Immortal Remembrance

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the article's first paragraph.

Many monuments stand to remind us of horror, violence and people lost. The Vietnam Memorial and Auschwitz are stark reminders of the consequences of war. How do we feel when reading the 58,325 names on “the Wall?” Can we sense the horror (when) inside a gas chamber? Memorials exist to provoke a somber reaction, promoting peace. Joan Didion, the author of Salvador, compares how the Metropolitan Cathedral and Pablo Picasso's Guernica convey their anti-war sentiments.

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Immortal Remembrance
By Michelle Bopp

Many monuments stand to remind us of horror, violence and people lost. The Vietnam Memorial and Auschwitz are stark reminders of the consequences of war. How do we feel when reading the 58,325 names on “the Wall?” Can we sense the horror (when) inside a gas chamber? Memorials exist to provoke a somber reaction, promoting peace. Joan Didion, the author of Salvador, compares how the Metropolitan Cathedral and Pablo Picasso’s Guernica convey their anti-war sentiments.

Through its physical appearance, the Metropolitan Cathedral stirs anti-war sentiments in the hearts of visitors. The Cathedral in San Salvador stands naked and vulnerable with its “wiring...exposed,” its “bare incandescent bulbs,” a makeshift cross (Didion 86). It is not a sanctuary, but a barren frame. Without Archbishop Romero, and the once communal prayer, invocations are lost in the “warped ply board” (Didion 86). Rusting structural rods are “sticking out at violent and wretched angles” (Didion 86) as were its people dying on the front steps. Such a desolate place can only stand as a virtual tomb, blood of the innocent to stain the “cheap linoleum” (Didion 86). The “wiring...exposed,” its “bare incandescent bulbs,” a makeshift cross in the Cathedral are unlit. Nothing sheds light on the altar, globe or dove. These objects draw no attention and go unnoticed: “At this time and in this place the light of the world could be construed as out, off, extinguished” (Didion 87). The light of God, hope and freedom of religion has been trampled by the National Guardsmen. The desolate nature of the Cathedral reflects the despondent mourners. No illumination of the light of God could restore faith to the Salvadorians.

Guernica’s promotes anti-war sentiments through its depiction of the bombing in Guernica, Spain in 1937. The monochromatic use of grays and blues in Guernica emphasize destruction, a lack of color and life. Color use in the mural coincides with the obscure and jarring lines, used to portray a people in agony. The writhing horse depicted in the painting shows mangled hands and feet “sticking out at violent and wretched angles” (Didion 86) just as the structural rods of the Cathedral were protruding through the desolate framework. In addition to the dismembered bodies of animals and humans, viewers notice the mother holding her dying child, looking upwards and sobbing to heaven. According to pbs.org, Picasso’s portrayal of the bombing’s aftermath “is modern art’s most powerful anti-war statement” (Guernica”). Art not only expresses its message through physical appearance, but through its symbolic condemnation.

Since the Cathedral and Guernica stand as “authentic pieces of political art,” (Didion 87) they have maintained their honored status. Unfortunately, people of El Salvador are offended by the condition of the Metropolitan Cathedral. It is not a polished or finished symbol, but the guts of a murdered religion: a literal tomb to memorialize those who lost their lives at this holy spot. Moreover, the Cathedral’s inconsequential existence is verified by the “Sony and Philips billboards near the steps” (Didion 86). Because the Cathedral “remains perhaps the only unambiguous political statement” to Salvadorians, the message of the National Guardsmen is subtle. The cathedral has become a Judas to the people of El Salvador, proving that one government rules over God.

Defining Guernica as one of the “authentic pieces of political art” (Didion 87) is deliberate and appropriate. According to pbs.org, Picasso avoided political art but was overcome with images of destruction brought upon Guernica by Generalissimo Franco. The carnage became Picasso’s inspiration. This painting “challenges our notions of warfare as heroic and exposes it as a brutal act of self-destruction” (“Guernica”). Patriotism, support for troops, and cheering for a successful mission is lost. Guernica symbolizes the disguised side of war - the aftermath. Picasso compellingly portrays the havoc of mankind and its ability to ruthlessly obliterate one third of a town’s population.

The awakening of emotion exhumed by the political authenticity of the Metropolitan Cathedral and Guernica substantiate their anti-war sentiments. The “bare incandescent bulbs” (Didion 86) of a makeshift cross in the Cathedral are unlit. Nothing sheds light on the altar, globe or dove. These objects draw no attention and go unnoticed: “At this time and in this place the light of the world could be construed as out, off, extinguished” (Didion 87). The light of God, hope and freedom of religion has been trampled by the National Guardsmen. The desolate nature of the Cathedral reflects the despondent mourners. No illumination of the light of God could restore faith to the Salvadorians.

Picasso’s ability to portray the emotions of Guernica’s people is what confirms the mural’s anti-war sentiments. An image of a weeping mother holding her dying child instills a resentment of war. The bond of mother and child is sacred. A sense of despair is felt at the realization of innocence lost. Therefore, anger boils within when one realizes Guernica is a result of needless violence. Generalissimo Franco’s chilling disregard for human life is portrayed through the excruciating pain brought to the innocent.

An imitation of pure and unsuspecting subjects in Guernica was influenced by Picasso’s...
love for bullfighting. Through the symbolism thereof, the anti-war sentiments of the Metropolitan Cathedral and the mural itself are truly revealed. A bullfight is a lasting image: the intensity of the sport, yelling of the crowd, flagging of a matador's blood red cape, the taunting of the bull as it dies a slow, painful death are all components of this exhibition. Also an exhibition is the Cathedral in its crumbling decay. On the main steps where parishioners were executed by the National Guardsmen was "a spill of red paint, lest anyone forget the blood shed there" (Didion 87). Therefore, the comparison of bullfighting to the Metropolitan Cathedral is clear. Due to the torture of Salvadorians by the National Guardsmen, the government of El Salvador is much like a matador – draining the hope and life out of its target. The paint on the front steps and the cape used in bullfighting are symbols for death; the Cathedral and a bullfighting arena are places where death is on display.

This link between bullfighting and inevitable death can also be seen in Picasso’s mural, raising its importance as an anti-war statement. The “brutal choreography — fierce power and inevitable tragedy” (“Guernica”) displayed in Guernica captured the fragile state of its townspeople through the death of a bull. The delicate art of bullfighting - the passion behind the struggle for life, the vibrant red of the matador’s cape and hemorrhaging of the bull - is absent in Guernica. In the mural, the struggle for life is over and the lack of vibrant color finalizes death as opposed to a red cape taunting life. To further explain, as a matador “carves off pieces of the bull for distribution as trophies” (“Bull Fighting”) the mural is an insult to the fascist government of Spain, illustrating its violence. Picasso’s mural is not a “trophy” for Franco’s regime, but a permanent reminder of the slaughter. Because of bullfighting’s influence on Picasso’s Guernica, the mural’s anti-war statements were significantly influenced.

The Metropolitan Cathedral and Guernica stand as monuments for the people of El Salvador and Spain. These monuments are reminders of violence, horror and people lost. One prevails as a literal tomb and another as a remembrance for its fallen. Their anti-war sentiments look to instill a desire for peace in all who experience them. A constant repetition of violence only encourages further monuments that will exemplify needless suffering.

Works Cited

