

Guernica, Farewell to arms, Las Meninas and Alcaine

By Alejandro de Pablo
(alejandro@cameraman.es)
Translation: Mark Long*



Seventy-four years ago, in 1937, Pablo Picasso created one of the most important paintings of the twentieth century, *Guernica*. Since then a large number of theories have been published around the inspiration for this masterwork. None of them has been definitive, beyond what viewers themselves may feel when contemplating the painting, since Picasso was always more or less able to sidestep speaking about its symbolologies or inspirations.

At the end of an interview about his work in *The skin I live in*, José Luis Alcaine explained his discoveries around what he considers the essential inspiration for *Guernica*. He is convinced that the painting draws from various images in a film sequence. Just over five minutes long, it narrates the nightmare evacuation of civilians and soldiers along a hellish road: at night, in the rain, bogged down in mud, all the while under bombardment. This sequence takes place in the second half of the film *A farewell to arms* directed by Frank Borzage in 1932, that opened in Paris at the end of 1933. It runs just over five minutes, from minute 51 to minute 56, approximately. At that time, films were commercialized over six years, so that it would have been on rerelease in neighborhood cinemas until 1939 (very few copies were made and these were continually rereleased).

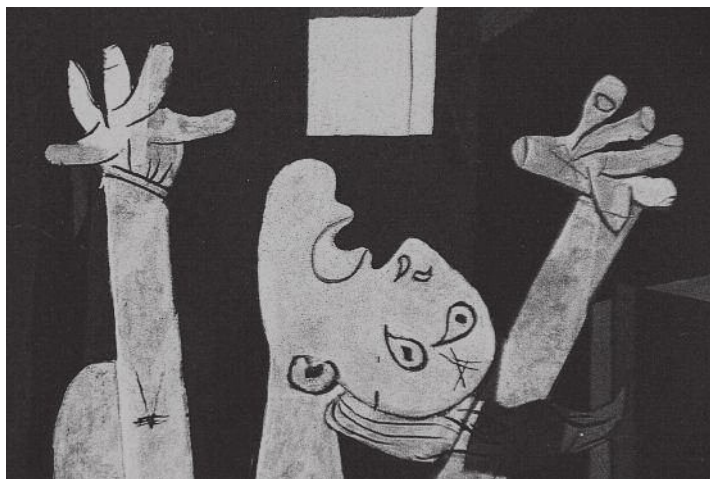
*Associate Professor of Political Science, College of Charleston.

Alcaine explains that the film and the particular sequence must be viewed to form an opinion, of course, but he ventures that by comparing stills from the film and details in *Guernica*, a

first impression can be gained. The similarities he has discovered are as follows:

José Luis Alcaine adds the following observations:

Woman crying to the heavens



Moribund hand



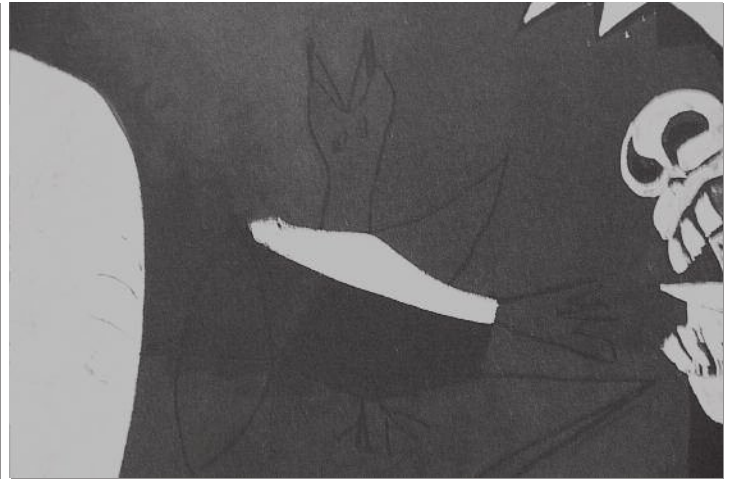
Horse legs



Grief-stricken woman's face



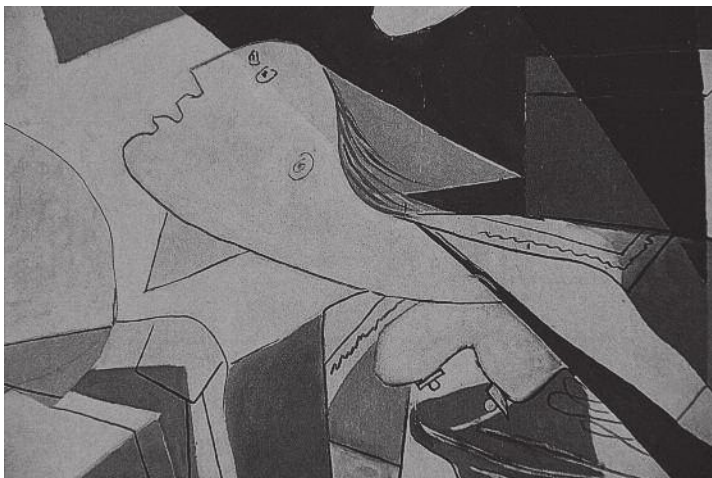
Bombed goose



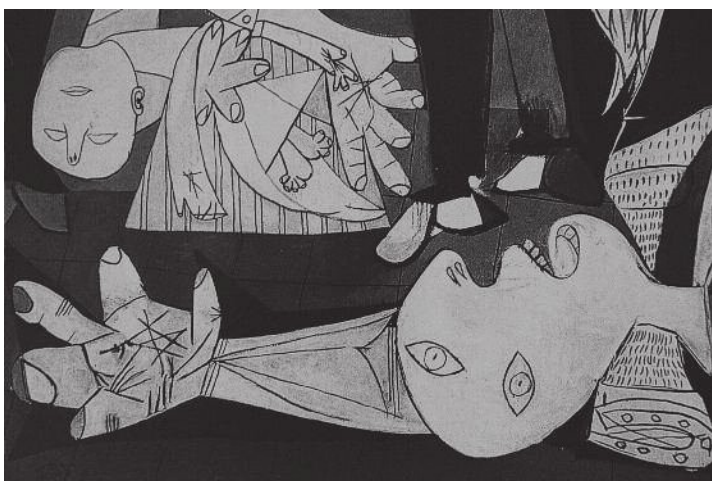
Mother and child



Terrorized woman



Man's body with outstretched arm



Door



Horse heads



Opening and fire



A/ The painting is in black and white, as is the film, of course.

B/ The action in *Guernica* takes place at night, seen in the dark backdrops (almost black), the two lighted lamps, and the intensity of the flames. However, the actual bombing took place in daylight (it began at around 16.40 and lasted until around 19.45 on April 26, 1937). All of the nightmare sequence on the road in *A farewell to arms* takes place at night.

C/ All of the figures in *Guernica* lean, bodily or through their gaze, from right to left,

and none looks from left to right. Some look upwards, but their bodies indicate that they too are immersed in this right to left movement. The hindquarters of the Iberian Bull stand facing right, but his trunk turns left and his profile faces left. In the language of the cinema, we would say that all of the figures in the picture are painted on the right to left axis. The entire sequence in *A farewell to arms* is also narrated from right to left. All except a horse that, because of the bombing, has lost its rider and its mind. To show this, the director makes it

go against the direction of all of the other figures.

D/ Picasso succeeds splendidly in his designs for the whole picture to emanate a feeling of movement, also from right to left. It is clear that this obsessive, continuous, despairing movement, seemingly leading nowhere, is in the road sequence in *A farewell to arms*. The only figure that seems to keep still in *Guernica* is the Bull.

E/ There are only two animals in *Guernica*, in addition to the Iberian Bull: a goose and a horse. At market in a Spanish town more typically hens, lambs, even goats would be found. In *A farewell to arms* we only see two geese in a ramshackle baby carriage, and horses. There are no other animals...

F/ The production and photography in *A farewell to arms* gives off the nightmare feeling of an infernal vicious circle, almost without end, along a damned road. *Guernica* has that same sensation. Both works transmit, in their totality, very similar sensations.

G/ According to some analyses, the Iberian Bull is Franco (highly unlikely, Picasso would never have painted him as a noble animal with a transparent expression); others claim that it represents the Spanish nation; others still that the Bull is Picasso himself. Alcaine asserts that the latter is definitely the case and signals the great Velázquez in Picasso's most beloved painting: *Las Meninas*. If we eliminate from the frame the upper part of *Las Meninas* and we compare it with *Guernica*: we can see that the Bull-Picasso is situated in the same space in *Guernica* as Velázquez in *Las Meninas*. And now if we blow up part of the image we can see the Bull-Picasso and Velázquez.

Note the following commonalities: both are very still in their respective paintings and they both look outwards in a similar fashion:





full-faced, taking everything in, with a wholly transparent, similar expression. The only difference is a hint of anger or distress on the Bull's face at what he is witnessing. Alcaine adds that Picasso's great admiration for *Las Meninas* is widely known (20 years later he would paint his celebrated variations on this marvelous picture), and so he suggests that, like Velázquez in *Las Meninas*, Picasso wanted to appear in his masterpiece, *Guernica*. And, he thinks this must have been a factor in Picasso's request that *Guernica* be hung in the Prado Museum, in the same building as *Las Meninas*.

For Alcaine *A farewell to arms* is a great film, but above all the damned road sequence is superb. It is clearly influenced by Soviet cinema from that time and by the photography of Charles Lang who collaborated closely with Frank Borzage to achieve its nightmare feel. José Luis is convinced that it was an important influence in the creation of *Guernica*, but he insists that the film must be seen—in particular this sequence—several times to understand all the nuances of this possible influence. José Luis Alcaine's moving and stirring analysis of these artistic works, can be expanded upon as follows.

***A farewell to arms* (1932) by Frank Borzage and *Guernica* (1937) by Picasso**

It is remarkable that it has taken 74 years for a Spanish director of photography to

discover such striking parallels between these different artistic works. More professionally active than ever, José Luis Alcaine, a master of light who will receive the Gold Medal of the Spanish Academia de las Artes y las Ciencias Cinematográficas on October 4, after his recent Vulcain prize in Cannes for his work in *The skin I live in*, has unearthed what was probably Pablo Ruiz Picasso's most significant inspiration in the creation of *Guernica*. This is not the first research on Picasso's passion for cinema and on the influence of film on his artistic output. In 2007, the Pace Wildenstein gallery in New York presented the museum installation "Picasso, Braque and Early Film in Cubism" as a first exploration of the role of cinematography in one of modern history's most important artistic movements. *Picasso and Cinema: Guernica and The Battleship Potemkin*, published in the Prado Museum's bulletin (volume 9, page 110), explained the influence this film had on the artist's famous painting. *Guernica* was explored from the cinematographic perspective in *Pacific Art Review*.

The motion picture

From the start, *A farewell to arms* was a controversial film. The following description situates the film in its historical context. Its purpose, through to the end of the article, is to spark interest on the reader's part as the film did among war conscious artists and intellectuals in its time. Artists and

intellectuals, in particular in Paris and specifically Picasso, were drawn to the film not just because of the controversies that surrounded it in the US and Europe, but because in Europe in particular the film's obvious antiwar appeal gave the controversy a markedly political tone. Hervé Dumont's *Frank Borzage: The Life and Films of a Hollywood Romantic* is extraordinarily useful in understanding *A farewell to arms*.

The script for *A farewell to arms* was adapted from Ernest Hemingway's novel of the same name, taken from a verse by the sixteenth century poet George Peele. Hemingway hated the film from the get-go, before he had even seen it.

Given its success, Hollywood's movie machine had designs on the rights to the novel almost as soon as it was published. However, the censor was alarmed by extramarital affairs, desertion, an illegitimate son, the negative image of the Italian army etcetera; and under pressure from various lobbies, first Warner and later MGM abandoned the film project. The Italian ambassador in Washington lodged an official protest with the Hays Office, which advised the studios "we have been clear in our warnings, and you should expect no goodwill if you continue in your endeavors."

In the end Paramount Pictures risked buying the rights for eighty thousand dollars and contracted with Frank Borzage to direct, with Helen Hayes and Gary Cooper as stars. For decades after the film was made, censorship challenged its narrative

integrity. It was only around 1970, when the film became part of the public domain, that it could be shown in art house movie theaters, sometimes unrecognizable as Borzage's *A farewell to arms*. It is only because film libraries in London, Brussels and Prague had complete copies, and because a nitrate film copy of the 1932 version of *A farewell to arms* was found in David O. Selznick's basement, that it has been possible to see it again, on DVD (Image Entertainment), seventy-five years later.

A farewell to arms is celebrated as a classic antiwar film that denounces the horrors of war and its consequences. It was nominated for four academy awards by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, winning Sound Recording and, for its marvelous black and white photography, Cinematography Oscars in 1934. (There was no awards-ceremony in 1933.) Writing about the Caporetto evacuation sequence in *Frank Borzage: The Life and Films of a Hollywood Romantic*, Hervé Dumont signals "The deliberate meticulousness – regarding the evacuation sequence – which tends to prize the inscrutability of intimate details over the roar of history, more sensitive to the vibrations of the indescribable than to grandiose explosions, impregnates the photographic style of the entire film." Just like Picasso in *Guernica*, Frank Borzage prioritizes intimacy and ineffability over grandiloquence, jettisoning most of the work of second unit director Jean Negulesco, which he described as "monumental."

***A farewell to arms* in Paris**

The film premiered in the Opera Cinema in Paris on the twenty-ninth of October 1933, under the name *L'Aideu au drapeau* (Goodbye to the flag). Picasso had returned to Paris that September. The French release too was controversial, but unlike in the US, this time around it was more about politics than morality.

The French censor's office dragged its heels in allowing the film to be shown, as reported in *L'Echo* on 9/11/1933. To boot, several Parisian newspapers came out against the film. *Mon Cine* explained on 30/11/1933 that "This title is ill-advised given that the main character is a deserter." The fascist Francois Vinneuil claimed in *L'Action Francaise* on 4/11/1933 that "a particular chaplain takes on the glorious task of demoralizing the combatants one by one... Americans care little for physical

cowardice. So, a series of the most horribly melodramatic moments must be stacked one atop the other to explain the desertion of a so manly a fellow as Gary Cooper." In *D'Artagnan* on 9/12/1933, Frederic – Gary Cooper's character – is defined as "somewhat communist, to put it lightly." And the novelist Francis de Croisset, in *Debout* on 11/11/1933, explained that the film was "a somber melodrama, entirely too pretentious, 'directed' by a director who, if he ever experienced war at all, has long since forgotten it, and who forces us to remember war ... in a most disagreeable way. And all of this he calls 'goodbye to the flag', a polite and civil translation of the word *desertion*."

The painting

The Fall of Malaga and the bombing of Guernica

The widespread drama in Spain and the bombing of Guernica are undoubtedly two essential emotional driving-forces behind the creation of the *mural*. Every bit as important, however, in Picasso's state of mind, was the fall of Malaga –the painter's native city, where he still had family– on February 8, 1937, one of the bloodiest and least remembered episodes of the civil war. The evacuating civilians and soldiers left Malaga along the road to Almeria and they were machine-gunned and bombed mercilessly, just as in the novel and the film *A farewell to arms*. Truck drivers reported that skeletons were found along the road until 1960. In her book *Picasso-Guernika 70th Anniversary*, Josefina Alix details how the writer Arthur Koestler explained to the artist what had happened: "Arthur Koestler explained the tragic events to Picasso, especially how planes shot up thousands of refugees, women and children, fleeing along the road to the coast. He would have heard how women carrying their dead children in their arms lost their minds, how some threw themselves into the sea with their children and seemed to drown. These images stayed in his heart but, for now, he couldn't focus, unable to begin his commissioned work." In *Guernica* a grief-stricken woman holds her dead child in her arms. In *A farewell to arms* one woman takes her child in her arms and she throws herself to the ground to protect him from the bullets. She is machine-gunned, her child at her breast.

Reports in the media on the bombing of Guernica significantly impacted international public opinion. This was particularly so in Paris where, in the traditional workers'

parade on May Day, people marched to the cry of "Guernica!" Twenty-seven days earlier, another bombing of civilian targets, in Durango, had been more cruel still, but garnered much less media coverage, as happened likewise with the bombing and machine-gunning of most of the civilian population that fled Malaga after it fell, on foot along the Almeria road.

Guernica

Early in 1937, a Spanish delegation made up of the general director of Fine Arts, Josep Renau, the architect Lluís Lacasa and the writers Juan Larrea, Max Aub and José Bergamín visited Picasso at his home in Paris. Their objective was to request the painter's collaboration in the Spanish pavilion at the Paris World Fair that very year. The Spanish government's primary commission was a mural, which for different reasons was delayed by months, until the heartrending reports and photographs of the bombing of Guernica in the press profoundly impacted Picasso.

The realist impulse in the painter's work

Many critics share the idea of the constant realist impulse in Picasso's oeuvre. Fernande Olivier, the painter's sentimental partner, explained that the tragedy of any city bombed to ruins, let alone a Spanish city, would have had to afflict Picasso and inspire his freewheeling creative impulse, even if he remained contemptuous of the facts on the ground. Julio E. Payró, an Argentine scholar, author of *Picasso in his artistic-social time*, claimed that the painter "Never could give up on making some reference to the real world. Except for its title, this painting is not about a specific episode in a particular war. It is not about one incident, but rather it condemns total war." Ricardo Gullón, recipient of the Prince of Asturias Prize and ex-member of the Spanish Royal Academy of Language explained: "When he painted, Picasso started from reality, even if over the course of the adventure he deformed and altered that reality as a function of his needs at that moment, plastic needs, of course." Arnold Hauser, in *The Social History of Art* says: "His works are notes and commentaries on reality." John Richardson, an art historian who specializes in Picasso, developed a thesis through which he considered the totality of the painter's oeuvre to be autobiographical, but with one very interesting nuance: "I am convinced that on occasion even Picasso himself didn't realize

how deeply he had to draw water from the well...." This theory lines up closely with Gertrude Stein's idea that Picasso had an urgent and visceral need to constantly empty and purge himself. "Picasso was always haunted by the need to purge himself, to purge himself completely, to purge himself again and again; he is so full that his entire existence is nothing more than to repeat this absolute self-purging; he must purge himself, he can never purge himself of being Spanish, but he can purge himself of what he himself has created. So, everyone says that he changes, but that's not what happens. Rather, he purges himself, and just as soon as he's done he must begin again to purge himself, since he fills up so fast." In fact, as Jackson Pollock explained one time: "The psychic power of an image emanating from the depths of his subconscious impregnates all of his drawings." In *Picasso-Gernika 70th Anniversary*, Gijs Van Hensbergen writes: "Picasso stood ready to steal elements from every and any place, to stock the hoard of images that he had gathered over fifty-five years of perfecting and constant searching, reorganizing his incredible photographic memory." With *Guernica* Picasso moved from plastic expressionism to a dramatic, heartrending, restless, expressionism, throbbing with humanity, with truth, with life

before the horror. Picasso's urgent and indispensable need to begin the creative process with reality, current or not, must be borne in mind.

If Picasso used reality as an inspiration for his artistic works, consciously nor not, what did he use as inspiration for *Guernica*? What would be the closest thing to the bombing of Guernica that Picasso could have seen? What images of horror and despair might have inspired Picasso in painting *Guernica*?

Picasso never lived through a war; he never experienced the horror of war firsthand. He could have traveled at will to Spain over the course of the civil war, since the Spanish government made a plane available to him to travel from Paris to Madrid at any time. It could not have been easier for him, but Picasso didn't even visit Madrid for his appointment as director of the Prado Museum. In fact, Picasso never attended any of the many visits, meetings, and even congresses that celebrated artists held in the Spanish Marxist zone. He declined countless appeals to participate. Picasso was a good friend of Ernest Hemingway, who he knew through their mutual friend Gertrude Stein. Art, bullfighting and love for Spain brought them together. It is unlikely that Picasso read *A farewell to arms*. But, he was a big cinema

buff and given the controversy in France, and elsewhere, around Frank Borzage's film version of one of the most popular novels of the time, written, moreover, by a good friend of his, it is highly likely that Picasso would have seen the film; and that he would have been moved by the bombardment and machine-gunning during the evacuation of Caporetto.

At that time, the closest people who had not personally lived through war could come to its horrors was through war films shown in the cinema. For today's audience, the emotional impact, however profound, of viewing a war film cannot be compared to that of viewers in the 1930s. Today, we live in a society awash in graphic information, accustomed to images of war, famine, and the most base atrocities and human cruelties. For Picasso, whose family was well-to-do and who never experienced economic or social problems, film was the medium through which to enter into contact with the inequalities, wars and injustices that characterized his time.

With respect to *A farewell to arms*, Borzage has Frederic taking the decision to desert before the military catastrophe. He decides to bid a "farewell to arms" for love. As Hervé Dumont explains in his book on Borzage, when he deserts, Frederic "skirts a road defined by allegory (mutilated people without faces, with their arms in the shape of the cross in a buckled doorway; three one-legged men staggering around on their crutches; a hand twisting under a burst of machine gun fire etcetera). This implies a refusal of sorts to show what cannot be represented, to afford horror anything other than a stylized synthesis." With this final idea in mind, I close my eyes and see Picasso's *Guernica*, and all of this analysis has me thinking about the painter's feelings as he created the picture.

Conclusions

I would like to add a note or two to José Luis Alcaine's analysis at the beginning of the article. *Guernica* does not show a bombardment, it does not show conventional weapons of modern warfare. All we see is a broken sword being waved about, which I interpret to symbolize a rapidly evolving industrial world. Thus, Picasso makes sense of a world which has literally been blown to bits. The horse is no match for tanks or bombs. While they fled from the holocaust at Guernica, animals and humans were mercilessly slaughtered by firearms from the sky. Modern warfare leaves conventional forces and conventional

Picasso and the bull



Finally, it is worth underlining that Picasso lived together with the bull and the minotaur for years, often using them autobiographically in his artistic works. He even posed as a Minotaur with a wicker bull mask, in this photograph by Edward Quinn.

Page from the Figaro newspaper on 29/10/1933, explaining the premiere of *L'Aideu au drapeau* (A farewell to arms).

weapon systems defenseless. It is waged from the heavens with no possibility of defense for warriors from the past, like Picasso's ancestor, John of Leon, who was assassinated in a skirmish at the gates of Granada in 1481. The Christian Reconquest of Spain was right in front of Picasso's eyes when he looked out the window of his room in the Merced Plaza towards the Gibralfaro and the Arab Alcazaba. In one scene in *A farewell to arms*, when the main characters say goodbye in Milan, Helen Hays tells Gary Cooper: "I forgot to get you a present, a whistle, so that you're not afraid. Or a sword, I'll bet you can get one very cheaply," to which Cooper replies "they're not much use at the front." "That's right, it would get in your way if you have to run" is Hays' response. A sword is of no use at the front – running is the only possible salvation in the face of bombs and machine guns. Finally, it is worth underlining that Picasso lived together with the bull and the minotaur for years, often using them autobiographically in his artistic works. He even posed as a Minotaur with a wicker bull mask, in a photograph by Edward Quinn. The poet Juan Larrea claimed that in Picasso's art before he began *Guernica*, horses represented the most important women in his life; and he told Françoise Gilot, the painter's partner who bore him two children, that the horse symbolized her as a woman while Picasso's pride meant her

was the bull. In several of the sketches done for *Guernica* the bull had a human head, which was transformed in the final picture.

This research shows that the motivations and the similarities connecting these artistic works are more than sufficient to warrant further development of Alcaine's hypothesis, impossible to confirm since Picasso's passing. The painter's repeated refusal to speak about the meanings of and influences on *Guernica* adds to this challenge. His reticence is illustrated in his conversations with the North American painter Jerome Seckler. Approved by Picasso, published in the *New Masses* on 13/03/1945, and included by Alfred H. Barr in his book on the artist, there Picasso steadfastly denies that his artistic works, including *Guernica*, make any conscious symbolic allusions to known people or political events. It is only after a long discussion, and at the insistence of his interviewer, that Picasso reluctantly admits the possibility, and possibility only, that his

work might mention unconscious political references.

In 1947 the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where the painting hung at that time, organized a Symposium on *Guernica* during which the museum director Alfred Barr read a letter that he had recently received from Picasso's agent at that time, Daniel Kahnweiler. That letter contained the painter's last words on *Guernica*: "The bull is a bull and the horse is a horse. There's some sort of bird too, a chicken, or a pigeon chick, on a table. I no longer remember. And the chicken is a chicken. Of course they're symbols. But painters are not in the business of creating symbols; better to write a bunch of words than to create symbols by painting. The people who view the painting should see in the horse and the bull symbols to interpret according to their own understanding. There are some animals. But, they're just that, animals, slaughtered animals. For me, that's all there is. The public should see what it wants to see."

