

<p>Francisco de Goya, <i>The Third of May</i> 1808, 1814, oil on canvas, 268 x 347 cm (106 x 137")</p>	<p>initial analysis</p> <p>The background shows buildings including a church or cathedral in the city of Madrid. A mound separates the foreground scene from the city. Off-centre on the ground on the right of the picture a large illuminating lantern. It casts a shadow on the soldiers and lights up the group about to be killed.</p>	<p>The painting was factured six years after the event.</p>
<p>On the left a group of six men about to be killed. They are Spanish citizens who rebelled against Napoléon's invading army. At their feet the corpses of three others in ghastly depiction. There are two other figures behind them almost merging into the mound. To the left of the six men are more figures. One in anguish holds his head in his hands, another holds his hands to his mouth. The central figure is on his knees expecting to be killed, his arms raised as if he was being crucified. His right hand has the mark of stigmata. To his right one man has clenched fists and a second, a monk, is holding his hands in prayer. One of the other men at the back has his hands over his face. Goya factures subtly shifting perspectives. We feel that we are looking down on the corpses but up at the soldiers. The effect is that we lose a secure angle of vision, a definite sense of how to interpret the space. The only flat ground in the painting is under the feet of the French soldiers. The victims have no such foothold. They are all kneeling, crouching, or climbing as the earth beneath them undulates and dips. Where, for example, are the rest of the legs of the monk? With the single exception of the boots that belong to corpses, we cannot see the feet of a single Spaniard. In fact, the spectator is presented with a view in which not one body among the citizens can be seen whole.</p>	<p>The tipping perspective, the lack of visible ground beneath the victims, and the merging of figures, in which legs, feet, and parts of bodies seem to vanish or blend into one another disorients the viewer and mirrors the confusion and violence of the bloodshed being portrayed. Goya has chosen an emotional perspective over a rational one.</p>  <p>The painting is in the Museo del Prado, Madrid.</p> <p>I am indebted to Siri Hustvedt for many of the insights and vocabulary used in this analysis ('Goya's bodies. The living, the dead, and the ghostly', <i>The Yale Review</i>, July 2005, Vol.93(3), pp.34-54).</p>	<p>Five French soldiers are in the process of killing a group of civilians. There are three other soldier's helmets visible beyond them. The soldiers are depicted anonymously as if a neutral killing machine. Goya's techniques, his staging of the scene with its faceless killers and illuminated victims who have no visible feet, his tilting perspective. His rough brushstrokes merge corpses in the dirt and blend figures into the hill. This not only creates a closeness to this particular scene of murder but also reverberates with the reality of traumatic experience. In her book <i>Powers of Horror</i>, Julia Kristeva describes abjection as a debilitating 'narcissistic crisis' of someone who witnesses "the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders." Abjection is that which disturbs 'identity, system, order.' In war, this disturbance is triggered by seeing the unspeakable, by facing non-existence, the imminent danger of the 'I' becoming 'it' – a corpse, human waste. In battle, all rituals for the dead, the elaborate cultural procedures that separate the living from the bodies of the dead, are suspended. Soldiers wade in the gore of their comrades, and for the survivors, the memory of this often takes the form of returning hallucinations, seeing or re-living the same moment over and over again.</p>