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# **The Temporal Structure of Pictorial Narrative Representation: A Methodological Essay (Part One)**

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The purpose of this paper is not to offer new art historical evidence to augment our knowledge of art in the past. Nor does it attempt a fresh interpretation of well-known works of art. Instead, the author would like to call readers' attention to one particular aspect of visual art, which has been hitherto, if not neglected, less scrutinized by art historians than other aspects. It is my hope that by concentrating our study upon this single aspect of visual art, a number of art historical facts which still remain in obscurity might be brought to light, and that many problems which are the subjects of irreconcilable debates might eventually find their solutions.

## **INTRODUCTION: Concepts for Analysis**

Problems concerning the expression of time, or time itself in visual art, have long been a subject of art historical research. The fact is, however, that most art historians have been more concerned with the static, formal aspects of plastic art than the dynamic, temporal ones. There are several reasons for this: a work of art is regarded as an unchanging object except for certain types of art which operate by themselves such as kinetic sculpture, light art, etc. Hence the intrinsic structure of visual art is also thought of as immobile and unchanging. In addition, a common assumption prevails that all the essential factors which constitute a work of art must be installed exclusively within the work of art itself. In other words, a work of art has been regarded as a treasure house which, filled with the secrets invented by the artist, quietly waits for an art historian to open the door. But is it right to further insist that the meaning of a work of art ought to be present prior to its discovery and any statement about it? The meaning of art is always accompanied by the viewer who believes that he found it in the work

and reveals it to society. Perhaps I may further assert that viewer's participation in the work of art - by means of perception, interpretation, or further actions prompted by the viewer's encounter with art - is the essential premise for the actuality of the work of art. The temporal aspect of visual art must be dealt with in this respect precisely.

In the first section of this chapter I would like to discuss briefly a set of concepts which I have borrowed from the main current of the philosophy of time in our era. They would seem to be extremely useful for analyzing the temporal structure of art. Then, in the second section, I will examine various means by which the viewer participates in a work of art and thus completes the actuality of the work of art, not in imagined but in real time.

It should be made clear at the outset that throughout my following discussion the term 'narrative art' will be applied most liberally: cyclic narrative representation is only one of a rich variety of narrative art, though it offers us, as it were, a model pattern of the temporal structure. As long as we can read a narrative in a work of art, or even as long as we can invent and develop a narrative based on our experience of art, such an art may be called 'narrative.'

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G Overmeyer, *Studien zur Zeitgestalt in der Malerei des 20. Jh.: R. Delaunay - P. Klee*, (Hildesheim, Zürich, New York, 1982). A lengthy but rather superficial survey of the history of the study on this subject is found in pp. 3 - 20.

#### 1: The Philosophical Foundation of the Temporal Analysis of Narrative Art

What is the temporal structure of a work of art? How can we ascertain that a work of art is temporally constructed? A hint to answer these questions can be gained by looking into the history of philosophy of time in the twentieth century. In 1908, J.M.E. McTaggart, a Cambridge professor, proposed his famous paradox of time. He asserted that position in time could be distinguished in two ways: as long as each position is Earlier than some and Later than some of other positions, they form what he called B series. On the other hand, when each position is either Past,

Present, or Future, these positions form A series. Since the distinction of positions in B series are permanent, this seems to be more objective and more essential to the nature of time than A series. But McTaggart believed that the distinction of Past, Present, and Future should be as essential to time, or even more fundamental than B series.

McTaggart's ultimate goal was to prove that even this A series is unreal and that consequently time itself is nonexistent. However, we cannot be greatly concerned here with such purely philosophical debates. Nor can we make a decision as to whether or not the distinction which McTaggart made is justifiable. I should like only to note that the two different concepts of time correspond respectively to the two fundamental, but distinct approaches to the problem of time. Namely, in conceiving time as a series of positions which rests on the Earlier than-Later than relationship, we arrive at a clear and objective 'image' of time. On the other hand, the concept based on McTaggart's A series corresponds to time in constant flow. Because of its elusive nature, this time cannot be conceived as an objective image as in B series, but, one might perhaps say after Bergson, can be given only to our subjective consciousness in a very indefinite way. In this respect, McTaggart's A series in effect does not concern 'positions' in time, but only the change of the state of an event and its impact upon our consciousness. 'Positions' are possible only as long as time is represented as a spatial image.

Due to these peculiarities the two concepts of time proposed by McTaggart have appealed to two different types of philosophers: naturally the aspect of time conceived as A series has been dealt with mostly by those philosophers, together with some linguists, who engage in studies of the function of our subjective consciousness. They are psychologists and phenomenologists of human consciousness. On the other hand, those who emphasize objective correctness, i.e., logicians and mathematicians, have preferred B series, as being more important, to A series.

In accordance with the subject of our present discussion, it will be wise to begin our study with observations of cyclic narrative representation which can be accurately explained on the basis of the concept of time defined as B series. (Since, according to McTaggart, the content of the position in time is event, we may safely assume that in B series time consists of a sequence of events.) Then we will proceed to deal with more complex forms of cyclic representation and eventually to discuss the

subjective meaning of time in visual art and how it can be explained by the art historical method.

As has been stated above, a work of art is normally thought of as being immobile. In spite of this, a work of art often contains in itself formal or iconographical relationship in visual sequence. The most obvious instance is a pictorial narrative cycle which is indeed a sequence of scenes, each representing an event or events. Further, chromatic gradation such as found in Klee's works may well be counted among these visual sequences. Iconographical representation which is based on a stable text also comprises an inherent sequence for reading the picture.

Thus we may enumerate countless instances of such a sequential relationship which exists, whether explicitly or implicitly, in works of art. Yet, being immanent in art objects, this relationship itself has to remain immobile. So far, it is no more than an indication, or even a mere metaphor, of time. In such a state the temporal structure of visual art is still, so to speak, inactivated, and we must wait for the participation by the beholder until it can be realized altogether.

(Of course I am not the first to discuss the sequential relationship in visual art. Similar notions have been expressed by other art historians, especially with regard to the study of rhythm in visual art. The case of G. Kubler, who applied the concepts of sequence and events explicitly in his *Shape of Time* (New Haven and London, 1962), is irrelevant to our present topic, because he used them not for analyzing the structure of art work but for reconstructing the history of style which, he said, had been endangered by the rising interest in iconology at that time. More recently, L. Dittmann tried to develop the notion which had been suggested by K. Badt in 1961. Yet, Dittmann's argument is not convincing enough, partly because he still confuses the image of time represented as a visual sequence with the meaning of time, which is 'directly given to our consciousness.')

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18/19 (Göttingen, 1980), pp. 133-150.

## 2: Participation of the Viewer as the Essential Premise for the Actuality of Art

It is the beholder's act of participation that completes the actuality of a work of art in terms of both space and time. Then, the temporal elements immanent in the work not only evoke the action of the viewer in real time but also prescribe its course and direction. Thus, the temporal structure inherent in the work of art is at the same time the origin and the premise for the actuality of art.

Participation of the beholder as such may be divided into the following three types:

### 1) Perception/Measuring

In order to grasp the formal as well as the chromatic structure of a work of art it does not suffice merely to cast one's eyes over it, but the quantitative relationship among the components must be confirmed. Whatever the actual dimension of the work of art may be, such a scrutiny is indispensable for appreciating its intrinsic nature.

The fact is that such contemplation requires a certain length of time. That is to say, it can be accomplished only in a sequential manner. In this respect the traditional view that art appreciation can be achieved not only intuitively but instantaneously is quite wrong. Here the actual dimension of work of art is not the primary factor for deciding the length of time thus required: it may well take much longer to appreciate the essential quality of a small still-life by Cézanne than that of a gigantic work by Rubens.

Here a further remark will be useful: measurement demands a scale, i.e., a standard. The quantitative-proportionate relationship among the constituents of a work of art can be recognized only by means of comparing every component with the standard. Not only the spatial, massive relationship but also the tonal gradation can be perceived through such a comparison. In this respect, art appreciation is actually founded on a certain regularity, which is often metaphorically called 'rhythm.' This very fact proves the temporal-sequential structure of art and art appreciation. Such a regularity is not necessarily a premise for the sequential

nature of time: temporal sequence is possible even if the intervals between events are irregular. Nevertheless the sequence is best perceptible when provided with regulated rhythm. This will be important when we discuss the archetypal form of pictorial narrative cycle.

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#### 2) Reading

Iconographical reading of works of art has been systematically explained by E. Panofsky as to be accomplished in three different stages. Here it must further be noted that the act of interpretation can be completed and demonstrated by means of writing or oral statement. Again this is possible only in the sequential manner for the following reasons:

a) The act of writing and oral statement can be done only temporally, i.e., sequentially. b) The reading of iconography is normally directed by the formal and chromatic arrangement in a work of art, which, more often than not, reveals itself as sequential. c) More complex iconography requires a certain textual basis for reading, and the reading primarily follows the sequential structure of the source text.

However, from the last remark, we should not conclude that iconographical reading would always have to be carried out on a firm textual ground. Between a well-established, canonical text and an *ad hoc* commentary on picture, there are a great variety of 'textual' references, e.g., rhetorics, poetry, legend, folklore, etc. The traditions in these literary genres are often unstable and as the result the relation between these 'texts' and the accompanying images tends to be inconsistent.

#### 3) Discourse

A great variety of human activities can be motivated by the perception/measuring and the reading of works of art. Even if we confine our scope of discussion to verbal activities, there are a vast number of discourses of different types. These discourses in fact form the substantial body of the actuality of art. It is said that the Chinese traditionally enjoyed composing narratives based on landscape paintings which obviously had no written

textual basis. In a similar manner the Japanese found pleasure in listening to rhetorical discourse while looking at the so-called *meisho'e*, that is, a pair of folding screens with the depiction of famous sceneries and monuments in and around the capital of Kyoto. Discourses and treatises on art played a very important role in the history of Chinese art, where most of the original works had been lost. Therefore, aesthetic ideas and standards were created mainly on the basis of the writings about the lost works.

The texts of art criticism and art historical studies today must also be counted among the discourses on art. Here, significantly, the syntagmatic relationship within these texts decides the positions of the works of art in sequential order. An extreme case of the perverse relationship between text and image is found today in Conceptual Art, which deliberately minimizes or makes ephemeral the meaning of the actual presence of the work. Consequently the meaning of the work of art is completely taken over by the text or verbal performance. Finally, it should be mentioned that the reading of, and discourse on works of art have been traditionally public performances.

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