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Author(s)	Tsuji, Shigebumi
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The Temporal Structure of Pictorial Narrative Representation: A Methodological Essay (Part Two)

TSUJI Shigebumi

At the outset of my study of narrative art, I dealt mostly with iconographic problems. However, I became increasingly intrigued by the sequential structure, which, I now believe, functions as a major temporal factor in pictorial narrative. In my previous essay I discussed very briefly such a potential temporal structure of narrative representation in its wider sense, and how the time can be 'actualized' by the viewer through various actions. I also clarified that a visual 'sequence' consists of a series of 'events' (Cf. pp.47ff.), and that in pictorial narrative art an 'event' is represented as a single scene which is more or less discrete. Thus sequence and event are both made perceptible. In fact, the more clearly scenes are articulated, the more explicit and discernible becomes the temporal structure.

Recently, however, I have become aware that, so long as I rely upon the limited ground of the two concepts of sequence and event, neither the crucial issues of narrative representation in general nor the temporal structure of contemporary art may sufficiently be explained. It now seems to me that the fundamental concepts for analysis must rather be 'continuity' and 'articulation,' which are not only more precise but also more comprehensive than the previous ones.

In most cases, continuity in narrative representation tends to remain latent. It is often supported by the continuity of the underlying sequence of text, or, at best, merely implicated by the continuous extension of picture surface. Both text and picture surface serve as agents which unify scenes within the framework of narrative. Or, as seen in the majority of cases, both complement one another to create unity. Obviously a normal pictorial surface cannot be infinitely extended but is limited appropriately, i.e., articulated against the indefinite environment which surrounds artwork. In this essay, however, I will not enter this problem of the relationship between artwork and its environment.

Let me give a quick thought to the history of easel painting from the Renaissance to the beginning of the twentieth century. Painting from this

era is characterized by the illusionistic rendering of three dimensional space. Here again, however, the continuity of space is merely implied by a series of images of objects by which a picture surface is clearly articulated in accordance with the opticomathematical order. This may explain the reason why a Quattrocento artist working at the outset of the development of such illusionistic rendering and, hence, less familiar with atmospheric perspective, felt a strong need to delineate objects as sharply as possible in order to gain perspective effect.

Obviously, priority was given to space rather than to time in Renaissance painting. Nevertheless, the spatial continuity which was thus implied could occasionally provide a temporal framework for narrative representation. Therefore, we find a number of instances from the fifteenth century where scenes which correspond to different moments in a narrative are distributed in a perspective vista. For example, in the famous *Portinari Altarpiece*, Hugo van der Goes represented the scene of the Adoration of the Shepherds in the foreground, while the relevant scenes of the Annunciation to the Shepherds as well as the Journey of the Magi are integrated in the background. However, such an amalgamation of space and time became less frequent as time went on: the introduction of figures in turbulent motion as seen in Michelangelo's paintings served to emphasize the impression of instantaneity rather than the continuity of time.

Although the elimination of temporal continuity belonged to the general trend in art of the modern era, it was not totally abandoned: not infrequently a narrative sequence was integrated into a single picture, as seen in the latest work of Poussin, *Apollo and Daphne*, where narrative elements derived from different stories related to Apollo are combined altogether without regard to their chronological sequence. Or, as seen in Watteau's *A Pilgrimage to Cythera*, figures in different poses are placed side by side from the foreground into the distance so that they represent a sequential movement of lovers until they embark on the ship in the middle ground.

In order to put an end ultimately to this priority of space over time, and to reintroduce time into visual art more conspicuously, it became inevitable that images of objects which used to articulate picture surface would be discarded. The Impressionists played a decisive role in this respect and wrought a fundamental change in the course of the history of European art. As has been repeatedly pointed out, the illusionistic space of

modern painting used to be articulated by motifs, i.e., images of objects. Now the Impressionists divided space into much smaller units of touches of pigment. Consequently, traditional space construction became very ambiguous, especially in the late works by Monet. In the *Water Lilies* every motif has been disintegrated into ambiguous clusters of touches. They not only float at indefinite distances in the picture space but also develop parallel to the picture surface as the spectator walks along it.

The case of Cézanne is more complicated: the unit which articulates the picture surface is not a spontaneous touch of pigment as in Monet, but a chromatic plane, which in ensemble produces a tremendous impression of spatial depth. For this purpose the color-value of every plane has to be differentiated with utmost care. However, quite significantly, the mimetic quality of motifs dramatically decreased in his latest works, and the perspective construction became deliberately distorted.

In this revolutionary development in Cézanne's latest works, the following generation represented by Picasso and Braque immediately noticed an encroachment of time-element. The result was the introduction of multiple viewpoints into a single picture space. The success of the Cubists was soon followed by the attempts by the Futurists whose primary concern was with 'motion' and 'dynamism.' But their method of visualizing 'motion' and, consequently, 'time' often became not unlike that of the chronophotography by Marey. Balla, especially, was obsessed by the idea of *Path of Movement + Dynamic Sequences* (1913). Yet, inasmuch as this 'path' was represented as a series of repeated outlines of objects which are combined with uninterrupted lines, the motion in time was made perceptible only for intellection. Such an image of motion in time was in fact refuted by Bergson at about the same time in his *Creative Evolution* (1911), even if his philosophy inspired the Futurists. While admitting that such a 'cinematographic' method would be effective for the routines of our perception as well as intellection, the philosopher carefully distinguished such an animated 'sequence' of images from true continuity.

In this respect Monet in his latest stage of development attained a decisive stage which actually predicted a drastic change of the course of history that was to occur twenty years later. Here I would only like to mention two most important issues relevant to my present topic.

1) In the later series of *Water Lilies*, the illusionistic representation of three dimensions was almost completely subdued. This was made possible

chiefly by means of disintegrating objective images which had been used to articulate picture surface and to produce a feeling of depth. As the result of this suppression of three-dimensional quality, the painting now begins to develop parallel to its own picture surface, instead of into depth as previously. Especially in such a large scale work as the Orangerie picture, the spectator can hardly grasp the whole picture at one glance. Instead, he inevitably has to walk about along the picture. This proves that the painting is constructed temporally. Moreover, quite significantly, it is no longer clear articulation of picture surface that supports the temporal structure in the Orangerie picture: an uninterrupted, continuous vicissitude in sight lures the spectator into a state of reverie.

2) In Monet's last *Giverny Garden* series from the 1920's, the brushstrokes became extraordinarily excited. The spasmodic, turbulent touches in fiery colors no longer serve to 'describe' any objective image. Nor are they deliberately disposed on the canvases in order to create balanced, well-articulated composition. The violent strokes are truly the testimony of the action of painting by old Monet who was suffering severely from cataract. The intense colors strengthen the impression of the inexhaustible vitality of the artist. Here, the total effect points to the accumulation of spiritual power which has been released through Monet's continuous action of painting.

I am well aware that neither Tobey, Pollock, nor De Kooning is an heir to the Impressionists. But, when viewed in terms of general historical development, Monet ought to be counted among the true predecessors of Abstract Expressionism, at least in its Romantic stage. Monet emancipated the art of painting from the tyranny of the timeworn intellect and consigned it to our sensory presentness. This was achieved in such a way that Monet restored the autonomy of picture surface, which had been regarded merely as an unsubstantial, transparent 'window', as Alberti declared five hundred years ago. After Monet's revolution, the chance was steadily growing that picture surface could eventually recover its reality. That is to say, the spectator should no longer search for a fictitious three-dimensional space within a picture frame. Painting won its own real space, which is, more often than not, a flat, two-dimensional extension of wood, cloth, etc., covered with pigment. Thus the chance has arrived for artists such as Jiro Yoshiwara and his Group Gutai, for an engagement of human spirit with 'materials.'

Simultaneously, it happened that in order to deal with an entire picture surface, the beholder should spend real time. This is quite unlike the time of contemplation which has been merely *read* in a picture. Thus, when De Kooning began his *Women* series, the relation between painting and both artist and spectator had been ready for a fundamental change. An artist is now offered an indefinite extension of space, which guarantees an uninterrupted, continuous action on his side. Instead of articulating picture surface 'meaningfully', he now acts upon it. The spectator, in his turn, no longer has to 'contemplate' the hidden meaning behind images but has to do something about the painting in front of him, sometimes even with his own physical reaction.

'Articulation' is mostly for our intellection, whereas 'continuity' is to be realized only through our action.

(Associate Professor, Faculty of Letters)