**El *Guernica* de Picasso y su impacto en el debate sobre arte y política en América Latina**

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**Picasso's *Guernica* in Latin America**

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This is not just the story of a painting but of the debates that this painting has produced. There is a symbolic power represented by the indelible memory of this painting and by the many other circumstances that have made it a paradigmatic case when art historians consider the central problem of an image and its power. It is an image with an aura so powerful that it supersedes all the images that reproduce the work: an exemplary case is the tapestry reproduction of the painting, purchased by Nelson Rockefeller and donated to the United Nations in 1985 as a reminder of this organisation's responsibility to maintain peace and prevent the repetition of such wars. This tapestry was covered by a blue sheet when Colin Powell announced an end to negotiations with Baghdad. Of course, the image of women running and cradling their dead children, or waving their arms among flames, which recalls civilians assailed by bombs dropped by German warplanes on the city of Guernica shortly before the beginning of World War II, was not the most appropriate for the announcement of the bombardment that would soon begin in the city of Baghdad.

For its time, in 1937, the work was an image-manifesto. It was an image generated at a very precise historical moment, one which aimed to provide answers to a set of latent imperatives regarding the forms in which modern art could indeed provide answers in the face of historical imperatives. It was a work that expressed, better than any other image or any other text, the imminence of a brutal war.

The power of *Guernica* was constructed around the specific circumstances in which the work itself was

produced: a government commission issued by the Spanish Republic for exhibition in the Spanish pavilion at the 1937 Paris World's Fair. It was a state commission and therefore, inevitably, it was propagandistic art. However, at the same time, it was a painting that not only referred to Spain but also addressed prewar tensions; it assumed a place in the nervous prewar climate emblematically embodied by the two monumental and confrontational pavilions organised by Germany and the Soviet Union. Between these two pavilions stood the Spanish pavilion, constructed as a link in the desperate strategy that sought to break the indifference and neutrality that France and England had established with Germany, in order to provoke some form of commitment. The elimination of the closed and raised fist in the final version of the painting could be attributed not only to formal explanations. It also expressed the need to avoid inconvenient references to the Communist Party which, in the strained prewar climate, complicated the garnering of support.

In the conflict-ridden climate of the Cold War, when Picasso publicly proclaimed his allegiance to the Communist Party, the 'free world' lost the man and the artist-intellectual, but it could not also lose the work. To possess the painting meant being able to assign it meaning, to separate it from the specific circumstances surrounding its origin—the Spanish Civil War, the German bombardment, the possible relations with the Communist Party—and to give it the most generalised significance possible, as Alfred Barr affirmed in the explanatory plaque hung beside the painting for the public at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA): 'There have been numerous but contradictory interpretations of Guernica. Picasso himself has denied any political meaning whatsoever, simply establishing that the mural expresses his hatred of war and brutality'.

Once the painting had overcome initial criticism, once it had withstood the furious aesthetic debates that took place at the heart of the Communist Party during the postwar years, it formed part of the leftist aesthetic canon, having become the unchallenged exemplary model of the sought-after fusion of art and politics. The texts written by Sartre, Adorno, Marcuse and Garaudy, among many others, legitimated the painting during the 1960s. At the same time, they converted it into a kind of limit that could not be surpassed. This painting, which resolved the difficult relationship between art and politics more effectively than any other, didn't allow an analysis of what was happening in art during the dynamic years of the 1960s.

The influence of *Guernica* in Latin America can be recognised in numerous artists, from Jose Clemente Orozco (*Dive Bomb and Tank*, 1940), Candido Portinari (*Retirantes*, 1944), Lasar Segall, with his series on war (*Inmigrants ship*, *War*), and particularly with a work like *Mascara* (1938), where the presence of *Guernica* can be perceived—a work that he saw during his stay in Paris between 1937–38,

when he travelled to his show in the Renou et Colle gallery to officially represent Brazil at the International Congress of Independent Artists. The influence of Picasso can also be observed in Tamayo's paintings after 1940; for example, *Heavenly Bodies* (1946). It can be seen in the expressive violence of the forms by Picasso, in which Tamayo could recognise the relations that linked them to pre-Columbian art, as well as to their terrible historical present. The topic of the air bombardment, represented for the first time by Picasso in *Guernica*, became one of the main topics painted by Tamayo during the 1940s. The influence of *Guernica* can also be recognised in the work of Osvaldo Guayasamin (*La edad de la ira*, 1963) and Beatriz González (*Mural for Socialist Factory*, 1981). The work was influential in a much more powerful way than could have happened merely because of its style.

During the 1960s, the image played a central role in the debates about the relationships between art and politics in Latin America. These debates were reactivated after the Cuban Revolution, when art wanted to play a part in the revolutionary process that aimed to convert the whole continent to socialism. What was the kind of art that could collaborate in this process? What were the limits of this politicisation of the art? There are no simple answers to these questions because the relationship between art and politics yielded various solutions. These also materialised in ways that conflicted with the sense of dissatisfaction produced by the conviction that something was lost when art was linked to politics.

In general terms, Soviet Socialist Realism suffered from a negative image: no one wanted to bear the burden of what all agreed were horrendous productions. It was even more difficult to neutralise the aesthetic of Mexican Muralism, a school that had emerged in Latin America in the context of a revolution that relegated the artist to the social position of a worker, a wage-earner who, having dispensed with his privileges, had accepted the task assigned to him by Vasconcelos, the minister of culture: to paint a lot and to do it quickly. The dream of public art, of art outside the confines of the museums, of art that was part of daily life and with a presence in schools, office buildings and on streets, capable of representing on walls the history of the first modern revolution in Latin America, was not a resource that could be discarded easily. Nonetheless, revolutionary art had also been, and was still more than ever, a form of state-sponsored art, a repetitive rhetoric adapted to the requirements imposed upon it by an institutionalised revolution. In the early 1960s, Muralism could not be a model for the avant-garde sectors.

By the mid 1960s, for all positions, those that defended the legitimacy of forming ties with politics, as well as those that pushed for its complete autonomy, an answer was provided by Picasso's *Guernica*. In 1963, the Mexican writer Luis Cardoza y Aragón wrote in the Cuban

magazine *Casa de las Américas*: '[In *Guernica*] all the complaints about art and politics, formalism and realism, content, etc., were magnificently and pictorially resolved, providing a great, concrete, and exact lesson. All those who have any doubts should return to it'. This painting condensed solutions that were capable of overcoming all objections. It did not work upon empty forms. Neither did it justify itself on the basis of theme, but rather on the basis of establishing, with theme, an artefact, a machine in which reality, albeit dramatic, was rife with the configuration and internal articulation of the work.

By analysing the corpus of magazines published by the intellectual left in Latin America during the 1960s, the laudatory ode to the life and work of Picasso is seen time and again. What was the problem that this painting resolved? What did it reveal to be wrong with all other solutions?

In 1961, Sartre wrote that

> the most fortunate of artists has benefited from the most amazing good fortune. In fact, the canvas combines incompatible qualities. Effortlessly. Unforgettable rebellion, commemoration of a massacre, and at the same time the painting seems to seek only Beauty … The coarse accusation remains, but without modifying the calm beauty of the forms. Inversely, this beauty does not betray: it helps. The Spanish war, cardinal moment of World War II, breaks out—precisely—when the life of the painter and his painting reach a decisive moment. The same social forces transformed a painter into the negation of the order of such forces, from a distance the same forces had prepared the fascist destruction and Guernica … If the crime continues to be odious upon becoming 'plastic,' it is because it explodes and the beauty of Picasso is perpetually explosive, to borrow an expression from Breton.[i]

This text provides one of the most extraordinary formulations of everything *Guernica* was responding to: the point at which form recognised content (political content) and exalted it; the imperturbable balance at which reality was not lost in aestheticism, but rather gained strength through language.

In 1964, Roger Garaudy's *Hacia un realismo sin fronteras* (*Towards a Realism Without Borders*) was published in French.[ii] One year later it was translated into Spanish in Buenos Aires. In this text, which could be read as a kind of ship's log, Garaudy explained why Picasso was a realist as well as why he was not. He highlighted certain revolutionary aspects of Picasso's work, particularly the important fact of his having departed from and broken with tradition. Cubism was the breakthrough that had enabled painting,

'liberated from its tutelage under literature', to conquer its 'autonomy'.[iii] Picasso had taken the next step with *Guernica*:

> *The significance is in intimate unison with the form*. It was necessary for the color to produce pain, the line to produce anger or terror, and the composition to have such mastery that the work should signify both a verdict and a cry of man in the process of overcoming … However, by virtue of its formal expression, that ossuary and chaos inspires in us neither the feeling of defeat nor of desperation.[iv]

What Garaudy was saying was that art did not have to submit to the demands of revolution, nor did it have to wait for revolution to take place, because revolutions in art respond to the same principles, the same transformative matrixes, as revolutions in painting or literature. The relationship was not forced, but rather it had a natural bond.

The debate over the relationship between art and politics was well known, but it increased in intensity because the situation required that it should. In the middle of the 1960s, it seemed that to 'take a position' was unavoidable in the new reality. The Argentine artist Roberto Broullón emphasised the scope of this obligation:

> Today more than ever the painter must take a position in the critical-historical process he is part of, and this process rests upon a political perspective … But this coincidence, specifically in the artistic sphere, will always be MEDIATED (I have in mind 'GUERNICA' as a symbol of Nazi barbarism).[v]

The taking of a position with respect to the sociopolitical process or, in other words, the conversion of the artist into an intellectual, did not imply, for the moment, subordinating artistic practices to political demands, which could at best coincide with each other, but only when this coincidence was 'mediated'. This mediation provided the possibility of establishing language as an autonomous system.[vi] What was at stake here, finally, was the notion of autonomy in a double sense: with respect to its connection to the theme (in this sense, *Guernica* was the ultimate and most perfect way to force the language) and with respect to its social function.

These two problems—autonomy and social function—could not for the moment have a satisfying theoretical solution, neither through affirmative positions with respect to the aesthetic change in the 1960s—represented by Pop Art, performances and assemblage—nor through negative ones: the

new art of the 1960s was critically condemned by the analyses of the intelligentsia as expressions of imperialism. From this perspective, Broullón differentiated between the interpenetration of cultures (which was compatible with the concepts of 'universalism' and 'internationalism', in positive terms) and the economic and political penetration of the most developed countries into the less developed countries; that is, 'imperialist' or 'colonial penetration': an assault that was called, on the cultural level, 'cultural colonialization' or 'ideological penetration'.[vii]

*Guernica* operated, in spite of Picasso and the quality of the painting, as a barrier against the gaze. Undoubtedly, it was a work that represented the culmination of the modernist paradigm. As such, it was used as intellectual justification to dismiss, without even analysing, the profound aesthetic change that was taking place all over the world, including Latin America. A paradoxical situation then emerged, not owing to the painting, but rather to those who used the painting to further their own interests: in a world startled by revolutionary promises, such as those of the 1960s, when a better future was being proclaimed throughout Latin America, what proceeded from this revolution—the art that was brandished as an example of the union between art and politics—did not pertain to this world but rather to one thirty years earlier. Ironically, the debates over art and politics focused on an example that the left championed as an example for the future, yet it was a work that had been produced three decades in the past.

We are concerned with an image that is profoundly contextual and, at the same time, anachronistic. 'The force of the image emerges when it is freed from its context', Susan Buck Morss affirms.[viii] The images are inscribed in fields of possibilities. Its condition of appearing, of acquiring significance at different moments, implies a manipulation of time and refers to its paradoxical anachronistic condition, stratified periods of time, survivals, durations. In this respect, the artistic images are not simple historical documents, they are also events. They acquire unforeseen powers—anachronistic with respect to their moments of origin—but also historical as their effects bear a relationship to different contexts: the context in which the image was created or that in which its unexpected, unforeseen meaning is currently realised.

All the superlatives that one hears at the merest mention of Picasso's *Guernica* suddenly vanish when one describes the actual surface of the painting. Tears, missing pieces, cracks, accretions, reinforcements, deformations, holes, dirt, crevasses, rips, retouching, microfissures, warps, relocations, rebuilding, wear and tear: the terms refer more to a ruin than to a splendid icon of the twentieth century. In its current condition, it might be wondered if it hasn't all but disappeared; if what we now see isn't the mummification of the work that was once

painted to shock the world; if what is now exhibited is hardly more than its cadaver. However, as history has demonstrated, the dead don't necessarily lose their power. Occasionally, they continue to grow.

Considered as a paradigmatic representation of one of the most deplorable acts of violence in Western history, the painting also questions the immediate present. The Israeli filmmaker Juliano Mer Khanis poses the question, 'Who will paint the Guernica of Lebanon?'[ix] Similarly, John Berger wonders, 'In which cities are similar crimes committed today which have yet to be recognized?'

**Notes**

[i] Jean Paul Sartre, 'El pintor sin privilegios', in *Literatura y arte, Situations IV*, French edition, Losada, Buenos Aires, 1977, p. 282.
[ii] Roger Garaudy, *Hacia un realismo sin fronteras. Picasso—Saint-John Perse—Kafka*, Lautaro, Buenos Aires, 1964.
[iii] ibid., p. 46. In the interview published by the North American magazine *New Masses*, and republished by *L'Humanité* on 29 and 30 September 1944 under the title 'Pourquoi j'ai adhéré au parti communiste', Picasso explained: 'My adhesion to the Communist Party is the logical consequence of my entire life, of all my work … How could I have doubted? Fear of committing myself? But on the contrary I have felt freer, more complete': in the chronology established by Sarah Wilson, in Pontus Hulten (ed.), *Paris-Paris, 1937–1957*, Centre Georges Pompidou-Gallimard, Paris, 1992, p. 308.
[iv] Garaudy, pp. 57–8 (emphasis in the original).
[v] Roberto Broullón, 'Apuntes sobre el vanguardismo', *Literatura y sociedad*, vol. 1, October–December 1965, p. 109. This magazine, complied by Ricardo Piglia and Sergio Camarda, and published only once, was one of the few incursions into the area. The publication of articles by Sartre, Gramsci, della Volpe and Lukács established an authoritative criteria that ran through all such leftist Latin American publications.
[vi] For a discussion of the concept of autonomy, see Claudia Gilman, 'La autonomía, como el ser, se dice de muchas maneras', in VV.AA, *Nuevos territorios de la literatura latinoamericana*, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Oficina de Publicaciones del CBC, Instituto de Literatura Hispanoamericana, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, 1997, pp. 131–9.
[vii] Broullón, pp. 109–10.
[viii] Susan Buck Morss, 'Estudios visuales e imaginación Global', in José Luis Brea (ed.), *Estudios visuales. La epistemología de la visualidad en la era de la globalización*, Akal Estudios Visuales, Madrid, 2005, p. 157.
[ix] Juliano Mer Khanis, in 'A Letter from 18 Writers', 18 August 2008, *The Nation*, 28 August 2006.