

# Fear and Transgression in the Imaginary of Hieronymus Bosch and Francisco Goya

Radu Carnariu\*

**Abstract:** This research prospects the fantastic imaginary of Hieronymus Bosch and Francisco Goya from the perspective of two fundamental characteristics common to the two artists: fear, with its influence on the production of phantasms, beyond historical and iconographic frameworks specific to their times, and transgression, which determines psychologically the typology of the artistic approach, the special phenomenology of the creative labor from the "forbidden imaginary" (Freud) and the "creative surprise" (Anzieu) to the aesthetic sublimation of various "clandestine delights" (Huyghe). In the case of Hieronymus Bosch, the fantastic imaginary is provoked by the fear of damnation, from the visionary interstices of which the clandestine delights of a guilty duality erupt to the surface of the image. In the case of Francisco Goya, the fantastic imaginary is determined almost obsessively by the fear of human bestiality, whose best avatar is Saturn devouring his sons, the sinister keystone of the famous *Casa del Sordo*. The research connects several theoretical, historical and psychoanalytic perspectives, based on notable studies on the artistic particularities of the two visionaries, following, especially, the impact over time on romanticism, expressionism or surrealism.

**Keywords:** imaginary, fantastic art, unconscious, phantasm, introspection, transgression.

## Introduction

In the case of Hieronymus Bosch, the fantastic imaginary is provoked by the fear of sin, of instinct, of the loss of salvation towards the enigmatic delusional transgressions of a *mystical fable*, in Chevalier's words, from the visionary interstices of which the *clandestine delights* of a guilty duality, between sacred and profane, *erupt* to the surface of the image. In the case of Francisco Goya, the fantastic imaginary is determined almost obsessively by the fear of human bestiality, and the absurdity of blind brutality, whose best avatar is none other than the dreadful *horror of war*, best symbolized by *Saturn devouring his sons*, the sinister keystone of the famous *Casa del Sordo*.

In both cases, there is a clear common and *secret* denominator: fantastic transgression towards and beyond ugliness and evilness. Dividing the aesthetic concept of *evil* into natural ugliness, spiritual ugliness, and

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\* Visual artist and Art professor, Iasi, [radu\\_car@yahoo.com](mailto:radu_car@yahoo.com), [radubogdancarnariu@gmail.com](mailto:radubogdancarnariu@gmail.com)

artistic ugliness, Karl Rozenkrantz, in his famous *Aesthetics of Ugliness*, subtly defused the taboos of neoclassical idealism about the degree of aesthetic value of the negative, in general.

An investigation of the notion of ugliness, an aesthetic of it, has its exact path, as such. It must begin by recalling the concept of beauty, not so much to present it in its full essence as a metaphysics of beauty should proceed, but only to the extent that the basic determinations of beauty can be stated; also, through its negation, the ugly is born. However, this research must end with the notion of transformation, of which the ugly becomes aware, in that it becomes a means of the comic.<sup>1</sup>

Like ethical ugliness, understood as *privatio boni*, aesthetic *ugliness*, almost ubiquitous in medieval imaginary, seen as disharmony and loss of measure, reveals the monstrous dimension of the human condition, which we will find much later, in an extreme dramatic version, in the art of German expressionists such as Otto Dix or the Dadaists from the New Objectivity movement such as Georg Grosz. However, *evil* in the medieval imaginary of some Renaissance masters such as Hieronymus Bosch or Matthias Grünewald, was allowed as long as the painter could represent it *beautifully*, with a sense of *good* technical virtuosity. The *aesthetic test* was thus passed if the evil, the ugly, was *well* done. The medieval apocalyptic imaginary abounds in various oppositions: the dualities of sin-virtue, demonic-angelic, human-monster, determining the *phantasmic* scenarios from the perspective of a dichotomized state of mind in the midst of a transformative crisis.

This is how monsters, loved or feared, kept under control, but at the same time freely admitted, make their way more and more, with all the horrible fascination they bring with them, in literature and painting, from the descriptions of Dante's *Inferno*, to Bosch's later paintings. Only a few centuries later, in the romantic and decadent atmosphere, the attraction to the awful and the Beauty of the Devil will be recognized without hypocrisy.<sup>2</sup>

For the Renaissance masters mentioned above, the Fantastic Art of Dark Ages metaphorically appears as a retrospective diary of fears and moral breakdowns among the swamps of apocalyptic horrors, a monstrous codex of spiritual disease and torment, a soporific invasion of delusions and teratological obsessions, a *pandemonium* of the primeval grotesque, uncovered and haunted by inquisitorial tortures. Perhaps the image of a convulsive Job decomposed by mystical madness would more eloquently synthesize the conflicting spirit of this age. From the unscarred stigmas of the medieval imaginary, guilty fear unbridledly unleashes its hungry bestiaries in a fairy of vanities.

Goya's later artistic vision not only symptomatically opens the imaginary of romantic agony, especially through his works decorating the walls of the famous *Casa del Sordo*, but foreshadows with a fascinating

<sup>1</sup> Karl Rozenkrantz, *O estetică a urâțului*, ed. Meridiane, București, 1984, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> Umberto Eco, *Istoria Frumuseții*, RAO, București, 2006, p. 148.

emotional power the dawn of expressionism and avant-garde social realism. An echo of this visionary attitude can be seen in the urban pandemonium of Grosz's compositions (German *New Objectivity*) which, although seemingly Boschian in the futuristic-miniature decompositions of dehumanized crowds of bestiality and vice, remains Goyan in the critical attitude towards the disasters of the psychological and moral dissolution of the interwar European society.

The tragic vision of the Romantics often appears disguised in realistic images as a technique, structure or compositional organization, as we see in Goya's *Disasters*, Piranesi's *Dungeons* or Friederich Caspar's strange landscapes. What becomes an essential stylistic mark for the haunted universe of romantics is the tragic *Schopenhauerian* sense of being. This sickly disposition of the romantic artist, generates a series of explorations towards the imaginary that can be characterized, in some cases more eloquently (Piranesi, Goya, Blake), as visions of the tragic. In this sense, Goethe's statement in old age according to which, in his words, "*Romanticism is sickness, Classicism is health*", becomes emblematic for the cultural and psychological profile of the time.

An iconic work for Goya's visceral "expressionism", *Saturn devouring his sons*, physiognomically evoked before in one of Baldung Grien's drawings, as imminence of the blind unleashing of instinct, represent, says Audeguy,

(...) not the savagery of an archaic god, but the background of the hopeless cruelty of humanity, which he had already evoked in *Los Caprichos* (1799) and then in the *Los desastres de la guerra* (1810-1815), devoted to the violence perpetrated by the Napoleonic occupiers of Spain. Like Sade, both contemporaries of the Enlightenment, he leans on these unfathomable abysses.<sup>3</sup>

The night of the *Thanatic* drive or impulse, to paraphrase Freud's terminology, begins especially with the violent depictions of the disasters of war where the state of conflict is exacerbated to the paroxysm of mental and physical dismemberment, to the *bestiality* of blood thirst. Although the restoration of the unconscious mind in the fantastic art of the Romantic era relied on the phenomenology of *fear* and *sadness*, on the rediscovery and exploration of the dark side of the human condition, it must be understood essentially as a positive moment, necessary to expand the vision of human existence and its artistic expression.

Introspection, mystery, darkness, ruins, the study of imaginary worlds, mythological-historical fiction and, especially, the artistic struggle into the depths of emotional dimension of the human psyche are some of the stylistic and philosophical marks specific to Romanticism. Along with the horrors of the First World War, against the background of new apocalyptic

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<sup>3</sup> Stephane Audeguy, *Monștrii*, ed. Univers, București, 2008, p. 59.

fears, these stylistic marks are enhanced to the point of paroxysm by expressionists. From Edvard Munch's *Scream*, Otto Dix's *War Triptych* to George Grosz's *Pandemonium*, fear, and its profoundly disturbing imaginary, takes on unprecedented visionary springs, the artistic imagination reorienting itself towards a visual rhetoric of emotional shocks, of borderline feelings, arousing an imaginary of extreme tragicness of the human condition.

### Bosch. The Apocalyptic Enigma of Forbidden Desires

One can write as much about Bosch as Shakespeare without ever exhausting the subject. The imaginary of Fear, in his case, exceeds the customary representations of the monstrous in the religious painting typical of the Middle Ages and the Nordic Renaissance. In the opinion of Virginia Pitts Rembert, in *Hieronymus Bosch and Lisbon Temptation*, “to the medieval mind, the man who could reveal so plainly its own worst fears must have been a wizard or a madman, perhaps a tool of the Devil himself.”<sup>4</sup> Considering a number of authors such as Charles De Tolnay, with a Freudian approach to the Boschian imaginary, Jacques Combe, who identifies alchemical symbolism in the iconography of this enigmatic artist, or Wilhelm Fränger, most notably, who distinguishes, for the first time, two different iconographic registers of Bosch, as well as his possible membership in a heretical sect that would have influenced his artistic vision, the author considers that no definitive conclusions can be clearly drawn on the illustrativeness or a clear intentionality on the meanings allegorized in the art of Hieronymus Bosch. Just as one cannot delimit firm interpretive frames regarding the supposed hidden symbols or suggested meanings that the imaginary of the famous Renaissance fantastic artist would illustrate. From this angle of analysis, it would appear that when we take into account the premeditated meaning or, at least, the presupposition of an iconographic program predetermined by it, according to the customs of representing the ugly or evil of that period of art history, in Bosch's delirious visual fables we are immersed, in Chevalier's words, in a “delicious atopy.”

At Bosch, the relationship between idea and pictorial metaphor, between meaning and visual fable, is often *surreal*. The author mentioned above considers that, in the case of the Boschian imaginary, the usual approach of most historians is deficient if only the semantic, rational aspect is taken into account, ignoring the parallel “story” of the images themselves, of the visual micro-stories that it coagulates with visionary ingenuity during the artistic process in which, not infrequently, the irrational seems to randomly provoke, according to an internal “logic” of delirium, of the oneiric trance, alternative directions of interpretation.

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<sup>4</sup> Virginia Pitts Rembert, *Hieronymus Bosch and Lisbon Temptation: A View from the Third Millennium*, Parkstone Press Ltd., New York, 2012, p.15.

At Fränger, the proponent of the thesis that the Renaissance master would have misappropriated and codified meanings in accordance with the ideology of the alleged heretical sect of which he was a part, as the author mentioned above notes, the interpretation takes almost no account of intrinsic meanings (psychological or artistic) of the image, Bosch's "transgressive" imaginary hiding, according to a *conspiratorial* logic, a double meaning; moreover, it hides a subversive iconographic system parallel to the visual narrative, both critical of popular pagan religiosity and the Christian clergy.

Virginia Pitts Rembert considers that the mistake of many exegetes, including Fränger's, is to focus exclusively on the hermeneutics of the image, on what it really means, and less on how such images are produced, on the visionary phenomenology from which they emerge, beyond the historical, theological or iconographic context. From this it would be inferred that Bosch could be considered an enigmatic forerunner of later surrealists, not only by his special disposition to imagine new ways of iconographic representation of evil, beyond the usual imaginary of the time, but especially through its constant tendency towards visual digression, escapist deviation and transgression from the context of his own narrative. Elusive, hallucinatory, hypnotizing, dissociative, the Boschian apocalyptic imaginary leaves the moralizing didactics of the fable, as well as the bookish logic of the parable or visual allegory, typical of the illustrative, towards the new territory of self-referential phantasmic "delights". In other words, the authenticity of this artist emerges primarily from the pictorial and technical fluency of the "dream" recording, on the edge of an "abyss" of uncertain references, beyond the (self) imposed theme. We are in the swampy territory of a "forbidden dream", in Freud's words.

We can certainly admit the importance of ideas as a necessary element of Bosch's paintings – that is, the ideas from which he received inspiration and the total idea to which he related each painting. But the individual images within a painting do not necessarily have ideational meaning except as they relate to the total conception. They are creations forged during an artistic process, and should be considered as such. To judge them according to rational, exterior, content only compounds the confusion concerning Bosch. The images resulting from his creative activity are not rational structures in themselves. To look for rational meaning in them only leads to the kind of misunderstanding that has been rampant in the nearly five centuries since the painter's death.<sup>5</sup>

Virginia Pitts considers that the *unusualness* of Bosch's imaginary is not necessarily due to a critical or ironic distance from the representational subject, nor from any personal iconographic system, as can be seen from Huyghe's previous analyses in *Dialogue with the Visible* or in *Fantastic Art* of Marcel Brion, but precisely from a special *religiosity* of the artist, an aspect that would have served him, as in the case of the intense mysticism of

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p.78.

Matthias Grunewald in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, as a *phantasmic* pretext, a deep need for visual exploration of the imaginary beyond artistic conventions specific to his time. It can be said, without a doubt, that at Bosch, the overflowing imagination, doubled by a perfect mastery of the technical means, as well as by a greater freedom or indifference towards an imposed subject, but also by a deep predisposition of his psyche for *fabulatory* pictorial “polyphony”, contributes to the appearance of an unprecedented fantastic approach, an “odyssey” of visual delirium, especially if we look at it retrospectively from the perspective of surrealism, at least.

His paintings exude belief of an extraordinary nature. The fact that his governing drive was the desire to heighten religious experience would be a prime factor in his freedom from the ordinary artistic restrictions. His lack of preoccupation with reality has made him incomprehensible to the layman and historian alike, but this would naturally follow his desire to concretise such imaginary concepts as heaven, or hell, or the visions of a saint.<sup>6</sup>

Also, in *Dialogue with the Visible*, R. Huyghe sometimes tends to overestimate the hermeneutic importance of the psychoanalytic approach in deciphering the fabled riddles specific to Boschian fantastic imagery. As Virginia Pitts Rembert pointed out before, he emphasizes the importance of psychoanalytic or symbolic research, similarly to Charles de Tolnay (1937) and Jacques Combe (1946). Sigmund Freud had already taken the first step with his well-known essays on psychoanalysis applied to art. Furthermore, regarding the relationship between Bosch’s imaginary and the supposed symbolic alchemical-inspired subtexts that Combe discusses, Huyghe particularly considers C.G. Jung’s extensive contribution to understanding the archetypal imaginary as an abysmal matrix of artistic language and of the evolution of the psyche (individuation), also analysing the medieval alchemical symbolism, in *Psychology and Alchemy* or in the *Red Book*, especially in relation to the deep knowledge of the *psyche*, as source of creative imagination. Without going into details, an almost exclusively psychoanalytic approach, an aspect that Huyghe considers equally “dangerous”, in the case of the imaginary production, has, to use Eco’s expression, its “limits of interpretation”. In the absence of complex semantic “keys”, with the help of which we can decrypt quasi-objective, even on the “anecdotal” surface of delirium, something relevant or convincing from Boschian allegorical hassle, solving, in Chevalier’s words, the “cryptogram puzzle” of some possible meanings premeditated by the artist, the psychoanalytic approach remains debatable. The psychoanalytic approach obviously has its hermeneutic importance, especially in depth, but it also risks “contaminating” the process of receiving and interpreting images, through the inevitable presumption of *induction* of an interpreter-psychologist who tends to “choose” a convenient decoding direction.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, pp.81-82.

At Bosch, in particular, the “transgressive” status of the fantastic image, atypical for its time, beyond the intricacies of various referential contexts, is more important and more revealing precisely through the “bursts” of the creative ingenuity of the unconscious in the act of visual production, by digressing the subject, through the associative spontaneity, through the brilliant “neuroplasticity” of this outstanding “technician of the imaginary” according to I.P. Culianu. Bosch’s imagination can easily become a *visionary trap* for the viewer, a double magic mirror to the abysses of the human mind in front of which he looks and lets himself be seen, in a mutual game of subconscious projections. At Bosch, we can speak of a charisma of the enigmatic that emerges from the illusion; and the allusion; of visual duplicity. In a direction of moderate psychoanalytic interpretation, Huyghe speculates on the artist’s subconscious entering the troubled waters of medieval Phantasia, stating that:

“Bosch speaks incessantly of the obsession of instincts that man demands, removing him from salvation. Is he perhaps afraid of their consequences? It would be said that he gives in to a secret delight.”<sup>7</sup> Carl Linfert considers Bosch a “pivotal figure” who manages intuitively, through the enigmatic duality of his satirical-apocalyptic, ironic-mystical imaginary, to make the transition to the spirit of Renaissance and especially of the later Reformation.

(...) he possessed two gifts: clear-eyed insight into all blind folly, a coldly critical view of all excess and exaggeration. However much or little religious as may be his paintings that comment on these failings, he never ceased to show how all God’s beneficent influence on the world is constantly thwarted by man himself. (...). And though there was no sign as yet of a Reformation, in such pictures there was a first hint, a seed of doubt, perhaps even a warning to the artist’s contemporaries, an unmistakable, though enigmatic, glimpse of things to come.<sup>8</sup>

### Goya. The Devouring Horror of Inner and Outer War

Kenneth Clark, in *The Romantic Rebellion*, considered that the author of *Los Caprichos* was “obsessed with all the terrible things that could happen to mankind when it lost control of reason”<sup>9</sup>. And War could be considered the ultimate and the most horrid materialisation of apocalyptic fear. Goya undoubtedly makes the transition from the *Aufklärung* to the reconsideration of the profound influence that the Unconscious exerts on the artistic imagination, through the creative intuition of the hidden universes. The hidden universe, in this case, must be correlated with the *forbidden imaginary*. The Freudian phrase refers to the way in which the writer, playwright or artist camouflages through aesthetic effort the true motive or

<sup>7</sup> René Huyghe, *Dialog cu vizibilul. Cunoașterea picturii*, ed. Meridiane, București, 1981, p. 325.

<sup>8</sup> Carl Linfert, *Hieronymus Bosch*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1989, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Revolta romantică*, ed. Meridiane, București, 1987, p. 43.

desire hidden behind the phantasmic dream that provokes, in Didier Anzieu's terms, the "state of surprise" that determines the "labour of art".

Through modifications and disguises, the writer attenuates the selfish character of his dream, thus managing to win us through the purely formal pleasure, that is, the aesthetics, which the embodiment of his fantasies provokes in us. (...) It probably contributes to this success ~~in-a~~ to a large extent the fact that the writer transposes us into a state in which we can enjoy our own fantasies without having rebukes of conscience (...).<sup>10</sup>

However, with some reluctance to the psychoanalytic approach regarding the fantastic imagery, Huyghe insinuates that Goya's imagination revolves almost obsessively around themes that illustrate violence, bestiality, cruelty. Although the author of the famous *Los Caprichos* is undoubtedly a pre-romantic forerunner of social and political criticism, through his art committed against war, authoritarianism or aristocratic hypocrisy, like Grosz in the twentieth century, Huyghe insists on the presumption of a *repressed bestiality* in the case of the Spanish artist. He also observes similarities between Goya's *Saturnian* dream, animated, in Huyghe's words, by the same *clandestine delights* as in the case of the gloomy visionarism of late medieval predecessors such as Urs Graf or Baldung Grien. "In his fantastic visions, Goya further confesses his obsession with cruel bestiality. Saturn, invoked by Goya, is always present, obvious or hidden in the depths of human fear. In fact, the mythical or bestial aspect remains the devouring monster."<sup>11</sup>

Although one of the hallmarks of the fantastic in art and literature is the *unusual* that emerges from a special dynamic of more or less controlled incoherence, the dark vision of the Goyan fantasy provokes the absurd in the opposite way, precisely through an almost manic structural coherence, especially in rendering the details of character and in the suggestive gestures of the bodies.

At Goya, we can speak of a subtle complicity with the viewer, similar to that of Bosch. If in the case of the Renaissance artist, his complicity, apparently rather self-ironic and self-parodic, than guilty or frightened by the universality of the devouring *peccatum*, betrays him as a true aesthete of histrionics, camouflage, evasion and embezzlement, in the case of Goya we can speak about a subtle and subversive visual satire. In Bosch's case, the imaginary of apocalyptic fear is offset by the duplicity of controlled delusions, as apparent escape points from the *anthill of hypotheses*, in Huyghe's words. Bosch incites hallucinatory decipherments, manipulating the tangled visual conundrums with an abundance of slippery meanings and seductive appearances through their unpredictable inner movements. It seduces the imagination of the one who steps beyond the fabulous visionary

<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Eseuri de psihanaliza aplicată*, ed. Trei, Bucureşti, 1999, p. 96.

<sup>11</sup> René Huyghe, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

drunkenness by sinking him, senselessly, into the bottomless sea of evanescent possible interpretations.

The production comes from the viewer captivated by the tricks of the painting. Bosch was said to have been delusional. On the contrary, he causes delirium. Turns on the meaning-producing machinery. However, by escaping the developments and works triggered by the deceptive promise of a hidden meaning behind the image, he becomes alienated from their places and time, becomes an uninhabited place and a non-time, differentiates himself more and more from what he generates.<sup>12</sup>

In Goya's case, "the tricks of painting" do not consist in inducing, consciously or not, the sensation of meaning through an enigmatic game of visual-allegorical references decomposed by the incongruous dynamics of the dream, nor in any narrative artifice of immersion into delirium, but rather in the sense of "rational" clarity of the Irrational that invades the clear territories of conscious thought. What in Bosch's imaginary is under the sign of "mystical" and, above all, *psychological* fabulation, in Goya's dark visions becomes, in Freudian terms, a *manifest content* of the unconscious mind. Especially in the case of the famous cycles of engravings mentioned above, the imaginary of Fear, provoked by the horrors of war, both exterior and interior, acquires new intriguing dimensions. According to Huyghe, the *Sleep of Reason* anticipates later psychoanalytic explorations. At least from this angle, of investigating and *capturing* the dream as the starting point of artistic production of phantasmic coherence by the means of art, Goya anticipates not only Romanticism, but also Surrealism. Endowed with a keen sense of subtle and subversive meanings, in a tragic-comic or sarcastic-fatal tone, features that reveal him as a refined genius of satire, Goya excels in manipulating pictorial-allegorical invectives in leisurely thought-out theatrical scenes, and the outstanding characters, although they embody up to a point, vices, defects, as well as behavioural or age-specific taboos, possess that inner duplicity that generates a sense of strange mystery, betraying the irony of the one who handles them behind the scenes as some sideshow puppets.

*Los Caprichos* can be seen as Goya's contribution to the campaign waged by Spanish intellectuals to bring the Enlightenment to Spain. Shot through with satire and caricature — the weapons of liberal intellectuals — the prints arouse extravagant emotions, among them fear and horror. Although in general they are critical, today the meanings of some of Goya's images are obscure. The plates are numbered and have explanatory inscriptions, but these may also be veiled because Goya used well-known proverbs, figures of speech, parts of sayings and double meanings.<sup>13</sup>

Delacroix is one of the first iconic artists of Romanticism to recognize Goya's satirical genius, beyond the expressiveness of the subtle play of light and shadow, character synthesis or technical virtuosity. Martha

<sup>12</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Fabula mistica*, ed. Polirom, Iași, 1996, p.55.

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Carr-Gomm, *Francisco Goya*, Parkstone International, New York, 2012, p. 136.

Richardson also talks about this essential aspect for the symbolic and historical continuity of Goya's art as a turning point for the emergence of Romanticism. In her words,

In the *Caprichos*, Goya avoided superfluous details. The figures are placed in sparse, almost spaceless, settings that force the eye to focus on the central drama. The drama is further heightened by the theatrical use of sharply contrasting lights and darks. There is an eerie quality to the etchings, a sense of the mysterious without precedent in Western art.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, if we refer, from the same perspective, to the painting of *May 3*, we can consider that Goya is perhaps the first artist to offer a stylistic statement of the new romantic spirit that he anticipates as its predecessor. This work of art, in particular, becomes an image-testimony, typical of pictorial journalism, and at the same time a clear political statement, as Tim McNeese observes, marking an ideological turning point of freedom in spite of authority, of the liberalism promoted by Enlightenment against the oppressive absolutism. This work of art also indicates a paradigm shift in artistic expression, showing a different pictorial language that adapts to the tumultuous history of the event. The artist postpones his introspections, art leaves the intimacy of the studio to meet the important events on the spot. The work can be compared to other large emblematic war scenes such as Delacroix's *Massacres at Chios*.

(...) The painting also appears modern through its subject matter, as if it were a journalist's snapshot of an event worth remembering. There is an immediacy and personality to the painting, as if Goya had actually been there as a witness of French retaliation. It is all thrown in the viewer's face, with a no-holds-barred realism.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Martha Richardson, *Francisco Goya*, Chelsea House, New York, Philadelphia, 1994, p. 75.

<sup>15</sup> Tim McNeese, *Francisco Goya*, Chelsea House, New York, 2008, p. 124.