**Goya in the Age of Romanticism**

While Goya’s dark visions in his black paintings are commonly believed to have generally reflected contemporary social and cultural ideals peculiar to the eighteenth century Spain, other interpretations emphasise the influence of the artist’s personal life and individual psychology which do you find to be most persuasive interpretations and why?

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Crude, nightmarish, overwhelming; yet progressive, expressionistic and layered with interchangeable meaning, Goya’s ‘black paintings’ are executed with immense independence and ambiguity. Painted onto the walls of his home, these brooding images draw influence from social, cultural and political changes within Spain. Equally convincing, such events took its toll on Goya’s personal life and psychological state of mind, suggesting these later factors were the ignition to such a radical style of painting. This would be the world’s first glimpse of the sublime modern era, perceived by a complex artist who rejected Renaissance traditions and relied rather on unfettered imagination, a way of feeling and brought the unobservable into focus. Nevertheless, without the social changes, cultural ideals and political unrest that peaked Goya’s anguished psyche and impacted on his personal life in the 18th century, the foundations for the black paintings may never have been realized.

**Social, cultural and political**

Goya experienced uncertain times within Spain and completed a myriad of paintings and etchings of varying styles and influences. The ‘black paintings’ are not exempt as “the genesis of these images lies in Goya’s own past”¹ The emergence of progressive thought encouraged by the enlightened thinkers, political uncertainty with invasion from France and the devastating impact this had on the people of Spain, suggests the black paintings were Goya’s final response to the world he witnessed. As Havard suggests the “paintings continue to reflect Neo-classical percepts, which is to say they offer a catalogue of social evils, superstitions, brutality, persecution,

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¹ Hofmann, W. *Goya; to every story there belongs another*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2003, p233
deprivation, wantonness which will be eradicated by liberal measures and enlightened thinking”².

The reality that these brooding images were painted directly onto the walls of his home, never commissioned or sold, not restricted by the size of a canvas suggests the progressive thought that the spirit of the enlightenment was supportive of, indicative of the shift in society that was occurring, as a culmination of the political and social transformations. The use of browns, black and ochre as well as unrefined, thick brushstrokes unifies the images. “Goya began to see ever deeper into the darker side of the world and behind the façade of its social structures”³. Themes, which Goya addressed previously, were beginning to reemerge, more abrupt than before. The repetitive use of the somber colour palette and violent manner in which they appear to be painted; mirror the bleak condition of civilization in Spain, indeed the chaos and devastation, as a result of the turbulent times, politically and culturally, that Goya observed.

*Saturn Devouring one of his Son’s* (Fig. 1) references the persecution, wantonness and brutality described by Havard. Saturn clutches his son’s body with both hands; his fingers appear to penetrate the boy’s spine, moments from tearing him in half. The boy’s head has been devoured with Saturn primed to take another bite while the blood runs down the body, pooling at his hands which cup the torso. His eyes are wide and exude an immense feeling of terror. Hunched over and surrounded by vast blackness, mimicking the overpowering sense of helplessness Goya now felt due to political and social events witnessed.

Artworks that were vaguely political, representations of social deficiencies caused as a result of war, were monitored. No longer completing work for patrons or painting for the monarchy, Goya found asylum in the freedom to paint for himself, on his walls, in private. However, Goya in previous times, had faced the Inquisition and remained on guard and therefore was compelled to

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³ Hoffman, 2003, p. 236
“express himself in coded form”

Saturn Devouring One of His Son’s is no exception. This image is interchangeable in its meaning. Goya saw himself in Saturn, an artist fighting with oneself. Now reaching a time of utter despair due to the social evils witnessed in years previous, like Saturn, he is vowing to destroy what he and his fellow artist have established, represented through the child being devoured. In addition this heinous act committed by a character not naturally familiar to the viewer, is remnant of the barbaric acts he witnessed the people of Spain endure during times of relentless war. This visual expression of persecution and brutality was once assumed would be eradicated by enlightened thinking. However, now uncertainty looms over the spirit of enlightenment, as mortality draws closer for Goya.

Personal life and individual Psychology

The invasion of Spain by Napoleon, the political upheaval and cultural unrest stemmed from the enlightenment, his ill health and eventual deafness impacted on Goya’s individual psychology. The ‘black paintings’ “are seen as the product of Goya’s tormented mind and the outpourings of his unconscious”

Isolated in his home in Madrid, deaf, comforted only by his active imagination and haunting visions of the turmoil he had bore witness to, spurred on the creation of the ‘black paintings’. “Perhaps the black paintings were a means of releasing and exorcizing the phantoms which possessed him and haunted his imagination”

Goya interpreted the variety of his experiences and approached them with individual expression, in tune with a Romantic style of painting. The physical act of releasing the images from his suffering mind and onto his walls temporarily liberated Goya, psychologically.

4 Hofmann. W, 2003 p246

5 Havard, 2005, p. 616

6 Honour H & Fleming J. A world History of Art, United Kingdom, Laurence King Publishing, 2009, p 645
Desperate to establish contact with the world that Goya felt cut off from, he found tranquility by connecting with his fellow beings through his creation of the ‘black paintings’\(^7\), although it is considered they were not intended for public viewing. These were a manifestation of his tormented mind, painted with severe expression and energy. As Gregg states “it is in the ‘black paintings’ where his haunted evocations of despair reach their final crescendo and represent the desperate outpourings of a man driven to despair by the irrepressible voices of the subconscious”\(^8\). Once a traditional painter, Goya now accesses his tormented mind for inspiration and artistic gratification. Although each image fluctuates in subject matter the overall ambiance of paintings are fused by scale, proportion, ambiguous characteristics and a coarse and harsh colour scheme.

The very creation of ‘black paintings’ broke previous traditions. Goya expressed his personal visions and aligned with Romanticism ideals. Identified by Charles Baudelaire that “Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subject nor in exact truth, but in a way of feeling”\(^9\).

The symbolic and personal agenda conveyed in *Dog Half Submerged* (Fig. 2) echoes the essence of Romanticism and in turn his personal torment and individual psyche. This image reveals the hopelessness and despair Goya was experiencing toward the end of his life. *Dog Half Submerged* depicts a profile view of a head of a black and grey dog in the lower half of the painting sunken in the earth and being overpowered by natural forces greater than he. The dog’s gaze is directed along the dark line that buries the remainder of his body. This slant in the painting creates the contrast between the murky brown earth, to the dirty highly textured fawn and ochre in the remainder of the image. Not only is the abandoned dog engulfed by the earth beneath him, but by

\(^7\) Chabrun, J. *Goya*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1965, p. 265–266

\(^8\) Gregg, S. *New Romantics, Darkness and Light in Australian Art*, Gipson Art Gallery, Australia, 2011, p 19

the vast empty space above. The cavernous void juxtaposed against the disproportionate animal, suggests feelings of isolation. The dog, once an icon of loyalty and fidelity; Goya instead creates a sublime modern representation of himself as the dog. Tormented by his physical and psychological isolation, the dog is remote and alone, drowning in his own solitude. Rejecting the gentle sophisticated brushstrokes of the past, Goya creates his own set of rules with an uneven surface and sublime visual quality depicting unfettered imagination, which plagued his tortured psyche.

Similarly, Two Old People Eating (Fig. 3) and Two Old Men (Fig. 4) make reference to his tormented mind. The images appear to have been executed with spontaneity. In areas the figures are unidentifiable, yet rapid in the nature of their execution and ‘authenticate his psychogenesis’¹⁰. Both images exude morbidity and gesticulate toward Goya’s awareness that death for him is looming. The figure entering the top right hand corner in Two Old Men, appears to be screaming into the ear of the elderly bearded man, potentially references Goya’s deafness, a disability forcing him to exile further into his own mind, as his ability to communicate deteriorates. The extreme use of chiaroscuro in Two Old People Eating contrasts between the near mummified figures to the dense use of black in the background, resembles two figures emerging from a grave, again making reference to Goya’s obsession with mortality. Affected mentally and physically by the tumultuous times, both images depict his personal obsession with isolation, abandonment and his impending death. These two black paintings support the interpretation that Goya was influenced by his personal situation and psychological state of mind. However, this meaning is interchangeable and increases the emotional impact of the painting, drawing links to Romanticism, illustrating that painting “could and should demonstrate simultaneously, a state of sensation, state of mind and state of awareness”¹¹.

¹⁰ Havard, 2005 p 618
¹¹ Chabrun, J. 1965, p. 266
Most persuasive argument

There is distinct and complex duality reflected in the ‘black paintings’. The gloomy images convincingly illustrate the political, social and cultural shifts associated with 18th century Spain. However, the impact of the brutality, horror, social evils and his own disability took its toll on Goya’s personal psyche, resulting in the creation of the ‘black paintings’. The interpretations of the ‘black paintings’ are interchangeable and could support either a personal and psychological influence or political, cultural and social one. However, the fact that the haunting images were painted with frenzied intensity, as the subdued colour and texture suggests, onto the walls of his home, not intended for an audience, indicate the ‘black paintings’ are the work of a tormented and damaged, yet progressive mind.
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**Internet**

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http://www.museodelprado.es

The Metropolitan Museum of Art New York. This is the official website for the Metropolitan Museum which includes a Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Francisco Goya and the Spanish Enlightenment. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/goya/hd_goya.htm