

Framing resistance: Mirzoeff's countervisuality and the politics of seeing in European art from Romanticism to Modernism

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Abstract: This paper examines how images shape power and how art can contest it. Using Nicholas Mirzoeff's concept of countervisuality – the “right to look” – it investigates how visual culture both upholds and challenges authority. The central concern is how artists have historically deployed visual strategies to resist dominant narratives and contest the terms of perception. While much existing scholarship applies this framework to contemporary media, activism, and identity politics, this study looks further back to argue that visual resistance has deep historical roots in the Western fine art tradition itself. Through close analysis of Goya's *The Third of May 1808*, Courbet's *The Stone Breakers*, Dix's *The War Triptych*, and Picasso's *Guernica*, it traces how artists subverted official narratives across distinct political moments. The method is interpretive and visual, grounding each artwork in its historical and political context. These works – through the subversion of aesthetic norms, the use of anonymity, fragmentation, and absence – disrupt heroic narratives, foreground collective suffering, and refuse the viewer's passive gaze. What emerges is a shared structural impulse: to challenge how power is seen, and who gets to be seen.

Keywords: countervisuality, visual culture, political resistance in art, power and perception, art historical critique

(Esp.) Enmarcando la resistencia: la contravisualidad de Mirzoeff y la política de la visión en el arte europeo desde el Romanticismo hasta el Modernismo

Resumen: Este artículo examina cómo las imágenes configuran el poder y cómo el arte puede contestarlo. A partir del concepto de contravisualidad de Nicholas Mirzoeff – el «derecho a mirar» –, investiga de qué modo la cultura visual tanto sostiene como desafía la autoridad. La preocupación central es cómo los artistas han desplegado históricamente estrategias visuales para resistir las narrativas dominantes y disputar los términos de la percepción. Mientras que gran parte de la literatura existente aplica este marco teórico a los medios de comunicación contemporáneos, el activismo y la política identitaria, este estudio retrocede más en el tiempo para sostener que la resistencia visual tiene raíces históricas profundas en la propia tradición de las bellas artes occidentales. A través del análisis detallado de *El tres de mayo de 1808* de Goya, *Los rompedores de piedra* de Courbet, *El tríptico de la guerra* de Dix y el *Guernica* de Picasso, se traza cómo los artistas subvirtieron las narrativas oficiales en momentos políticos bien diferenciados. El método es interpretativo y visual, y sitúa cada obra en su contexto histórico y político. Estas obras – mediante la subversión de las normas estéticas, el uso del anonimato, la fragmentación y la ausencia – interrumpen las narrativas heroicas, ponen en primer plano el sufrimiento colectivo y rechazan la mirada pasiva del espectador. Lo que emerge es un impulso estructural compartido: desafiar cómo se ve el poder y quién tiene el derecho a ser visto.

Palabras clave: contravisualidad, cultura visual, resistencia política en el arte, poder y percepción, crítica histórico-artística

Summary: 1. Introduction, 2. Countervisuality in visual culture: from media management to vernacular resistance, 3. Applications of countervisuality in contemporary artistic and cultural practices, 4.

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1. Introduction

In June 1994, O.J. Simpson – former NFL star and broadcaster – was arrested for the murders of his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ron Goldman. The case became one of the most contested criminal trials in American history (Friedman, 2015). Two magazines covered the arrest. Newsweek ran Simpson's police mugshot as taken. TIME ran the same image, but darkened it, deepening the shadows around his face. Mirzoeff (1999, pp. 88-89) read this as deliberate visual framing: the same photograph, altered to cast one man as more threatening (see also Norris, 2013, pp. 1592-1593, on the infamous 1988 "Willie Horton" ad). Images do not record reality neutrally. They shape how audiences read people, events, and social groups. Jenks (1995, as cited in Nae, 2015, p. 12) defined visibility as "an implicit way of organizing social relations achieved through the act of seeing." That framing runs through several foundational works which collectively theorize the constructed and politically inflected nature of vision: Berger's (1972/2018) argument that ways of seeing are culturally learned, Debord's (1967/1995) analysis of a society in which images mediate social life, Mulvey's (1975) account of how cinema constructs a gendered gaze, and Rancière's (2000/2013) theory of who gets to appear, and how, in public life.

Visibility seeks control over perception. Countervisuality resists it, challenging the visual structures and narratives through which that control operates (Mirzoeff, 2011). Contemporary forms of vernacular and amateur documentary media offer the clearest, most accessible examples of this resistance (Boal, 2011; Gregory, 2012), and this paper engages with them, but they are essentially just a starting point, not the main subject. Their value lies in making Mirzoeff's theory visible in a direct, familiar form. The deeper subject is European fine art: a tradition that resisted the visual conventions of academic and state-sponsored art long before the smartphone or the protest video. From the Romantics to the early Modernists, artists worked against visual authority in ways that remain underexamined through this framework. This paper first builds the theoretical and methodological foundation (visibility and countervisuality in Sections 2 and 3, method in Section 4), then reads specific artworks to trace how visual resistance shifted across two centuries of European art history (Section 5).

2. Countervisuality in visual culture: from media management to vernacular resistance

In the early 2000s, media management sold the Iraq and Afghanistan wars as "clean" stories of precision and heroism (Mueller, 2005; Robinson et al., 2013), while the actual carnage was carefully hidden (Boal, 2011; Gregory, 2012; Herold, 2002). But the truth leaked through a dark trade in which soldiers swapped graphic battlefield photos for porn on sites like NowThatsFuckedUp.com (NTFU; see Malik, 2006, pp. 107-108). The images showed bodies torn by shrapnel, soldiers grinning over corpses, men holding severed limbs and skulls as "trophies" – the visual record the official account refused to produce (cf. Apel, 2005, on the Abu Ghraib leaks).

The execution of Saddam Hussein on December 30, 2006, followed the same pattern. State television broadcast a silent, controlled ceremony – a theater of legal authority (Swimelar, 2017, pp. 189-190). Then a cellphone video appeared. It was shaky and loud, the audio full of sectarian taunts the state had tried to suppress (Bakir, 2009, pp. 12-13; Mirzoeff, 2011). As the trapdoor swung and the body fell, the camera dove beneath the scaffold into the suffocating dark where the official lens refused to go. There, a faint glow hit the lifeless body, exposing the "forbidden" reality of the moment. That second video broke the official account open and turned a managed spectacle into a site of contested memory (Swimelar, 2017, p. 190).

3. Applications of countervisuality in contemporary artistic and cultural practices

Mirzoeff's (2011) framework has been applied to several contemporary artistic practices. Knudsen et al. (2021, p. 270) examine two works: Jeannette Ehlers' performance piece *The Gaze* (2018) and the participatory documentary *Faire-part* (Nizar Saleh et al., 2019). Both works make their own conditions of seeing explicit: who is looking, from where, and on whose authority. That act of exposure, Knudsen et al. argue, is what gives an image political force. Mendes (2023, p. 774) reaches a related conclusion through a different case: Ai Weiwei's 2016 reenactment of the photograph of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian child found drowned on a Turkish beach in 2015. Mendes argues that Weiwei's pose does not simply repeat the image. It turns a viral photograph back into evidence of a specific, preventable death. Across both cases, countervisuality works by closing the distance between viewer and event that official or media framing keeps open.

Beyond performance and artistic reenactment, countervisuality has proven central to deconstructing spatial and identity-based power dynamics. Hoppe (2014) examined graffiti and street art by Dolk, JR, and Swoon as "true subversive visual practices" (p. 2) that contest surveillance and repurpose public spaces into arenas of resistance. This focus on subversive representation extends into documentary film and gender studies. Macedo et al. (2023) highlighted "the relevance of artistic creation in the processes of production of counter-visual perspectives" (p. 1.8) in Portuguese films (e.g., *Bustarenga*, Gomes, 2020), noting that these works reflect the "unequal relations, the gender trouble, and identity issues" (pp. 1.20-1.21) that characterize contemporary society. In a similar vein, Sánchez Espinosa and Calderón Sandoval (2020, p. 33) analyzed Italian filmmaker Simone Cangelosi's enactment of a "queer countervisuality," placing feminist principles like "starting from oneself" and "the personal is political" at its core. Their study extends to non-fiction cinema such as *Dalla testa ai piedi* (2007) and *Una nobile rivoluzione* (2014), which "go beyond denouncing existing realities of gender inequalities and violence experienced by gender-dissident subjects" (p. 34).

Countervisuality also operates in historical memory. Negrón-Muntaner (2021) examines the archival and curatorial work of Puerto Rican historian Arturo Schomburg, whose commissions and collections worked to restore Black presence to the historical record. Schomburg understood this as a dual project: multiplying the images available of Black life and reshaping how Black communities understood their own past (Negrón-Muntaner, p. 57). A comparable logic structures the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Davis (2022, pp. 224-226) argues that the NMPJ produces a countervisual account of lynching, mass incarceration, and anti-Black violence, one that pushes against the versions of history that institutional commemoration has typically sanctioned. Kwame Akoto-Bamfo's sculptural work *Nkyinkyim*, installed at the memorial, is one example of how the site moves beyond documentation toward a direct contestation of what Davis calls "the discourses of reconciliation, redemption, and postracialism" (p. 229). Both cases use the archive and the monument not to record the past but to argue about whose past gets recorded.

The cases reviewed so far share a common setting: contemporary activism, identity politics, and recent practices of memorialization. The historical archive mobilized by Mirzoeff (2011) similarly centers on imperial and colonial formations of power, beginning with the Atlantic plantation complex and extending through antislavery resistance and the visual culture of the Haitian Revolution. Canonical European artworks do appear in this genealogy – for instance, Jacques-Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, invoked in relation to the equestrian iconography of Toussaint Louverture (pp. 107-110) – but they function primarily as reference points within a broader transatlantic visual language of authority. European fine art is therefore not treated as a sustained corpus of case studies within the framework of countervisuality. Addressing that gap is the aim of this paper.

4. Methodological framework

What this study takes from Mirzoeff is a mechanism: visuality as the ordering of perception in service of authority, and countervisuality as the formal refusal of that order. Four works test that refusal directly – Goya's *The Third of May 1808*, Courbet's *The Stone Breakers*, Dix's *The War Triptych*, and Picasso's *Guernica* – but reading them requires first establishing the visual system each one pushes against. Each work is read through close formal analysis (attending to composition, viewpoint, scale, iconographic choice, and the handling of the figure) with the institutional conventions established below serving as the benchmark against which acts of refusal are identified and assessed.

4.1. The genealogy of visuality

Beneath the polished narrative of art history lies a more unsettling truth: neither art nor its interpretation has ever been neutral. Both operate within systems of visuality and visibility that shape how images are seen, what becomes visible, and which subjects are marginalized (see Groys, 2013; Moxey, 2018). At the foundation of these systems lies the Renaissance's linear perspective, which Brunelleschi and Alberti codified as geometry but which operated as ideology, placing a single rational observer at the center of represented space and treating that position as universal (Damisch, 1994; Nelson, 2000). That observer was the European man. In Masaccio's *The Holy Trinity* (1425-1426) and Raphael's *The School of Athens* (1509-1511), theological and intellectual authority is not just depicted – it is built into the geometry of the canvas, so that to look at the painting correctly is already to occupy a position of sanctioned knowledge (Burke, 2014).

The academies hardened this into doctrine. History painting staged battle scenes as controlled theater. Muscular heroes, legible sacrifice, dignified deaths made violence readable as glory (Rabb, 2011; Wind, 1938). David, Antoine-Jean Gros, and the Neoclassicists stripped out Baroque ornament and replaced it with classical anatomy and austere architecture, presenting rational order as the natural visual language of power (Boime, 1993; Panourgiá, 2004, p. 169).

4.2. The imperial image

David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784) shows how this system worked in practice: a painting that served as a visual manifesto, channeling the austere Roman virtue that both revolutionary and authoritarian politics could claim as their own (Chua, 2021, pp. 15-16; Porterfield & Siegfried, 2006). His *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1801) makes the mechanism even clearer. Delaroche painted the same crossing forty-nine years later and showed Napoleon on a mule, cold and tired. David put him on a rearing stallion, his name carved into the rock beside Hannibal and Charlemagne (Bloch, 2011). Same event, two completely different political realities. Canova and Thorvaldsen extended this logic to stone: *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker* and *Jason with the Golden Fleece* use idealized anatomy to place their subjects outside ordinary human scale, framing power as physical inevitability (Havsteen, 2022; Johns, 1998; Ribner, 2021).

Goya, Courbet, Dix, and Picasso each worked against that visual order directly. The analysis that follows reads their formal choices as specific acts of refusal – of the idealized body, the heroic frame, and the authorized viewpoint that academic painting had spent centuries constructing.

5. Resistance within the canon

Francisco Goya (1746-1828) had been sympathetic to the Enlightenment principles that Napoleon's regime claimed to represent – such as reason, secular governance, and legal equality – which challenged the rigid feudalism of Spain. However, he quickly became disillusioned as French occupation turned into violent repression, marked by brutal crackdowns on Spanish resistance, widespread executions, and the imposition of French rule under Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon's brother (Cascardi, 1991; Shui et al., 2022; Wilson-Bareau, 2003). At the same time, the Spanish monarchy, restored in 1814 with the return of King Ferdinand VII – after Napoleon's defeat, when the Bourbon monarchy reclaimed the throne – proved just as tyrannical, betraying those who had fought for Spanish independence by reinstating absolute rule (Wilson-Bareau, pp. 145-148). Ferdinand not only rolled back liberal reforms by abolishing the progressive 1812 Cádiz Constitution, which had briefly established a legitimate monarchy, but also persecuted those who had supported it. This group included Goya, who served as court painter under both regimes (Andrews, 2013). Caught between two oppressive forces (the foreign tyranny of the French and the reactionary rule of the restored monarchy), Goya turned his art into an act of defiance, a form of countervisuality that rejected the sanitized representations of power that both sides sought to uphold. It is in this charged political climate that *The Third of May 1808* (1814) must be read.



Figure 1. *The Third of May 1808* (F. Goya, 1814; oil on canvas, 268 × 347 cm; Museo del Prado, Madrid).
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Painted in the immediate aftermath of the Peninsular War (1808-1814), *The Third of May* (Fig. 1) captures the execution of Spanish civilians by French troops (Wolf, 2009, pp. 223-224). The scene is lit by a lantern positioned at its center. Our eyes are drawn to the left side of the image. There, a civilian dressed in white – a color often associated with innocence and purity – kneels in surrender with his arms raised in a pose that evokes crucifixion (an unmistakable allusion to religious martyrdom, recalling images of Christ on the cross). Around him, secondary figures crowd the frame, some hiding behind him, some covering their faces with their arms in despair, and some already dead on the ground. With their backs turned to the viewer, the executioners are rigidly lined up. Their posture is uniform, their faces obscured, as they function less as people and more as an oppressive, inescapable force, a mechanical extension of the state.

Goya captures a moment of stunned incredulity – what Wolf (2009, p. 224) describes as the instant when horror becomes undeniable and the human body is reduced to a bloody object. The light of the lantern separates the victims from the surrounding darkness that covers their executioners, and highlights their exposure, their vulnerability, and the certainty of their fate. The man in white becomes an enigmatic figure: is he surrendering, protesting, or sacrificing himself? For him, this is no liberating sacrifice, but – as Woodford (1991) describes – a last passionate gesture, utterly defenseless, made in the face of inevitable death. And by investing an ordinary man with that expressive force, Goya stakes a claim on the visual register of martyrdom without the transcendence that register traditionally requires. At the bottom of the canvas, the bloodstained bodies seem to spill their color outward, confronting the viewer with a visceral immediacy that anticipates the shock impact of modern images of violence (Wolf, pp. 225-230). Tomlinson (2020) remarks that “Goya crystallized atrocity in an iconic image of good versus evil, juxtaposing the fear and disorder of the prisoners, illuminated by a lantern and trapped by the hillside behind, with the merciless precision of guns raised by anonymous figures in greatcoats and shakoes” (p. 217). “History [itself] is depicted as a massacre, as a catastrophe” (Argan, 1970/1982, p.

41), and Goya's commemoration of *The Third of May* becomes, in Woodford's words, "one of the most powerful condemnations of the brutality of war ever created" (p. 46).

Countervisuality is present not only in the subject matter, which highlights the victims more than the victors, but also in Goya's formal choices. The use of what Ribeiro (2002) calls "loose, almost impressionistic brushstrokes" (p. 77) is a departure from the highly detailed, polished surfaces of academic painting, conveying urgency and emotional intensity. Critically, the viewpoint, which is low and aligned with the dead, places the viewer among the victims and, according to Wolf (2009), echoes the perspective used in earlier religious art, particularly Goya's own *Crucifixion* (1780), where Christ was unusually depicted at human height. This compositional choice humanizes the scene and reverses traditional symbolism, as the martyr is no longer divine, but an ordinary man. More than a straightforward eyewitness account of Madrid's tragic events, *The Third of May* reframes the conventions of pictorial perspective with a deeply personal and immersive vision. What emerges above all, says Wolf (p. 227), is the painter's own gaze, charged with emotion, reflection, and artistic innovation, made central to the meaning of the image.

Where Goya revealed the faceless violence of state repression (Bouvier, 2011), **Gustave Courbet** (1819-1877) focused on another harsh reality: the grueling labor of the working class, a topic that the academic tradition had consistently overlooked or romanticized. For instance, John Constable's *The Hay Wain* (1821) celebrates the beauty of the English countryside while portraying rural labor as calm and untroubled. Though it depicts a real location and a typical farming task, the painting draws on older iconography of seasonal labor and shows little of its hardship (Rosenthal, 2006, p. 44). A few decades later, Rosa Bonheur, a contemporary of Courbet, took a similar approach in *The Horse Fair* (1852-55). In it, hard labor is rendered in grand, almost heroic terms, its repetitive hardship absorbed into spectacle (Bienvenue, 2022). Jules Breton (*The Gleaners*, 1854) and Jean-François Millet (*The Gleaners*, 1857) continued what A. Smith (2013, p. 98) would later characterize as the tradition of depicting agrarian work as "healthy and positive."

The 1848 Revolution (Springtime of the Peoples) had initially raised hopes for a more egalitarian France, as workers, students, and middle-class reformers briefly united to overthrow King Louis-Philippe and demand greater rights and economic justice (Price, 2004). However, after a brief period of socialist experimentation, marked by the establishment of National Workshops to provide employment, the revolution was crushed by conservative forces, and the working class remained in a state of exploitation, with their demands for labor protections dismissed under Napoleon III, who seized power in 1851 (Price, 2004; Traugott, 1985). Industrialization was transforming France, but its benefits were concentrated among the bourgeoisie (middle- and upper-class investors and industrialists who controlled production and wealth), while rural laborers and the urban poor faced worsening conditions, with long working hours, low wages, and increased job insecurity (Cottureau, 1987; Sewell, 1997). Art, too, played a role in maintaining these inequalities. The French Academy continued to favor idealized depictions of rural life, often portraying peasants in serene, pastoral settings, rather than acknowledging their hardships (Lehning, 1995). Even Romantic artists, while more sympathetic to the struggles of the poor, as seen in works by Delacroix and Géricault, often dramatized them, foregrounding individual heroism (Allert, 2003; Berg, 2007).



Figure 2. *The Stone Breakers* (G. Courbet, 1849; oil on canvas, 165 × 257 cm; formerly Gemäldegalerie, Dresden; destroyed 1945). Source: Wikimedia Commons

In response, Courbet redirected both classical idealism and Romantic sentimentalism, turning their inherited formal vocabulary toward subjects and meanings they were never designed to accommodate (Goldman, 1967). *The Stone Breakers* (1849) (Fig. 2) offers no moral lesson, no uplifting narrative, only exhaustion and dead weight. The young boy and the old man, standing at opposite ends of life – one just beginning his working years, the other nearing the end of his physical capacity – represent the cycle of poverty that spans generations. Their ragged clothes and bent postures signal what Clark (1973/1982) calls a painting “whose subject is the material weight of things, the pressure of a bending back” (p. 79): the toll of manual labor recorded not through pathos or moral appeal but through sheer physical fact. And their task is Sisyphean, breaking stones for roads they will never travel. The compressed pictorial space, with the hillside rising steeply behind the figures and denying deep recession, produces the visual equivalent of entrapment, a flattened world with no perspectival exit.

What makes *The Stone Breakers* an act of countervisuality is its deliberate rejection of artistic tradition. Large-scale canvases were typically reserved for grand historical or allegorical paintings, depictions of epic battles, biblical scenes, or mythological figures, subjects deemed “worthy” of monumental treatment (A. D. Smith, 2013). By dedicating such a vast space to anonymous workers, Courbet elevates them to historical significance while simultaneously stripping them of the dignity afforded to traditional heroes; they are deglamorized, unglorified, reduced to type. Their concealed faces (one turned away, the other sunk in shadow) deny the viewer a point of emotional connection; we see them not as individuals but as representatives of an entire class, laborers reduced to function (Boime, 2007; Fried, 1982, p. 638). For Clark (1973/1982), the faces are concealed because they were “the only things in the scene [Courbet] did not know or understand” (p. 74) – a restraint that reinforces rather than qualifies the countervisual refusal: Courbet declines to supply what he cannot legitimately represent. Unlike the Neoclassical compositions that celebrated human triumph (Boime, 1993; Havsteen, 2022) or the Romantic works that turned suffering into poetic tragedy (Allert, 2003; Berg, 2007), *The Stone Breakers* offers only monotony and fatigue: there is no narrative arc, no catharsis, only the endless repetition of physical labor, which makes it all the more unsettling in its realism. In Mirzoeff’s (2011) terms, this refusal of heroic narrative and legible individual identity disrupts visuality’s classificatory logic, denying the viewer the stable vantage point from which labor can be ordered, dignified, or morally resolved.

If Courbet's figures are trapped in an endless cycle of toil, a metaphor for the unchanging poverty of the working class, **Otto Dix's** (1891-1969) soldiers are in a nightmarish cycle of destruction. The artist himself was no distant observer of war, unlike many history painters who depicted battle without firsthand experience. At the outbreak of World War I, Dix volunteered for service and eventually became a noncommissioned officer, spending most of the conflict on the Western Front as part of a heavy machine-gun unit. He later said: "I simply had to experience [...] somebody falling down next to me, dead, with a bullet straight through him" (as cited in Karcher, 1987, p. 16). Severely wounded multiple times, Dix survived where many, including his fellow artists Max Beckmann and George Grosz, suffered severe psychological breakdowns. Remarkably resilient, he endured the horrors of mechanized warfare and continued to draw and paint amid the carnage (Rewald, 1996, p. 219), documenting dismembered bodies and shattered landscapes with an unflinching eye. His experience shaped his approach to painting, grounding it not in abstract ideology but in personal trauma. In a 1961 interview, Dix reduced the experience of war to its sensory residue: "hunger, lice, mud, terrifying noises" (as cited in Karcher, p. 16), a catalog of particulars that explains why his canvases refuse the grandeur of distance.



Figure 3. *The War Triptych (Der Krieg)* (O. Dix, 1929–1932; oil and tempera on wood, 204 × 204 cm center panel, 204 × 102 cm side panels; predella not shown; Galerie Neue Meister, Dresden). Source: albertinum.skd.museum

Created during the final years of the Weimar Republic, at a time when Germany was struggling with economic collapse (driven by hyperinflation, war reparations under the Treaty of Versailles, and the Great Depression) and political extremism, as factions of communists and fascists battled for control (Hagemann, 2015; Myerson, 2004), Dix's **The War (1929-1932)** (Figs. 3 and 4) offers a brutally unfiltered account of military conflict. The triptych's format, typically reserved for religious altarpieces to depict scenes of redemption, martyrdom, or divine intervention, "recalls Matthias Grünewald's rendering of the crucified Christ in his *Isenheim Altarpiece*" (Murray, 2014, p. 63). Dix deploys this format deliberately, transforming what should be a space of salvation into a vision of unredeemable destruction, where war erases any possibility of grace or transcendence.

The left panel – and "the least horrifying of the four," as van Dyke (2020, p. 360) would later note – shows young men, presumably German troops, marching to war. Their rigid posture and uniform gear reduce them to anonymous parts of a larger machine. Payne-Rancier (2007, pp. 12-13) sees them moving into a hazy dawn and their steel helmets emerging from the mist like industrial artifacts. The sky above, veined with red and violet under oppressive clouds, glows with apocalyptic intensity. The composition presses the figures together, amplifying a sense of claustrophobia and inevitability. A shattered cartwheel in the foreground could symbolize both the collapse of prewar ideals and the futility of the journey ahead. Most hauntingly, the soldiers seen from behind implicate the viewer in their march, creating a sense of shared inevitability. Gough (2010) observes that Dix was "conjuring up images of barren and blighted landscapes populated by phantom soldiers emerging from shallow graves" (p. 263),

a vision vividly realized here in the spectral march of the dead, caught between life and death in a desolate, war-torn no-man's-land. Only the leader's visible face, marked by tension, hints at human awareness amid mechanical obedience. Far from the glory promised in enlistment posters, this image introduces war as a foggy march toward dehumanization and death.

The central panel presents a trench-level view of war's aftermath, arranged in a circular, almost vortex-like composition. Mutilated bodies litter the scene: a skeleton impaled on metal, upturned legs jutting into the air, and a disfigured corpse. Dominated by coagulated reds and browns, the palette evokes the raw, organic violence of war (Payne-Rancier, 2007, p. 14). As Fox (2006) observes, the visible machine-gun belt in the lower left hints at Dix's own wartime experience (p. 263). This is not a battlefield, but a mass grave, an elegy in flesh. The lone figure standing amid the wreckage, clad in heavy gear, appears increasingly mechanical, stripped of individual humanity, a surviving witness in a world of silence and decay.

In the right panel, two ghostly figures "escape a fiery 'Stahlgewitter' [Storm of Steel] with a wounded comrade" (van Dyke, 2020, p. 356). Fox (2006) suggests that "Dix portrays himself carrying [the wounded one] back towards the spectator" (p. 267); his face is turned toward us in a hollow, exhausted stare. Painted in pale grays and whites, they dominate the narrow frame, symbols of suffering and survival. Below them, a goggled soldier crawls forward while another lies dead, staring upward. A charred tree leans leftward, its faint green core a rare sign of life, while to the right, the cratered earth resembles a barren moonscape. A red explosion burns at the horizon, echoing the chaos, and a second flare or aircraft cuts through the night sky above (Payne-Rancier, 2007, p. 13). This panel shows the brutal outcome of war's march: ruin, death, and the faint, fading struggle to endure.

The predella (Fig. 4) lies both literally and figuratively beneath the horrific panorama of the triptych: three soldiers are on their backs inside a very narrow, coffin-like trench. Van Dyke (2020, p. 356) and Payne-Rancier (2007, p. 15) note that they either rest or are entombed. The dominant earthy browns create a somber mood, with the tarp casting a faint reddish tint. This "intimate," more claustrophobic space evokes both physical entrapment and psychological suffocation and, ultimately, functions as a powerful reminder that beneath the broad sweep of history and violence lies the corporeal experience of individual bodies subjected to war's relentless pressures – as Fox (2006, p. 263) puts it: "it draws the spectator down into the earth [...], suggesting the war's inexorable tendency to pull combatants in this direction."



Figure 4. Predella of *The War Triptych* (*Der Krieg*) (O. Dix, 1929–1932; oil and tempera on wood, 60 × 204 cm; Galerie Neue Meister, Dresden). Source: albertinum.skd.museum

Dix's triptych directly confronted the revisionism that sought to transform the memory of World War I into a narrative of betrayal, the so-called "stab-in-the-back" myth, which falsely claimed that "[Germany's] army had not been militarily defeated" (Jacob, 1947, p. vi) but rather undermined by internal enemies, socialists, Jews, and pacifists (Deist, 1996). However, this defiance came at a cost: when the Nazis came to power in 1933, Dix was fired from the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts as part of a purge of modernist and politically subversive artists, labeled a "degenerate artist," and removed from German museums with his works seized and either destroyed, sold, or displayed in the infamous Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937, where they were held up for public ridicule (Schubert, 2005, pp. 313-317).

The War's countervisual force operates on multiple levels. Where academic history painting staged battle as controlled theater with muscular heroes, legible sacrifice, and dignified deaths, Dix offers mutilation, anonymity, and decay. The triptych format, borrowed from a tradition of sacred redemption, is turned against itself: there is no martyrdom here that redeems, no sacrifice that transcends. The trench-level viewpoint denies the elevated, distancing perspective through which official military imagery authorized its own grandeur. In Mirzoeff's terms, the triptych refuses visuality's most fundamental operation – the ordering of violence into a narrative that power can sanction and reproduce.

While Dix returned repeatedly to themes of trauma and violence in his art – echoes of his wartime experiences and deeper, early imaginings of bodily and psychological fragmentation – others, like **Pablo Picasso** (1881-1973), responded by abandoning anatomical coherence in favor of fragmented, contorted figures (Moorjani, 1992, p. 57). This fragmentation is not only stylistic but also sculptural in its intensity, as if painting itself gives rise to a new, tormented corporeality (Cox, 2011, p. 209). His disfigured portraits and monstrous faces, often set against the familiar bourgeois interiors of sofas, potted plants, and domestic accessories, interrogate the very notion of what it means to be human in the 20th century. In these so-called “dream creatures,” the classical ideal is undone; the human face is animalized, and the figure becomes unrecognizable, echoing the prehistoric image of man, what Cox (p. 214) calls creatures “no one resembles.” In *Guernica*, this fragmentation becomes a political weapon.



Figure 5. *Guernica* (P. Picasso, 1937; oil on canvas, 349 × 776 cm; Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid). Source: Smarthistory.org

Created in response to the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica on April 26, 1937, an attack carried out during the Spanish Civil War by Hitler's Condor Legion and Mussolini's *Aviazione Legionaria* at the request of Franco's fascist forces (Kramer, 2010, p. 118), *Guernica* (1937) (Fig. 5) serves as a searing indictment of modern warfare. The town itself had no meaningful strategic value; hence, the raid was a laboratory for psychological warfare, designed to terrorize the civilian population into submission and demonstrate what aerial bombing could accomplish (Cashman, 2013). When news of the massacre spread, Picasso, a committed anti-fascist living in Paris and publicly aligned with the Republican cause, was enraged (Martin, 2002, p. 71). In response, he began work on *Guernica*. The mural contains no identifiable landmarks, no aircraft, no reference to Guernica the place (Jordan, 1982, p. 6). Abstraction was the method. By dissolving the specific event into fragmented, anguished forms, Picasso reached for something wider, a more universal condemnation of violence and fascism as a mode of power.

In contrast to traditional war paintings that glorified battle or framed conflict in terms of heroism, Picasso's approach in *Guernica* was deliberately anti-monumental, rejecting grandeur, symmetry, or any suggestion of order. There are no generals, no soldiers, no clear enemy, only the consequences of indiscriminate destruction – people, animals, and buildings exposed to the violence and chaos of an unexpected attack. Figures are twisted, their bodies contorted unnaturally, rejecting anatomical realism; limbs stretched in agony reflect both physical and psychological torment. A mother wails over her dead child, her mouth open in an eternal scream, an expression of pure, uncontained

anguish. A fallen man, dismembered and broken, still clutches a shattered sword from which a small flower grows. Is he a soldier, a defeated fighter who represents the failure of armed resistance, or a futile symbol of struggle amid the carnage?

Saura (1993, as cited in Corbin, 1999) interprets the presence of the bull, horse, and armed man as figures drawn from the Spanish bullfight, a culturally significant and deeply symbolic part of Spanish civil life. In *Guernica*, however, these familiar figures appear in a distorted, nightmarish form. Saura (as cited in Corbin, p. 7) calls this a “perverse inversion” of the traditional bullfight: the bull, normally the vanquished, remains upright and unmoved, while the horse and the bullfighter – symbols of control and honor – are destroyed. This subversion suggests that the painting is about violence and the breakdown of civil society. The bullfight, once a structured ritual celebrating human mastery and national identity, is transformed into an allegory of civil war, a horrifying spectacle where order collapses and destruction reigns (p. 7). Taken together, this large canvas, expressed in shades of black, white, and gray, denies us any sense of aesthetic pleasure and, in turn, embodies the inhumanity, the atrocity, the hopelessness of war, the cruelty of bombing civilians (Xifra & Heath, 2018, p. 29), and becomes more than an anti-war statement by presenting civil war as a grotesque parody of civic life, a warped version of the very traditions that once unified the nation.

The political impact of *Guernica* was instantaneous and long-lasting. At the International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life in 1937, which featured the Spanish Pavilion and represented the Republican government in the struggle against the fascist regime of General Franco, the painting provoked widespread reactions and contrasted sharply with the fascist pavilions of Germany and Italy, which featured imposing neoclassical architecture and art that glorified the strength of the military and the ideals of nationalism (Darr, 1966; Jordan, 1982). It traveled extensively throughout Europe and the Americas, becoming a rallying cry against fascism, a form of resistance to authoritarian regimes and the indiscriminate violence they inflicted. During World War II, when a Nazi officer reportedly asked Picasso, pointing to the painting, “Did you do that?” Picasso responded ironically, “No, you did” (Atlee, 2021). Even decades later, the painting continued to disrupt narratives of war. In 2003, as the United States prepared to invade Iraq, its tapestry version hanging in the United Nations headquarters was covered during official discussions on military action (Kennedy, 2009). The decision underscored the painting’s enduring power: its message was so damning, so unequivocal in its opposition to war, that it had to be hidden.

The painting refuses to organize violence into legible narratives of heroism and national purpose and, instead, offers fragmentation, anonymity, and aesthetic refusal. The monumental canvas is turned against the logic of monumentalism itself by stripping it of glory and of any authorized viewpoint from which violence might resolve into meaning. By subverting the cultural symbols through which Spanish civic identity had been ordered, Picasso appropriates the formal vocabulary of institutional power to expose what that power conceals, which is precisely what Mirzoeff’s (2011) framework describes.

6. Discussion

The most consistent pattern across all four works is **a recurring use of formal subversion**. For instance, to illuminate the scene of execution in *The Third of May 1808*, Goya replaces the divine light with a man-made lantern. According to Tomlinson (2020), this is a radical shift from sacred to political indictment, transforming the crucifixion pose into a secular image of helplessness and protest (cf. Argan, 1970/1982; Wolf, 2009). More precisely: by placing the lantern at the center of the scene, Goya illuminates – deliberately, defiantly – what official narratives would have erased. And he is not singular. Courbet represented on a monumental scale something that was not historically grand (see A. D. Smith, 2013). His subjects were overlooked, anonymous, inadequately paid countrymen, doing their monotonous toil (Boime, 2007). As established earlier with reference to Lehning (1995), this choice directly confronts the romanticized portrayals of rural life favored by the French Academy and critiques the systemic exploitation of the working class (cf. Cottureau, 1987). What Goya and Courbet did best was to contest visuality’s aestheticization and classification of power.

Abstraction and ambiguity, particularly in *The War* and *Guernica*, can also function as countervisual strategies. Dix’s use of the triptych format, traditionally associated with religious redemption, is repurposed into what Payne-Rancier (2007) and Fox (2006) identify as a trench-level elegy of mechanized slaughter and bodily decay. In *Guernica*, the fragmented forms and disfigured faces resist narrative clarity, offering what Saura (1993, as cited in Corbin, 1999) describes as a “perverse inversion” of Spanish cultural symbols like the bullfight, while turning civil war into a grotesque

spectacle of social collapse. Both resist aesthetic closure and demand prolonged encounters with trauma and disfigurement (cf. van Dyke, 2020; Gough, 2010), thus shifting the function of art from contemplation to confrontation.

In Goya, Courbet, and Dix, a third pattern emerges: **the use of absence and anonymity** as tools of resistance. Goya's executioners, Courbet's laborers, and Dix's soldiers (see Bouvier, 2011; Fried, 1982; Payne-Rancier, 2007) – either caught in the act of crime, of repetitious, somewhat humiliating labor, or in a machinery of war that offered glory in the poster and annihilation in the field – all equally deny the viewer clear protagonists or heroes to identify with. These visual omissions resist personalization and instead direct focus toward structural violence and, by doing so, force us to grapple with collective suffering (see Mirzoeff, 2011, on how countervisuality disrupts the terms of visibility themselves).

The formal consistency across four different national contexts and political moments points to something deliberate: a **shared refusal** to reproduce the aesthetic codes through which states, academies, and military institutions authorized their own power. Take Knudsen et al. (2021, p. 270), who discuss the importance of exposing “authorial gazes and voices” to create a political reality: the same logic structures Goya's own growing disillusionment with imperial powers (see Cascardi, 1991; Shui et al., 2022). Mendes (2023, p. 774) describes Weiwei's reenactment of the tragic image of Alan Kurdi as a “testimonial gesture” that reveals “structural violence,” just as Dix used his art to openly criticize German nationalism and militarism even as he faced Nazi persecution (Murray, 2023). Hoppe (2014) shows how street artists transform public spaces into “arenas of resistance”; the same gesture is visible in Courbet's rejection of heroic romanticism after the 1848 revolution (Goldman, 1967). And Davis (2022) highlights how the NMPJ challenges the sanitized institutional accounts of racial violence, similar to how *Guernica* mounted a direct visual challenge to fascism (Martin, 2002).

Like the grainy cellphone footage of Hussein's execution or the raw imagery of NTFU, these historical artworks refuse aesthetic distance and challenge state-sanctioned narratives of war, justice, and progress (cf. Boal, 2011; Bakir, 2009; Malik, 2006). But where those contemporary images registered urgency, these works encoded it through formal structure, the subversion of convention, and institutional defiance, making visible what the unmediated shock of documentary footage cannot: that such resistance is not a reaction to modernity but one of its oldest practices. What these works share is a common structural effect as each exploits the formal conventions of its institutional context (religious altarpiece, history painting, monumental canvas) to turn the tools of official visuality against themselves.

7. Limitations

The four artists examined are all European, all male, and all firmly inside the Western canon. That was a deliberate choice, since the argument depends on showing countervisuality operating within the dominant tradition, even if the study says nothing about how artists working outside that tradition resisted it, or what formal languages they found to do so. The analysis is also interpretive, working from visual reading and existing scholarship rather than original archival research, favoring conceptual reach over historical granularity. It cannot address how audiences received these works, how their meanings have shifted over time, or whether the critical edge they once carried still holds today. What this study set out to demonstrate is that resistance to official visual culture is not a recent development or a marginal one. It runs through the center of the Western tradition itself.

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