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The Anti-Naturalism of
Goya

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Goya's paintings contain statements of style that I feel are very relevant in this century. But the language he invented to convey his ideas was for an audience with a knowledge of the art of before the nineteenth century. The present day audience is not amazed by these images to the same extent.

If Goya's particular aesthetic stimuli are just as valid this century it may help to try to translate the messages I see in his paintings into written language.

I shall not mention his equally important drawings of etchings but will only examine the five of his paintings which contain most clearly the elements I wish to stress. These are the power of the link between the subjective and the abstract. I suggest that the moment or moments these two fuse release the spirit of the painting.



The first example 'The Crockery Seller' (orange plate) shows how he uses the subjective gaze of the figures to lead our eye to the subjective and abstract centre of the picture. Subjectively (on the level of the subject matter) the central character is being looked at by two figures: the girl's head next to hers and the man at the front of the picture with his back to us. Abstractly she is the centre of the composition as her skirt is the largest islanded very dark shape against one of the

brightest yellows in the picture. The local black of her skirt combined with the shadow it makes form an unusual shape stopped on the left by a light shape which is subjectively the same figure, and on the right by the full stop of a dog which makes the black at this point become background shape. The same shape is made very positive to the left and very negative to the right without altering its tone.

Subjectively the central figure looks at nothing. Her personality

almost negates itself to become the rest of the haunting. She seems also to be the two women next to her; her youth and her old age.

The place where her head joins an almost identical head next to hers would be the centre of the wheel behind. The two heads also remind us of the extrovert and introvert qualities of a personality. The simple abstract device of the spokes of the cool blue wheel shine out from her mind (woman in general's mind?) to the rest of the picture and to the circumference of

the wheel which is interrupted in both directions by a figure's head. These two figures are in almost identical positions.

The left one in brown shadow colour is the complementary of the right one of bright red local colour. They both lean slightly with arms swinging out, one to the left edge of the picture and the other to the right. The mid-tone circumference of the wheel circles to the left meeting a black full stop of a man's head and to the right to meet a white full stop of a head. A gentle communication with both

these figures is suggested. The wheel is echoed by another fainter one in space.

Subjectively and abstractly these wheels have connotations of time, movement and space. Even the subject matter of the picture as a whole is a short interval in a physical journey through time and space. The solid rectangular stone building on the left stabilises the time element. It has a permanence of shape and substance, and the gap between our group and the building is joined

by the peasants in the background who have the semi-permanence of looking as though they frequently go there to work. This reminds us of Goya's 'The Grape Harvest' where he shows the peasants working while the rich enjoy the profits of the labour.

The red figure splashes out, arms swinging extrovertly, from the central figure's mind. He is the tonal complement of the brown man in the foreground. The two figures who splay out from each side of the coach also tonally complement

each other. The left man is light against dark and the right dark on light and they both have their arms raised in similar movements.

The most obvious tonal opposite is the central girl, mainly light against dark, contrasting with the girl dramatically framed in the carriage, who is dark against light. The two girls are almost identical

All the women are surely 'women' in general. All the men have their backs to us. Aren't they, in this painting, intended to complement

the women?

The central woman is looked at by two figures. The framed woman looks at us. Is the framed figure a mysterious crystallisation of the thought of the central three figures in one or is it 'women' whom we have observed through the rest of the painting now looking back at us? We enter the painting through the first woman, round the various ideas and forms, then out and back to ourselves. We are asked to think through the woman looking at us. She

is framed like a picture. Does 'art' look back and question us?

These are subjective elements which show how essential figures are to the painting. It can of course be appreciated purely as an abstract composition but the figurative element was necessary at that time to achieve a certain kind of atmosphere. Can this only be achieved for a twentieth century audience by using the right combination of the figurative with the abstract?



In 'The Meadow of San Isidro' (pale pink plate) the figures are grouped so that they merge to form wide brown lines running almost horizontally and receding into the distance to the horizontal shape of a river which itself becomes almost a line. The river shape is the lightest large shape in the picture and echoes the front group of figures, which has large dollops of the same light tone sweeping through it. But the front shape is made up of a conglomeration of small

shapes conveyed by very dark small blobs; as in the hair and hats of the figures and small shadows, and larger blobs of pastel colour. The strongest colour is in the red and yellow figure bending over to stop the eye continuing further out of the group and off the picture. Her bent shape reminds us of a bracket enclosing words in a phrase. There is even a full stop after her, seen in the turning head with two dots of tonal contrast of a light head with a dark hat on it. After

that two vaguer red marks walking back into space, nudge us gently back into the picture. The bracket at the left end of the group is formed by the highlighting of the pointing arm and thigh of a white seated girl. There is also a large tilted oval of the white umbrella above her which is a large full stop for the river shape. The umbrella is very similar in shape and tone to the highlighted bay of the river next to it, which pulls the river onto the horizontal again. Like

a jigsaw puzzle the shape of the small bay could exactly fit into the bracket made by the girl's pointing arm and leg. Thus the distant river about to leave the picture is brought back either to the brown middle distance and into one of the complex brown lines of figures or by the pink face with dark hat at the edge of the bracket shape, which not only reminds us tonally of the flesh-coloured blobs and dark hats of the figures in the foreground shape but this face

also looks at the face of the seated girl who alternately regards the group in the foreground. Subjectively she points out to the foreground figures she looks at, something that is in the background.

The left hand umbrella also draws us to the larger central umbrella which leads us to the figure nearest to us. She contains the strongest tonal contrast in the picture. There are two dashes of pure white against pure black; first in the highlight on the rear sleeve and

secondly in the dash of the black far sleeve against the white dress of the girl behind. The pastel green man to the left of them swoops out to the left but bends and looks back to the centre again. His black hat is repeated in the hat of the pink figure sweeping out to the right of the central girls. It is then echoed in all the receding hats which eventually form dark dots of figures and even carriages. The largest parasol is a beautifully bold way of

swinging us out of this huddled group. What a lovely extrovert shape! The central pink figure with his back to us is echoed right into the distance by tiny red marks.

So the main shape is made up of these foreground figures of strong contrasting tonal blobs and soft colours and leading by a dark line of shadow and scrubbery with more blobs above it to a tonal bracket on the left side and a bracket of colour on the right side.

This front group could be seen

as one of seven main shapes. The six others could be divided into:

the warm brown foreground,

the pastel sky which complements it,

the buff coloured distant landscape,

the beige green soft blobs of trees

in that distance which are beginning

to merge into a blurred shape echoing

the next linear shape of

the river

and lastly and most important

the dark brown shape of the

middle distance consisting of

myriads of tiny brown dark and

light blobs which the eye forms into lines.

It is fascinating that the first six shapes I think the picture naturally falls into are all horizontal and linear in character. This combined with the long shape of the whole canvas obviously is important in conveying an atmosphere of peace. Goya goes further though in an abstract concept most clear in this last shape. The central dark middle distance is not only linear but consists of tiny dark blobs of

people which in the way they are positioned form dark horizontal abstract lines.

Does Goya ask us what shape and line are by stating that the dark shape which is itself a line consists of lines made up of tiny marks which are also shapes?

We know the marks are shapes from the figurative element which reminds us that we know these dots are 'people' and the 'people' in the foreground we can see are shapes. And if these foreground figures

which we see as large shapes also have smaller contrasting marks in them such as dark or light hats or hair than as the dots in the distance are also known to be figures it has become a statement that a whole lot of dots or marks are in themselves only a mark or dot and, viceversa, that a tiny dot consists of a large shape which itself consists of shapes and dots to infinity. This is an abstract statement helped by a figurative code.

There is another message dependent
~~depend~~

on the introduction of figures and which has to be expressed in a new way today. This is more apparent in the 'Crockery Seller' where I think the artist is saying to his audience not

"Be aware of your awareness of the figures' unity with the other figures and with nature and man-made surroundings"

but

"Be aware of your awareness of the figure's awareness of his unity with the other figures and with nature and

man-made surroundings."

Perhaps Goya's plea is even

"Be aware of your awareness of the figure's awareness of his unity with the other figures and surroundings and their awareness of a communication of this awareness to the other figures."

The dots and lines dance and sway from one mind to the next like unspoken thought waves that wander from mind to mind touching various objects differently on the way and exploding in small bursts of colour or tone. In 'the Crockery Seller' the

clearest device used was the circumference and spokes of the wheel to touch the other figures' minds. In 'The Meadow' the lines of background figures seem to become by their very abstraction a new form of silent communication between them and the foreground figures.

I do not suggest that this is the only important message to be communicated by art but in my opinion it was a message which still needs to be communicated today.

To communicate this atmosphere to an audience who sees Goya as more naturalistic than he appeared in his time, a new way of expressing this side of the message must be found. Perhaps to abstract everything in the painting but the merest suggestion of figures and space, to lines and dots travelling from one figure's mind to the other could be a way to convey what Goya conveyed in his anti-naturalism of the eighteenth century.







Goya's frescoes in San Antonio de la Florida are painted to be seen from a distance and show very clearly his distortion of nature. Close to, the features of the figures become loose marks which circle round the head often emphasising the volume of the heads in general rather than individual character. The edge of the head is sometimes defined (see yellow plates) by hair which has been simplified to a line on one side of the face and a dark splotch on the other. If there are smaller marks in the splotch these

whizz round the head rather than show a particular piece of hair.

The mark on the old man's cheek (green plate) would not be there in reality but the volume it is describing would. When our mind, helped by the distance needed to view a mural, translates this information, the image that we receive appears more round, and in that respect more stimulating than our image of reality. The abstraction has served to emphasise what we find exciting about reality by giving us an image that appears more real than reality and

showing us the way in which it departed from naturalism to achieve this. This century we tend to see even these frescoes as fairly naturalistic. We are accustomed to much greater abstractions of nature and therefore must be more extreme with our abstractions in order to convey these messages. Bonnard seems to achieve this when he conveys a girl's head by soft pencil marks surrounding its volume.

I am not suggesting that the subject matter in its own right is

not important in Goya's paintings as his statements about the horror of war, and terrible social injustices are obviously extremely important. But it is the figurative element common to all his work to the same extent that interests me more. This I think can be separated from the no less important social or religious messages.

The frescoes are a clear example of his style as, due to the physical distance of the large high up space he was painting on and the media

involved, he had to exaggerate his style more than on his canvasses to convey the same message. He exaggerates his style later in oil on canvas in his Black Paintings like the 'Pilgrimage to San Isidro' but for me his last paintings after 1819 are less successful than these magnificent frescoes.

The figurative element is sometimes used in the frescoes to an abstract end.

There is a blob of tone on one side of an angel's head for instance and a line of tone on the other. (yellow plates)

They are essentially different in abstract

character but because we see them both representing hair on either side of the angel's head we begin to compare them. A line is a shape and a shape can become and even consist of lines.

The frescoes are so simplified that although we immediately recognise a human figure, very little is subordinated to the statement that the figure is universal and is unified with all other human figures by this exciting sameness.

Although the eyes and mouth

are lines to express form, the fleshiness and bony texture of the head and the hardness or softness of clothes surrounding a figure are not lost. The forms seem to exude not an individual personality but more a personality common to all mankind or at least waiting to be nourished with this communication of universality. The life in the figures is not shown by the expression on their faces or by anything narrative but by the transition from the figurative to the abstract. I think it may be important that the

figures themselves are introduced into the painting because it means that they are made up of the actual blobs and lines that express their life in the rest of the painting. Universal man is shown to be made up of and inseparable from his communication to other men. This holds an excitement for me which abstract paintings could not have.



Goya's 'Naked Maja' (pink plate)

jolts our preconceived ideas of a naked woman not merely because of the subjective boldness of her frank inviting position but because of the stressing of her round volume. Here the most abstracted part of the composition is the breasts which are pushed outward greatly distorting the figure so that we see her freshly each time. Instead of being painted for themselves the breasts form part of a soft round contour of a torso. The only detail

in the whole torso is the navel which itself emphasises the simplicity of the upper torso. The arms raised upwards have the added effect of simplifying the volume as they would normally be beside her body distracting the eye from the body to their volume next to the torso. In fact the detail next to the torso is the extreme detail of crumpled material which because of its frivolous nature again emphasises the simplicity of the torso. The bottom edge of the figure is a line formed by her shadow. Except for

two white round shapes echoing the round parts of the figure, with perhaps the lace echoing the hair, the top edge of the maja is formed by the dark shape of the whole of the top half of the canvas. Most of this large shape is dark because of room shadow rather than body shadow but two shapes in it are dark local colour. The main blob of local dark colour though is her brown hair nearly completely surrounded by light local flesh colour except when it merges into a dark shadow formed by her

left arm. Her eyes are two dark dots with eyebrow lines above them.

There are two main textures of material: a large white one of silk and a small one of dark velvet. There are two main textures in the body: a large light one of flesh, which is almost the same size as the white silk, and a small dark one of her hair which, including its shadow, is of similar size to the dark velvet.

The lower white blob of lacy white cushion echoes the form of the upper totso. Again it accentuates with its

trifling folds the differentness of the simple smooth flesh containing a much more sophisticated inner structure.

One is probably feathers, the other bone covered with flesh and a tight translucent skin.

The abstraction of the top of the torso to a single shape divides the figure into four parts. The lower legs form a long straight shape. From the knees to the waist the fullness of the hips creates an oval shape which is almost exactly repeated by the upper torso. Then instead of the arms

falling somewhere in the pattern to form a long shape they go berserk and form the direct opposite. The splay out from either side of the head making a large diamond at right angles to the line of three ovals. It is almost like a curvy symmetrical stalk with a flower on top. She lifts her arms to show her naked body and they shine out from her mind.

The clothed Maja is quite different compositionally although subjectively still in the same position.

Dots of dark local colour jump around the top half of the figure and are repeated in two small shadow marks under the shoes. The line under her is made by the dark bits on her tunic rather than shadow and the two dark velvet shapes are omitted. The painting is slightly more frivolous in character enforced by bright gold covered with jolly dark blobs. What lovely softly haunted hands! The brush marks sweep round the material and round the waist as in the angels

in the frescoes (yellow plate). Goya uses this technique of loose translucent brush marks flowing round the form, except in 'The Cannibals' and 'The Martyrdom of St Jean de Brebeuf' where they travel along a limb to create muscle and flesh, to convey material passing round the roundness of a form. In Dr. Peral in the National Gallery even the whole arm passes down the torso and then round the waist with the brush marks.

Two of the black paintings I consider perfect are 'The Martyrdom

of St. Jean de Brebeuf and 'The Cannibals' (bottom pink plate). In my favourite, the Cannibals, Goya still uses translucent brush marks along the axis and round the volume of a limb to describe flesh on bone but they are even looser than before. The abstract side of the composition is emphasised more so that we cannot fail to see a line as a pure line and a blob as definitely a blob. The bold shadow of the standing man's arched legs is exaggerated to become a dark line going into the

dark splotch of head of the foreground figure. A rich dark shadow on the ground at the right of the picture rushes in from the edge of the canvas and divides into two shadow shapes. One leads us to the front figure and the other lands on the back of the right hand figure which curves round to the shape of the rest of the body in the light. These two shapes are contained to appear as a figure by three clear abstract devices. To the left by the background's becoming darker

towards the figure and therefore forming a shape from tone, to the right by a strong line running from the elbow and ending in a bold blob of hair, and at the bottom of the figure by two strong lines under each leg. How brave to put these last two lines so close together without interrupting ~~with~~ them with a shape to form an edge. These lines take us up the shadow line of the arm of the front central figure to his dark head which is courageously joined without any gap to the dark

line under the central figure's arched legs. Blobs of dark hair are repeated back into the picture and a bold branch from the direction of the furthest person's head swoops up into the sky.

Again the figurative element also compares local tone to shadow tone. The lines which form under the legs of the right hand seated figure are incredibly similar in thickness, tone and length, and also directionally lead into the dark spear on the left of the central

seated man. In abstract quality the lines are entirely the same but subjectively they are opposites. One defines shadow tone: the local tone of the figure is light (flesh colour) and therefore the line is only part of the object it defines - its shadow. The other line is of local tone: the local colour and tone of the spear is dark already so the line produces the whole object rather than conveying a larger object by becoming its shadow.

The shadow line fixes a moment

in time. If the light changes or the object moves the shadow would fall on a different part of the object. The tone of the spear however is not affected by time. If the light source altered or the spear were moved it would still remain dark in tone.

The dark line to express the figure is an illusion. The one expressing the spear is a fact. The painting says that these two images which come about for entirely different reasons can be translated onto canvas by an identical paint mark.

The modern awareness needs an even less naturalistic statement. Through a more economical suggestion of a figure we should be able to express this complex relationship of the physical to the mental. Man as an animal in a physical world with a mind able to communicate to other men his awareness of a relationship with them and their surroundings.

It is when the artist's silent communication through art is actually about people silently communicating to each other that it gives me the

experience from art I find most necessary.

I do not deny the validity of painting the communicating marks only on the canvas without figures or even landscape but I personally feel that we have exactly the same need today for what Goya could express to his generation and that this can only be done with the aid of figures.

When the figure itself is made from the same symbols it is talking about and using these very symbols

to communicate with, it shows the directness of the link between man and all that is physically outside man.