

VISUAL ARTS

Part C Term 1 Assessment

With three artists from different countries and backgrounds it is interesting that they have all, in some of their works, decided to work with the same concept. The one element that unites the works of Spaniard Francisco Goya, German John Heartfield and Hungarian Robert Capa is that, at least at some point in their career, they have all chosen to depict the universal issue of war. Goya extensively employed colour and unique paint application techniques to explore the emotional side of war and conflict during the invasion of Spain by France, while Heartfield used the composite medium of photomontage to protest against the suffering of desperate people under the Nazi reign. At a similar time to Heartfield, and at times in the same countries as both Goya and Heartfield, Capa photographed at least five different wars and captured mainly action photos aimed at portraying the violence of armed conflict. All three artists incorporate the human figure as part of their subject matter, but in my opinion John Heartfield and Francisco Goya are more persuasive in communicating their intentions than Robert Capa.

Francisco Goya was born in Spain in 1746 and practiced artmaking almost to the end of his life in 1828. He was the official court painter to Charles IV and the director of the Spanish Royal Academy, and with these connections he became a favourite of the wealthy who employed him to paint their portraits. Goya was part of the Romanticism movement and mainly worked with the media of paint; however he was prolific in the production of both paintings and prints (zinc plate and etching among others.)

Francisco had a free, painterly style and he often used his fingers in the place of a brush as he painted. He painted rapidly and his works include unblended patches of colour which was an untraditional technique in that time, making him a fascination of the later Realist painters. Whilst these painters, such as Manet, were influenced by him, Francisco was heavily influenced by artists including Diego Velazquez, a seventeenth century painter whose artworks included aspects of nature and realism, as did Goya's. Goya has had countless exhibitions, with a notable one of recent times being "Goya's Last Works" which was held in the United States.

Through his artworks, Goya explored the extremes of human action and emotion and in particular he depicted the corruption of the Spanish monarchy. In the chosen artwork, *The Third of May 1808*, the terrible nature of war is conveyed, in particular when, in 1808, Napoleon Bonaparte's army invaded Spain. Specifically, the work illustrates some citizens of Madrid being executed by the French for killing their soldiers. Goya was commissioned a few days after the massacre to paint the situation; however, being a Spaniard himself, he would also have had personal reasons for the production of the artwork.

In *The Third of May 1808*, Francisco Goya conveys the emotional aspects of war through the use of symbolism and varying colour, contrast, tone and directional lines. The immediate focal point of the artwork is a man wearing a white shirt. The colour alone



The Third of May 1808, Francisco Goya,
Oil on Canvas
1814

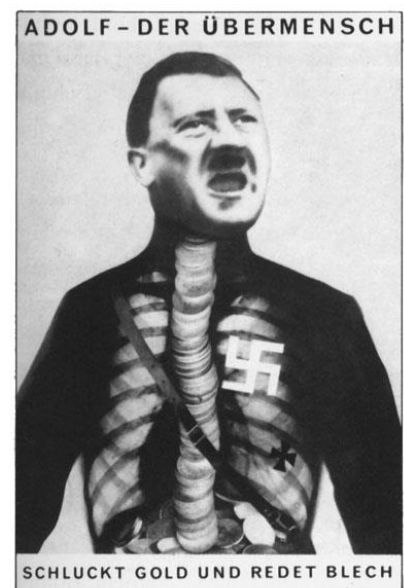
Reference: "Francisco Goya: Paintings from the Famous Spanish Artist." *Empty Easel*. N.p., n.d. Web. 3 Mar. 2012. <emptyeasel.com/2007/06/06/francisco-goya-paintings-from-the-famous-spanish-artist/>.

suggests innocence and purity which sharply contrasts with the dark colours of the armed soldiers. This, combined with the biblical allusion of the man representing Jesus, which is proposed by the similar stance (as if he is on the cross), conveys that the man is not guilty of a crime – only defending his city. The shape of the cross is mirrored in the man lying at his feet, dead, which is an emotive structural element and visually confirms the fate of the first man. The shooting men remain anonymous – their faces are turned away which gives the impression that they know that they are committing a shameful act. The fact that there are six of them killing one person shows that they lack courage – even though the man doesn't stand a chance. The painting is divided into two main sections – the highly emotive left hand side and the almost inhuman, merciless right hand side. The sections are split by a shadow cast by the lamp which illuminates the 'good' left hand side and darkens the other side which creates a persuasive aspect of the painting – the soldiers with the guns are evidently doing the wrong thing. I find *The Third of May 1808* a very persuasive artwork because the audience is immediately led to the pleading expressions of the rebels and the poignant symbols and contrasts found throughout the painting. The soldiers are only cast in a negative light, which influences the audience's judgement. Art critic Robert Hughes¹ says about this artwork: "This is the first truly modern image of war, the first to register the machine-like efficiency of oppression." I completely agree with this statement. The machine-like efficiency of the soldiers is similar to more modern warfare and the fact that Goya has produced such an advanced artwork means that it is still persuasive and relevant even today.

While Goya's artwork depicts anonymous people with power, John Heartfield's photomontage work depicts one specifically – Adolf Hitler. Heartfield was born in 1891 in Berlin, Germany, with the name Helmut Herzfeld, however he changed it in 1916 in part to protest against the anti-British propaganda of World War I – his opinionated view on war can be seen even from quite a young age! After this war John joined the German communist party and produced designs and posters for the organisation. He also worked for socialist magazines where he applied his photomontage to attack Hitler and the Nazi's. Heartfield died in 1968 in Berlin.

John was one of the original inventors of the unique technique of photomontage – as Bertolt Brecht² (a German poet and playwright) said: "He works in a field that he has created himself". Photomontage involves making a composition from parts of different photographs. With his own medium, he tackles the socio-political issue of war, but especially Hitler's rule over Germany during World War II (1939-45). Heartfield, it seems, was motivated by personal reasons to explore this issue as he was extremely unsupportive of Hitler and the Nazi party.

Similarly to Goya's artwork, *Adolf the Superman: Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk* consists mainly of sepia colours and these are reminiscent of the old photos it is made up of. However the obvious difference is the change of media from paint to photomontage. This artwork was designed as an anti-Hitler poster in the election in 1932. It denotes the financial backing Hitler received from industrialists who feared that Germany would vote for the Communist government. The fact that the piece was used as a poster and is still recognised later implies that it was persuasive and effective enough to be remembered. In the artwork, Hitler's body seems to have an x-ray like appearance, which portrays him as an almost transparent human being with no emotions, mercy or consideration for others. This aspect colours the audience's judgement which adds to its persuasiveness. The text included below the image – "Adolf, Der Übermensch: Schulckt Gold und redet Blech" is German for the title of the work. I believe that the



*Adolf, the Superman:
Swallows Gold and Spouts
Junk*, John Heartfield
Photomontage
1932

Reference: "Collage Images." *Cti.itc*. N.p., n.d.
Web. 3 Mar. 2012.
<cti.itc.virginia.edu/~mdst322/mdst32202.html
>.

¹ Article – *The Unflinching Eye*, The Guardian, 4th October 2003

² Quote – Bertolt Brecht, 1949. Source – Spartacus Educational UK.

inclusion of text makes the artwork more persuasive as it conveys the meaning of the work more powerfully. If the viewer hadn't read the text they might not understand the underlying meaning of the artwork.

Goya and Heartfield are internationally renowned war artists, however, unlike Robert Capa, neither of them have earned the title "The Greatest War Photographer in the World³." In a way, Robert is similar to Heartfield as he was born with a different name, however to begin with he didn't actually change his name – he invented a new imaginary person. Capa was born in 1913 in Budapest, Hungary as Andrei Friedmann. At the age of 18, he moved to Berlin where he and his Polish fiancé formed an alliance of three people – Andrei, Gerda (his wife) and Robert Capa (an imaginary and talented professional photographer). In this way, Capa began his career, making a sizable income posing as Capa and selling images for three times their worth. One influence on his practice is the fact that Gerda, his wife, was killed on a Spanish battlefield – he was grief-stricken and felt the need to further understand war and its' effect. Robert died in 1954, having stepped on a landmine in the First Indochina War.

Robert Capa covered five different wars during his short life – the Spanish Civil War, the Second Sino-Japanese War, World War II (across Europe), the 1948 Arab Israeli War and the First Indochina War. The controversial photograph being discussed, *The Falling Soldier*, has become a symbol for the Spanish Civil War. It has been alleged that it was staged – however nothing is proven as yet. Capa photographed the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939. This war was a military revolt against the government of Spain, with 500,000 deaths in total. It was a large-scale war which involved assistance being given to the Nationalists from countries such as Nazi Germany, who used the war as a testing ground for their new methods of tank and air warfare.



The Falling Soldier, Robert Capa
Photograph
1936

Reference: "Magnumphotos." *Magnum Photos*. N.p., n.d. Web. 1 Apr. 2012.
<http://www.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=ViewBox_VPage&VBID=2K1HZOFRRSWZU&IT=ZoomImage01_VForm&IID>.

Although *The Falling Soldier* is a controversial photograph, it is undeniably well known around the world, whether it is because of the questions asked about its credibility or the skill with which it was taken. It is a black and white photo which conveys the rawness of war, with contrast between the white shirt of the soldier and the smoky sky behind him. This artwork explores the themes of the horror of war and the frailty of human life. War is portrayed by Capa as being horrific through the subject matter of the work. The man is dying alone, shot by someone he had never met in a place devoid of emotion. Life is shown to be extremely frail and easily lost through an almost ironic feature of the photograph. The scale of the artwork makes the soldier appear large and almost invincible compared to the insignificant haze in the background, symbolising the way that humans feel invulnerable. However, the man is dead even while he is falling, which serves to show just how misled humans are about the concept of death – how quick and sudden it can be.

The man is caught in the moment before he hits the ground, which is not something that is usually able to be captured forever on film. Perhaps this is why the artwork is so well known. In my opinion, however, it is famous as a result of the accusations made about it. I don't think that this positively affects its persuasiveness as it is turning the concept of war into something to make money out of –

³ Title given to him by the *Picture Post*, a British magazine, on 3rd December 1938 after he published his prints on the Spanish Civil War. Source – Magnum Photos.

if the claims are true, Capa wasn't accurately and honestly portraying war but producing an artwork for his benefit only. I do find this image shocking in its blunt portrayal of death and war, which may have been the intention of the artist, but I don't think that the themes and intentions that Capa explored are new or convincing for the audience to think one way or another.

Goya, Heartfield and Capa have explored different aspects of war – respectively, the emotional side, the suffering and the violence. They all have varying degrees of persuasiveness evident in their artworks. I found *The Third of May, 1808* and *Adolf the Superman: Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk* equally persuasive. Goya's work portrayed the loss of innocent lives through the skilful application of colour and tonal contrast, while Heartfield depicted the discriminative regime of Adolf Hitler using his own unique media. I think that the use of photomontage improves the persuasiveness of the artwork as it is striking and innovative, leading the audience to search for the message within it. *The Falling Soldier* didn't appeal to me to the same extent as the others because of the claims made against it which reduces the impression that it has on the audience. In my opinion, for an artwork to be persuasive the artist should have honest intentions and be able to creatively explore an issue with an artwork that will instantly have an effect on the audience.

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