**Specified artist: Picasso**

**T. J. Clark** (2013) *Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. *Extract*, pp. 240-242.

*Guernica* is a painting in oil on canvas. measuring 139 by 307 inches: twenty-five and a half feet long, and more than eleven and a half feet high. It was first shown to the public at large in July 1937, in the entrance hall of the Spanish Republic’s Pavilion at the Paris World Fair. It was a mural. The painting did not exactly fit the space reserved for it, but clearly Picasso has sized up the entryway’s dimensions and mulled over the architect’s plans. On the opposite side of the entry, facing *Guernica* and filing the wall, was pasted a blown-up photo of Garcia Lorca “poète fusillé à Grenade.” In between the two stood a death-deerling fountain by Alexander Calder, with runnels of mercury falling into a pool. (Mercury was a key Spanish export.) Out past the steel pillars of the inner courtyard was a cinema set up under a flimsy ceiling, showing films of the Civil War. Luis Bunuel was in charge.

 *Guemica* is a picture of an air raid. On 26 April 19 37. in the tenth month of the war in Spain, the ancient town of Guernica, for centuries the focus of Basque identity, had been attacked by a squadron of Luftwaffe bombers supplemented by a handful of planes from Mussolini. The aim was to bomb and burn the city center in its entirety. It was the Luftwaffe's chance to see what the new incendiary explosives were capable of, to judge how long it would take to turn a town into an ash heap, and what the effect of so doing would be on "civilian morale." (This last euphemism became the currency of cabinet rooms.) In this sense, Guernica was inaugural. It ushered in the last century's, and our century's, War of Terror-terror largely administered by the state-in which tens of millions would die.

Unsurprisingly, Franco and the Luftwaffe took pains to conceal what had been done and by whom, though almost at once there were reliable reports from the ruins. A propaganda war followed. The Fascists spread the story that Guernica had been burned by Basque Communists, or perhaps an anarchist shock brigade. in retreat. Pillars of rectitude like T. S. Eliot were inclined to believe them. Picasso made his first sketches toward a picture of the bombing on May Day in Paris, five days after the raid. He appears to have begun work on the canvas itself about ten days later: the first photograph his companion Dora Maar took of the work in progress is dated II May. We can be fairly sure, from dated sketches done in conjunction with last-minute changes on the canvas, that the painting reached its final form on 4 June or very soon after. From first sketch to finished painting, that is, Picasso took just over five weeks; from the moment he began work on the full-size canvas, maybe twenty-six days.

**T J Clark** Extract taken from Picasso and Truth : from Cubism to Guernica. Lecture 6 – Mural. P248-250

Picasso himself rarely talked about pictures he had done, nor should we expect him to. He made a few offhand remarks about *Guernica* in retrospect, one or two of which I have already quoted. He tried – but of course failed – to head off the iconographers, and insisted that a bull is a bull. (I shall follow his lead in this.) But there is one moment, I feel, in which he says something worth thinking about. Two moments, actually: both Malraux and Gilot report essentially the same conversation. It has to do not directly with *Guernica*, but with Goya’s *Third of May 1808.* Naturally in talking about the one he knew he was talking about the other. Malraux reports the exchange as specifically happening in 1937, just before *Guernica* went off to the Spanish pavilion. Probably an artefact, this dating, but the connection is clear. The dark sky in the *Third of May,* says Picasso,

is not a sky, it is just blackness. The light takes two forms. One of which we do not understand. It bathes everything, like moonlight: the sierra, the bell-tower, the firing squad, which ought to be lit only from behind. But it is much brighter than the moon. It isn’t the color of moonlight. And then there is the enormous lantern on the ground, in the center. That lantern, what does it illuminate? The fellow with upraised arms, the martyr. You look carefully: its light falls only on him. The lantern is Death. Why? We don’t know. Nor did Goya. But Goya, he knew it had to be like that.

Compare Malraux with Gilot. Goya in the *Third of May,* she remembers Picasso saying (for some reason this passage occurs only in her book’s French edition),

truly places us in “the time of death.” All the elements in the picture are chosen and placed in a hierarchy, deriving from that enormous square lantern, placed on the ground in the center of the canvas like the light of eternity.

One may well distrust the detail here. “Phare d’éternité” sounds more Gilot than Picasso. But I am interested in what the two reminiscences share: the idea that the task of this kind of history painting turns on its *placing* the viewer in a time of death, and that the way to this placement lies in a kind of light. I would go further. The light that makes Death appear in a painting is not a general illumination – not the weird everywhereness of Goya’s more-than-moonlight – but light placed on the ground, given a shape and a size. The lamp in *Third of May* is enormous (the word occurs in both memoirs), and it is square. My intuition is that it is the specific crude objectivity given to light that Picasso most admires. “The lantern is Death. Why? We don’t know.” Maybe because its unlovely geometry anchors, but also contradicts, the heavy flow of embodiment all round it. It stands apart from the agony. It is a house – an abstraction of shelter – a tomb.

Incidentally, this is not the only time that Picasso talks about the idea of death being crystallized in an object. Remember the question to Malraux: “When I paint a woman in an armchair, the armchair, it’s old age and death, isn’t it?” Not that the “*x* and *y*” in this case (the single figure, the ominous piece of furniture) gets us close to what happens in *Guernica.* Critics who go on looking for death specifically in the lamp-bulb sun or the bull’s head or the fallen warrior are trying to turn the picture into an easel painting: they are forgetting the impact – the overload of stimuli – that comes from *Guernica’*s actual size. Death is not localized in *Guernica*: it is everywhere and nowhere: that is the picture’s main point. Everywhere and nowhere, but manifest – materialized – as a kind of illumination. Which exactly does not mean appearing as ambience or effulgence (a new moonlight): the flash of a bomb-blast is the hardest, most finite thing imaginable. It is specific as the twist of tungsten in a sixty-watt bulb. That is what had to be learnt from Goya.