

In “Modernist Painting”, Clement Greenberg defines and explains modernism as a way to attain a purer, self-defined means of painting, by maximizing the aspects that are unique to it and minimizing the aspects it shares with other forms of art. For instance, pictorial art can only distinguish itself from sculpture by – in his own words – “orienting itself to flatness”. Through observations that lie almost exclusively on modernist painting’s formal attributes – formal as in “with regards to form, shape and aspect” – Greenberg arrives to the conclusion that the movement holds a unique dimension that distinguishes it from other forms of art, and previous movements. However, Greenberg doesn’t allude to an element that is present in almost all forms of art: it serves to transmit a message, something I will call the “engaged” function (in French: la fonction engagée). For instance, he talks about David’s painting without mentioning the French Revolution, which undoubtedly played a big role in the latter’s choice of subject matter. In this paper, I will discuss the means whereby paintings – both modernist and of prior artistic movements, particularly romanticism and impressionism – serve their own fonction engagée. First, I will analyze Goya’s The Third of May 1808 as a means to criticize the violence of war; then move on to examine Manet’s Exposition Universelle de 1867 in the scope of T.J. Clark’s “The Painting of Modern Life”: how it portrays the evolution of Paris; and finally scrutinize Guernica, painted by Picasso who was a modernist, and how it portrays war.

The intellectual “animus” of art can be traced back to the XVIIIth century: social critique starts with Francisco de Goya. In The Third of May 1808, he depicts the execution of villagers during the French invasion of Spain led by Napoleon. Many pictorial elements serve to expose the violence of war. French soldiers, at the left of the painting, are aiming their guns at Spanish victims, who are at the left and the center of the scene. The most prominent element of this painting is the big contrast in light and dark: light seems to be radiating on the man wearing a white top and yellow trousers. This idea is supported by the fact that the sky is completely dark, signaling that the shootings are taking place at night, and the way shadows react to light: for instance, the soldiers’ point the opposite way. The man’s upper body resembles Jesus’s arms on the cross, but he is on his knees. His expression is calm, his mouth is closed and his eyes are open: this can be interpreted as both having accepted his fate, or pleading one final time for the life of his comrades (the open arms become an attempt to protect the others with his body). There are dead bodies on the ground, and a pool of blood around them. Two victims are covering their faces to hide the horror. Violence is directly depicted in the painting. Moreover, the soldiers seem almost unnecessarily well prepared: they are aiming at the unarmed civilians even though they are at point-blank range and they also carry a sword. All the soldiers are in the same exact position, arranged symmetrically one after the other. This gives a sense of continuity, as if there were more soldiers similarly arranged at the right of the painting. The soldiers’ backs are turned to the viewer, making them indistinguishable from each other: this alleviates the responsibility for their actions (they merely follow orders). The distribution of colors in this painting clearly makes a distinction between the victims’ and the executors’ countries: the yellow and red accents on the victims alludes to the Spanish flag and the colors on the French flag (blue-white-red) appears in sequence on the soldiers’ backs. The Third of May 1808 is a clear denunciation of the atrocities of war. Beyond the scene it portrays, many elements voluntarily highlight its violence confirming this painting’s function as a means of transmitting a message.

Social critique is not limited to denouncing war. It can also be found with the Impressionist movement in France. As T.J. Clark argues in “The Painting of Modern Life”, the Empire had initiated the social transition of France in the 1860s in the form of the Haussmannization of Paris. Even more so, he uses the art of Monet and Manet to analyze the political and historical climate of Paris at that time. At a first glance, Édouard Manet’s Exposition Universelle de 1867 offers a world view on Paris from an elevated angle englobing the grounds of the Exposition Universelle that took place that year. Clark, on the other hand, finds that it portrays a society that is progressively becoming segregated. Multiple groups are depicted in the painting, and each can be looked at alone – every group can be “cut” from the painting, and that image would be self-sufficient. At the far right, a group of soldiers in uniform seem to be resting: one of the soldiers is sitting in a relaxed position rather than standing in a rigid and upright stance. More to the left, two bourgeois men seem to be arguing. Completely to the left of the painting, a group of four women – perhaps of a lower class than the former figures due to their dresses – are laughing about something. Particularly with the group of four, they are arranged in a circle and close to each other: they are having a private discussion and remain impossible to approach. The grounds of the universal exposition become a tool for Manet to portray isolation and class distinction in the Haussmannian Paris. The inclusion of the gardener at the bottom right of the painting alludes to the poorer, working class. Clark notes he is being “pushed” out of the picture, symbolizing how the reshaped Paris excluded those classes from the heart of the city. It can also be observed that the painting contains many rigid elements: the view of Paris in the background contains many tall buildings, creating a sense of verticality, and spaces are delimited by barriers (the garden, the hill). Clark’s read of Manet shows the amount of cynicism that is delivered with a seemingly innocent painting. The Exposition Universelle becomes a caricature of modern Paris, where human interactions are limited and class distinction becomes the norm. In this sense, the Impressionist painter seeks to comment on the hierarchal discrepancies in Paris.

Clement Greenberg upholds modernism as a subtraction of other forms of art from painting. While modernist painting does focus more on form in order to maximize its visual quality, this doesn’t necessarily imply that it can’t express a message. Pablo Picasso, arguably the leader of modernism, uses fragmentation and geometry to depict the suffering caused by war in Guernica (the mural painting doesn’t belong to the cubist movement). Guernica is a town in Spain that was bombarded by Franco’s troops. The painting discards color, leaving only a blue, black, grey and white palette, in a similar way to photography, perhaps the colors of a newspaper in which the news of a bombing would be announced. The big size of the painting is meant to allow the viewer to be more immersed in the painting. Those two factors accentuate the emotion in Guernica, making the viewer more receptive to the message (he is being persuaded – using emotion rather than reasoning). The most prominent symbolic elements in this painting are the light bulb at the top center of the painting, of which light seems to be radiating: its shape resembles an eye. It can be the eye of the person who learns of the tragedy (the eye of the “reader” if the idea of a newspaper picture is maintained), or the Sun, or even a bomb right before detonating and bringing destruction. Right below it is a big painting of a horse, which Picasso has said represents the Spanish people. The horse’s expression is one of suffering (it looks like it neighs in pain), symbolizing the martyred people. His coat resembles the pattern of a newspaper article. At the leftmost of the painting, a woman seems to be holding a dead body in her arms and shouting. This is a reference to Michelangelo’s La Pieta, or

more generally to any mother losing her child. At the far right of the mural, a woman seems to be holding her arms in the air in a similar way to the man in Goya's The Third of May 1808. The two figures that human and alive are females, Picasso could imply that the people who suffer the most in war are the ones who don't participate in it as soldiers. Both the choice of "quoting" previous masters' works, as well as his own subject matter, treat directly with the theme of the horrors of war (or at least the loss of human life). Guernica is a modernist artwork, and does push to reaching the ideal of flatness. Also, and as did the previously discussed paintings, it does serve as a way for Picasso to accuse the violence of war in his painting, to transmit a message to the viewer.

Modernism, as Greenberg concedes, wasn't created to break the traditions and give pictorial art its uniqueness. "That visual art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and makes no reference to anything given in any other order of experience, is a notion whose only justification lies in scientific theory" (page 91). If modernist painting doesn't refer to the realm of experience, then art has lost its engagée function with modernism. Greenberg's formal interpretation and analysis poses flatness as the only focus that modernism has. Admittedly, he doesn't directly diminish the moral values of pictorial art, but the fact that painting becomes flatter doesn't mean it can no longer be "looked into" – or considered a means of expression. Flatter painting shouldn't exclude depth in meaning, and in turn the progress of painting into the modernist movement doesn't rob it of the fonction engagée of art.

Sources:

<http://e-cours-arts-plastiques.com/analyse-doeuvre-guernica-de-pablo-picasso/>

<http://www.pablocicasso.org/guernica.jsp>



Francisco de Goya, El tres de mayo de 1808 en Madrid, 1814



Edouard Manet, L'Exposition Universelle de 1867, 1867



Pablo Picasso, Guernica, 1937