Catastrophic Constellations: Picasso’s Guernica and Klee’s Angelus Novus

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Abstract: This article examines how, during the late 1930s, two paintings, Picasso’s Guernica and Klee’s Angelus Novus, became contextualised within discourses of catastrophe and conflict, creating what Walter Benjamin in his Passagenwerk termed ‘constellations’. Besides presenting this notion and its hermeneutic potentials’ I examine the positioning of the historical events during this time within aesthetic discourses. In retrospect the inter-war years, and in particular the late 1930s, can be viewed as a desperate and finally failed attempt to find an orderly, rational discourse to depict the turbulent, even frenzied situation brought about by the combination of new technologies which in tandem with Fascist ideology made the bombings of Gernica, the first chapter of the Second World War, possible. Benjamin’s own text about the Angelus Novus-drawing has become iconic for dealing with such catastrophes, but on a more universal level than the monumental Guernica mural. Picasso’s work had been commissioned for the Spanish Pavilion at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne in Paris in 1937 and almost immediately became acknowledged for its outspoken protest against the Gernica-bombings and Fascism.

Keywords: aesthetics; catastrophe; constellation; history; modernism; painting; Picasso; Walter Benjamin; war; world exhibitions.


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The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe.

Walter Benjamin, Arcades Project

/.../ image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.

Walter Benjamin, Arcades Project

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In his essay, ‘Commitment’ Theodor Adorno relates an anecdote about Picasso, who was living in Paris during the Second World War and how

“/a/n officer of the Nazi occupation forces visited the painter in his studio and, pointing to Guernica, asked: ‘Did you do that?’ Picasso is said to have answered, ‘No you did’”.

This anecdote deserves attention for several reasons. One is purely historical, because when the Nazis occupied Paris in 1941 Picasso’s Guernica mural, which had been commissioned for the Spanish Pavilion at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne in Paris in 1937, had already been shipped to the U.S. where it remained (except for shorter exhibition tours) until it was returned to a democratic Spain in 1981. Thus, it could not have been in Paris when the officer came to visit Picasso. And apparently, since the anecdote was known, a little more than half a year after Paris had been liberated, in March 1945, Picasso said in an interview that he had shown the Nazi officer a postcard of the painting. To the question if he had actually said ‘No, you did’, he had told the journalist ‘laughing’: “Yes, that’s true, that’s more or less true”.

No matter what really happened at this meeting, the Adorno-anecdote and the interview bring several narratives of basically the same event together, with Picasso and the officer looking and pointing at the Guernica, in original or reproduced on a postcard, as well as at each other, saying’ respectively: ‘Did you do that?’ ‘No you did!’ Narratives involving human agents and visual images of catastrophe and affliction serve as my point of departure for a discussion how, what Walter Benjamin termed image constellations, were constituted during the early modernist period, in particular during the inter-war period. I want to explore how an event like the bombing of the Basque village Gernica in April 1937 generated clusters of meaning through meta-narrative contextualisations, either by pointing at and talking about them, as exemplified by the two versions of the Picasso anecdote and prior to that by the location where the painting was first exhibited and its initial reception. It is this initial, quite emphatic reception that prepared the ground for the anecdote and the canonisation of Guernica.

In retrospect’ the inter-war years can be viewed as a desperate and finally failed attempt to find an orderly, rational discourse to depict the turbulent, even frenzied situation brought about by the combination of new technologies which in tandem with Fascist ideology had made the bombings of Gernica possible. The Paris exhibition, where Guernica was first exhibited, opened less than three months after the bombings while the exhibition was somewhat ironically a celebration of art and technology in modern life. Even if Picasso produced a huge, painted canvas as a response to the bombings, the speed with which it was created reflects the technological innovations for disseminating and reproducing images, starting already during the latter half of the 19th century which had already created the basis for new modes for perceiving both large scale catastrophes as well as local calamities. The speed with which images were now created as well as exposed (in both senses of this term) was complemented by the gradually emerging forms of modern life, expressed, for example by the constantly accelerating velocity with which people were able to travel and communicate.

Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’ is probably the most known and critically acclaimed formulation of the forms of ‘image-thinking’ that emerged during this intensely dynamic period. In the last section of his essay, towards which Benjamin obviously directed his argument about
the aura and technological reproducibility, he emphasised the close relations between the violence of war and aesthetics. In the third and last version of this essay, most likely finished in March or April 1939 which is much more explicit in its formulations in these matters than the second version (which was published in 1936), Benjamin was perhaps even indirectly reacting to the bombings of Gernica and to Picasso’s painting, even if he never says so explicitly. However, he does mention Picasso in relation to Charlie Chaplin’s films in this essay, but not in the context dealt with here.

After quoting the Italian futurist Marinetti, who had argued that “war is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with fiery orchids of machine guns,” Benjamin ironically commented that even if this statement has “the merit of clarity,” it shows that:

‘Imperialist war is an uprising on the part of technology, which demands repayment in ‘human material’ for the natural material society has denied it. Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities; and in gas warfare it has found new ways of abolishing the aura.

‘Fiat ars – pereat mundus,’ [Let art flourish – and the world pass away] says fascism, expecting from war, as Marinetti admits, the artistic gratification of a sense perception altered by technology. This is evidently the consummation of l’art pour l’art. Humankind, which once in Homer was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a surprise aesthetic pleasure. Such is the aestheticizing of politics as practiced by fascists. Communism replies by politicizing art.”

Today the final conclusion perhaps sounds naïve, but I have quoted the whole passage in order to emphasise how through the presentation of images – and this is also exemplified by the Picasso anecdote quoted above – fascist ideologies aestheticize politics by asking the artist: ‘Did you do that?’ while Picasso turned the table by politicizing art, answering: ‘No you did!’

The ways in which visual images during this period of upheaval and crisis were contextualised by written (or spoken) texts were of course not unique. They can already be discerned in multilayered forms of emblematic thinking developed during the Baroque period which Benjamin had already explored in his Trauerspiel-book written in 1924–1925. But early 20th century modernism of thinking in, through and about images was gradually developing distinct modes of relating to visual images containing a strong component of theatricality in the sense that it originated from a multi-layered negotiation among visual, often figurative, allegorical images and textual commentary or meditation, both in interaction with a human agent. On the stage, during a theatrical performance this interaction obviously contains an additional dimension involving an audience witnessing this interaction of components. Both the images I want to explore here, first Picasso’s Guernica as well as Klee’s Angelus Novus have been drawn into constellations focusing on catastrophes caused by human agents, bringing out the theatrical modality of these images. In what follows I will examine some of the dramaturgical principles for the creation of such catastrophic image constellations.

Picasso’s Guernica was first exhibited in the Spanish Pavilion, located just behind the German Pavilion designed by Alfred Speer and centrally located on the Trocadéro, connecting the Eiffel tower and the Palais de Chaillot. Speer’s building was topped with an eagle, while the Soviet Pavilion, with a statue of a young couple running towards a utopian future holding an outstretched sickle in their hands on top of it, was located on the opposite side of the Trocadéro. All of these locations created a map of images giving
rise to a complex narrative where art and technology interacted with ideology on several levels. It is also worth noting that more or less simultaneously with the Paris exhibition the exhibition of *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) opened in Munich, on July 19, 1937, one day after the first ‘Great German Art Exhibition’ had been launched there as well. This was just a week after the Spanish Pavilion had opened at the Paris exhibition, on July 12, 1937. All of Europe had become included in the mapping of images where politics and art intersected on several levels.

The day before the opening of the Spanish Pavilion the French-born writer and critic Max Aub spoke to the construction workers that had assembled:

> “At the entrance, on the right Picasso’s great painting leaps into view. It will be spoken of for a long time. Picasso has represented here the tragedy of Gernika. [sic!] It is possible that this art be accused of being too abstract or difficult for a pavilion like ours which seeks to be above all, and before everything else, a popular manifestation. This is not the moment to justify ourselves, but I am certain that with a little good will, everybody will perceive the rage, the desperation, and the terrible protest that this canvas signifies /…/ To those who protest saying that things are not thus, one must answer asking if they do not have two eyes to see the terrible reality of Spain. If the picture by Picasso has any defect it is that it is too real, too terribly true, atrociously true.”

It is hardly an exaggeration to claim that this speech already contained the seeds for Adorno’s Picasso anecdote.

At more or less the same time, but in a more secluded, less public context, not very far away from the exhibition grounds in Paris, Walter Benjamin – as can be seen in the famous photograph of him behind a table in the card catalogue of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* – was collecting the materials for the *Arcades Project* as well as making his final revisions of his essay, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility.’ In writing about his own position in the library, however, Benjamin seems to have been quite oblivious of the events surrounding him at the time, giving it a pastoral flavour:

> “These notes devoted to the Paris Arcades were begun under an open sky of cloudless blue that arched above the foliage; and yet – owing to the millions of leaves that were visited by the breeze of diligence, the stertorous breath of the researcher, the storm of youthful zeal, and the idle wind of curiosity – they’ve been covered with the dust of centuries. For the painted sky of summer that looks down from the arcades in the reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris has spread out over them its dreamy, unlit ceiling.”

Here Benjamin, as he frequently did in his writing positions himself in a closed, interior space while at the same time he was reconstructing the development of the public, Parisian arcades. Just how secluded he was can be seen from a letter to Gershon Scholem written in July 1937, where he mentions that because of his work he has not yet had time set foot on the exhibition grounds of the World’s Fair. It is doubtful that he ever did.

Already in his preliminary exposé for the *Arcades Project* which Benjamin had sent to Adorno in 1935, he had formulated his views on the notion of global exhibitions. In a passage from this exposé about the 1867 World Exhibition, he referred directly to the connection between image and ideology, arguing that the imminent demise of the idea of
such supposedly ‘universal’ expositions was an expression of the illusions created by the emerging forms of mass culture. They are ‘places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish’, and

“open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted. The entertainment industry makes this easier by elevating the person to the level of the commodity. He surrenders to its manipulations while enjoying his alienation from himself and others.”

In many of the Arcades notes however Benjamin expressed a much stronger sense of urgency with regard to how images are contextualised than in the general description from the Bibliothèque Nationale quoted before. The following passage, at the same time as it is a theoretical meditation on how image constellations are created, can also be seen as a kind of diary of the same turbulent times which Picasso had expressed in his Guernica:

“Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each ‘now’ is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of the intention, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth.) It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural <bildlich>. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical – that is, not archaic – images. The image that is read – which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.”

This is an extremely rich and complex passage. Besides presenting the spatial dimensions of image constellations, Benjamin has now introduced a temporal, historical dimension, governed by images and their dialectical contextualisations which have been formed by ‘the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.’ This is a moment where time is arrested, transforming the image to a ‘dialectics at a standstill’ and where ‘what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.’ But it is also possible, I believe, to understand Benjamin as saying that the image can only emerge when the temporal dialectics of history has come to a standstill, or “the image in the now of its recognizability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.” Only in the moment of danger, as Benjamin later, in ‘On the Concept of History’ formulated this issue, does the image reach its inner clarity, as a part of a fully contextualized constellation.

If Picasso’s Guernica almost became a fetish for protest against violence as it was expressed in the public sphere, Benjamin had gradually developed a very personal relationship to an image which he owned privately, the Klee-drawing Angelus Novus which he had purchased in Munich in 1921. Benjamin usually brought this drawing with him on his trips, but left it in Paris together with his notes for the Arcades Project with George Bataille as he set out on his last trip towards the Spanish border and the suicide at Port Bou. This drawing has become most known through the much-discussed text that Benjamin wrote about it in 1940, as a part of the textual mosaic called ‘On the Concept of History’ which was published only after his death. This text dramatizes and contextualizes the image of the mysterious figure in a manner which is almost diametrically opposed to the ways in which the Picasso painting became
contextualized through various constellations. Benjamin’s short text, which is quiet, almost whispering meditation, is a prime example of a ‘thought-image’ – a Denkbild – which according to Sigrid Weigel is an image ‘in written form /…/ in which the dialectic of image and thought is unfolded and becomes visible.’ Here is Benjamin’s short text:

“There is a painting by Klee called Angelus Novus. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees on single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm.”

Looking more closely at this text, we can see that he has created a theatrical staging, in German an Inszenierung, of the small painting which gradually also involves not only Benjamin himself, but also the readers of the text. After briefly describing the figure with its open mouth and spread wings, which ‘seems to move away from something he stares at’ Benjamin declared in the next sentence that, ‘/t/this is how the angel of history must look.’ The opposition between the ‘seems’ of the first sentence and the ‘must’ of the second one creates a strong dynamic force. On the one hand Benjamin has used the subjunctive mode of ‘als ware’ while on the other, he does not say that this could be the angel of history or even that he looks like such an image in the drawing. This is rather how the angel of history must look, even creating a necessary connection between the image on the canvas and the general idea of history. After creating this kind of tension between possibility and necessity, Benjamin widens the circles of theatrical contextualization by saying that the angel is facing the past where the debris of history as well as Paradise are situated, while the future is behind its back. This means that while we are looking at the picture with our face towards the future, we are in the middle of the debris, while Paradise and perhaps also significant portions of the past are behind our backs. The physical distance between the painting and the onlooker has received a temporal dimension where a large part of history, that which for us is a chain of events, but for the angel is a ‘only one single wreckage,’ is contained. The moment we have accepted that what we see is how the angel of history must look while it is looking at us who in turn are looking at the image, enabling our gazes to meet, the meditative, dialectical mise-en-scene becomes activated from its standstill, showing us the progression of history. The short meditation on the angel has given rise to a ‘theatrical performance’ where the reader becomes situated in the cosmic historical drama.

What Benjamin points out in the long quote above from the Arcades Project is that the “image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.” The catastrophes of history have been piled up so what the angel sees becomes reflected back to us by looking at him, creating a performative constellation of understanding and insight. The image in the painting has reached a standstill, but the moment we look at the picture through Benjamin’s text, the scene becomes reactivated by the double, simultaneous gaze directed both towards the past and into the future. Or as Benjamin wrote in the Arcades notes:
“The image that is read – which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded,”

signalling that the present moment of danger and violence is laying the foundation for the kind of text which is simultaneously a ‘reading’ and a mentally staged performance.

Benjamin’s text on Klee’s *Angelus Novus* has created an almost diametrically opposed catastrophic constellation from Picassos *Guernica*. Benjamin composed a short *Denkbild*-text about his small, privately owned drawing, dramatizing the moment of viewing itself. The debris, the wreckage or the ruins of history – the word that Benjamin used is *Trümmerhaufen* – can only be seen by the angel, who is both messenger and witness to the events of history, while the onlooker for whom Benjamin, almost like a prompter has provided a written scenario, has to imagine these events as being situated in the space between us and the figure in the painting as well as behind our backs. We do not see the catastrophe itself, except with an inner contemplative eye. On the other hand, Picasso’s mural painting, is not only huge in size, but also shows a group of larger than human-size figures, some animal, some mythological, some human, and it makes us to look directly at the suffering which the bombings of Gernica have caused, just a few months before the painting was first exhibited.

Picasso has transformed us into direct witnesses of a particular catastrophe, while Benjamin asks us to transform an already known chain of events into a universal, abstract catastrophe: history itself. *Guernica* led to a radically different form of contextualization from the Klee-picture. Instead of Benjamin’s meditative mode, composing a text relating to the picture as a kind of private icon, the public nature of Picasso’s painting, presented in the Spanish Pavilion, was immediately contextualised through the public discourses it triggered, in the speech before the opening of the Spanish Pavilion as well as in the anecdote with the painter himself and the Nazi officer, but in many other contexts as well. *Guernica* was immediately received as a public anti-war manifesto, while Benjamin’s text remained unpublished until after his death. Only gradually, after its publication both the text as well as Klee’s drawing have become canonised. Most recently, this happened in the 2007 Documenta in Kassel, where a reproduction of Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, in spite of Benjamin’s warnings against the loss of the aura in the age of technological reproducibility, was one of the central ‘opening’ images of the exhibition.19

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**Notes**

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5 A somewhat shortened version of the second version was published in French in Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, in May 1936. After that Benjamin began working on the third version of his essay, which was not published during his life-time.


7 Ibid., 270.

8 “The work of Art...” p.270 (Emphasis in original.)


10 Available at: http://www.olinda.com/ArtAndIdeas/lectures/ArtWeDontLike/entarteteKunst.htm (accessed, April 14, 2007). Georg Grosz’ painting Metropolis was exhibited at the exhibition of Entartete Kunst.


15 Arcades Project, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 1999, [N3,1] pp.462–463. In the preceding notation, Benjamin had used the following, almost identical formulation: “It is not that what is past casts its light at what is present, or what is present on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. – Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and where one encounters them is language.” Ibid., [N2a,3] p. 462.

16 Walter Benjamin purchased this painting for approximately 14 dollars at an exhibition in Munich in 1921 and it became one of his most valued possessions. After Benjamin had fled the Nazis from Berlin to Paris it was brought to him there, and before fleeing to the Spanish border, where Benjamin committed suicide, he deposited the Klee painting together with the manuscripts that have become known as the ‘Arcades Project’ in one of the two suitcases that George Bataille hid from the Nazis in the Bibliothque Nationale. Following the war, the painting made its way to Theodor Adorno in New York and he brought it back to Frankfurt before passing it over to the Kabbala scholar Gershom Scholem in Jerusalem, one of Benjamin’s oldest and closest friends. After the death of Scholem’s widow, Fania Scholem, the Klee painting was deposited to the collections of the Israel Museum, a stone’s throw away from my own home in Jerusalem.

