

STYLE AND THE REPRESENTATION OF HISTORICAL TIME

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Humans surely are not unique in their capacity for identifying different events as being recurrent. Other animals also project their organic needs under the same guise of identity among successive stimuli.

G. A. Brecher showed in 1932 that the snails read space into succession.¹ As an art historian, I am overly familiar with the notion of style, which is another way of imposing space upon time and of denying duration under the illusion that successive events are similar events. To spatialize time is a faculty shared both by snails and by historians.

I

This paper has three parts. The first one is about resemblances between the writing of history and the painting of pictures. The second part concerns the nature of duration as historians perceive it. The third part considers whether the idea of style is suitable to studies of duration.

The writing of history resembles the painting of pictures, as Thucydides remarked in the *Moralia*. It depends upon many schemes and conventions of representation. These may tentatively be grouped as (a) conventions in the *selection* of what to represent from the immense complexity of any portion of duration, and (b) conventions as to the mode of *figuration* among these selections.

Selection

1. Unique cases and general cases form a gradient at whose extremes the possibility of history vanishes. The historian selects a median position on the gradient, in order to resolve the antithesis between a microstructure where no two actions are alike, and a macrostructure where all actions are alike. The position selected depends upon the historian's desire to represent activity as having purpose.

Everything about a work of art is contrived to force us to perceive it as a unique object occupying one place and having unusually integral properties of material, technique, form and significance. Our habit of meeting it in a museum or on a stage or in a concert hall, where it bids for our attention with the illusion that it is a single point in space, time, and feeling, further masks the historical reality of every work of art. That reality is totally different from the illusion of uniqueness.

Historically every work of art is a fragment of some larger unit, and every work of art is a bundle of components of different ages, intricately related to

many other works of art, both old and new, by a network of incoming and outgoing influences. These larger units, these bundles of components, and these interrelations across time and space, constitute the study of historical style which is also called stylistic analysis.

2. Narrative and statistical presentations are antithetical. They require the historian to decide upon his unit of study, e.g., biographical or categorical, and upon an approach, either qualitative (e.g., the great man) or quantitative. Both are possible in the same work.

Some kinds of historical representation are less viable than others: the chronicler today tells us much less in the long run than the economic historian or the statistician. There is accordingly a hierarchy of the modes of historical representation in respect to generalizing power. But there is also an inverse hierarchy by immediacy and authenticity in which the chronicler who witnessed the events, is our primary source, and the statistician is very far from the events he describes. Whom shall we believe? Of course we believe them both, for different qualities of experience, yet equally.

3. Events may be treated synchronously or diachronously, i.e., as events at rest in a cross-section of relationships or as events in duration, under unceasing change in motion and flow. In synchronous treatment, events are either densely or sparsely arrayed. In the diachronous view, events are rapid or slow. Dense array and rapid happening are not equivalent (nor are sparse array and slow happening equivalent).

Synchronous treatments tend towards the definition of structures; diachronous ones towards the distinction of separate evolutions. Synchronism is synthetic; diachronism is analytic.

4. Having no intrinsic segmentation of its own, time divides only for organisms experiencing sequences of actions. The historian is at liberty to stress either the regularity of artificial periods (centuries, decades) or the irregularity of actual durations.

In either case, he is exploring a psychological phenomenon called *transduction*. Here, repetitive stimulations, as by works of art of the same class, induce a *spatialization*, or illusion of coherent surface, which some of us call style.

The phenomenon has been studied in snails: when the belly is repeatedly prodded, the snail begins to crawl, i.e., he transforms periodic stimulation into a perceptual object by a process called the transduction of simultaneity into duration.¹

Figuration

Figuration is as complex as everything that the painter does after deciding what he is going to paint.

For the historian it is the beginning of the last lap. Usually the prior matter of selection requires from him a nearly total commitment of his available time and energy.

How to frame the question is so much of his work (as with the true painter), that the presentation becomes merely a matter of how to pay the bills, as it were, for the existing contracts.

5. At any past moment, what was then present may be regarded as consisting mainly of latent possibilities. Equally truthfully, it may be regarded as consisting mainly of explicit actualities. The historian is free to find his own conventional resolution between these extremes.

In the first case, where possibility is stressed, the historian is concerned with futurities, with emergent values, and his work is forward-looking, imposing the past upon that which is to come. In the second case (the explicit actuality), the factual stock is inventoried and the past is brought into alignment with the inventory. Here the historian's work looks to the rear, imposing the present order upon the valuation of the past.

6. Distinct possibilities of figuration are available according to whether the historian prefers relations of "cause and effect," or relations of "conditions and events."

The causal search is one that imposes an excessively simple pattern of explanation upon events. Since every event, however minute, may be infinitely complex, the causal interpretation always betrays the haste of practical urgency. More flexible and expressive is the statement of conditions for any event. The conditional search is necessarily tentative, and it frays into many strands of doubt. Pictorially the difference between cause and condition resembles the difference between Picasso and Velázquez, between abstraction and illusion.

7. Historians have to decide the relation of figure to ground in their representations of duration. A historical personage, for instance, stands to the conditions limiting his actions much as a visible design drawn upon the page stands to its background. Sometimes the ground has greater visibility than the figure, and vice versa, depending upon the historian's preference or position.

Figure and ground are like recurrent events and sequences of events. In *The Shape of Time* I tried to replace the *cyclical* notion of recurrence by a *sequential* idea. The unit of happening is a serial episode: a chain of events with beginning, middle and end. The scale can be any scale.

The aforementioned conventions surely do not exhaust the possible or eventual range of the historian's devices for portraying duration. Like poets and painters, he too is engaged in a constant search for mimetic schemes of representation, and in testing their relatedness to the events being discussed. These, however, usually can be known only via historical means and presentations. In the dialectical progression he therefore tests his representations more on other representations than on events proper, since all past events are no longer available to observation save as artifacts or contingent traces of the activity under study, which we know only in documents, chronicles, and histories.

My purpose here in stressing the conventionality of everything the historian writes is to mark clearly the categorical difference between any duration, and the histories or portrayals that may be written about it. A duration and its history differ as greatly as what we see differs from a painting of that sight. By this token history is like sight.

Nor should it be forgotten that a written history becomes a part of duration in much the same way as a painting becomes part of what we see, and even of *how* we see it. Thus the writing of history has many modes. They all affect the nature of our perception of duration. Every portrayal affects the identity of what is portrayed, as much as the subject conditions its portrayals.

The subject of history is time. If we grant that time has no specially privileged divisions, the situation resembles the natural world we perceive with the sensory manifold. Time can be structured only as variously as the varieties of historical perception at our disposal.

II

Painting is about the world of vision, and history is about duration. Therefore, having paid respect to the parallel of history and painting, we should look at the nature of duration. This I consider as sequence among actions of the same class. Five axioms about such actions are proposed as relevant to the nature of duration.

- I. Similar actions by the same agent cannot occupy the same time. If they do, the recipient is different, and the action also.
- II. No one agent can perform the same action more than once without ageing.
- III. Actions can be only similar but not identical, being different as to agent, or as to time, or as to location.
- IV. Actions repeated undergo change.
- V. The agent changes with each repeated action.

Duration thus consists of distinct actions which resist classification, because each action differs from every other action in the microstructure of happening as to time, place, and agent. Yet the large-scale classing of actions is continually needed for activity to seem to have purpose.

I. Often one discovers that he is apparently doing several different things at the same time such as playing organ chords with ten fingers and both feet, or reading aloud by a sick friend's bedside, while thinking about what to say to the family, as well as rising to close the door on a draft, and rearranging the furniture. Yet none of these actions is continuous: each has interstices for intrusive actions, even reading aloud, which is far more discontinuous than we realize, consisting of bits of action separated by *intervals* like doorways for other actions.

II. No one agent can perform an action more than once without ageing.

The question arises: is there such an agent as a single agent? Each individual admittedly houses several identities or rôle-players. Is the agent an individual or does his individuality reside in a part he plays? Is he a cluster of attitudes seen through time, or a single facet caught in action and engagement? The question resolves for all practical needs when we compare the many-faceted person, which is each of us, to a revolving cog-wheel, presenting only one facet in each instant, unless the engaging sprocket jams the action by some unexpected motion of its own.

The single identity of any agent depends, in short, upon the position and motion of the person perceiving his identity. The singleness is assured by the shorter durations, and by instantaneous exposure to a reliable and constant perceptor.

III. Actions can be only similar, but not identical, being different as to agent, or as to time, or as to location.

To suppose identical actions by the same agent, we must admit the idea that time is reversible, which is contrary to experience. For actions to be identical, they must recur exactly as to agent and place and time. Hence recurrence would be like reversal in time.

IV. Actions repeated undergo change. Since place and agent differ for successive actions, however similar they seem, the actions themselves are necessarily different. The one quality of time never noted is its absolute power to erode and erase identities between actions. These identities are created only by the abstracting mind, engaged in making time tangible by arresting it.

V. The agent changes with each repeated action. The proof is seen in certain autobiographies rewritten after a lapse, as in the case of Igor Stravinsky, whose two lives appeared years apart, as well as in biographies rewritten by the same biographer, like Bertram Wolfe's two lives of Diego Rivera, written years apart. The "same" stories are told twice, but they are different stories, weighted and valued differently by different narrators.

III

The notion of style has long been the art historian's principal mode of classing works of art. By style he selects and shapes the history of art. We therefore need to correlate, if we can, style and duration.

Uncritical usage in the history of art permits the word, style, to be used in different and mutually exclusive ways. On the one hand, style is cited as a configuration of qualities shared by many objects spread throughout a long span of time, as though the shared configuration were immutable in composition and intensity.²

On the other hand, style preferably means all the systemic changes we observe in the history of a cluster of traits or forms, much as the word "weather" stands for constantly changing relationships of temperature, pres-

sure, humidity. The anthropologist, A. L. Kroeber, described style as a strand in culture, which is best studied as to content, structure, and flow, with development as its most characteristic trait.³

James Ackerman, the art historian, likewise specified style as a relational concept, under the operational view that the concept of style "is a means of establishing relationships among individual works of art,"⁴ like the concepts of society and culture, which are also based on relationships.

If we proceed on the assumptions that style is both relational and developmental, we need to test the connection between relatedness and change. Several propositions, seven at least, can easily be advanced, together with their counter-propositions:

1. Styles, being historical configurations, are neither perpetual nor in random change. Being in change, however, their identity is in doubt at every instant.
2. Elements dispersed evenly throughout all historical time cannot mark style. Yet style presupposes such stable configurations within limited durations.
3. Style is identifiable only among time-bound elements. Yet if the components are in differential change, as they always are, the relation among them is a changing one.
4. Presupposing a style presupposes that it has a beginning and an end, although the components may have begun earlier, and might end later than the style itself.
5. Each kind of human action has its styles: no actions or products escape style. Yet the preceding observations suggest that such configurations are more instantaneous than extended in duration.
6. We participate in going styles, and we observe past style. But the operations of esthetic choice are unpredictable: a past style may at any instant be revived.
7. Different styles can coexist, like languages in one speaker. Such coexistence itself can be more various than style.

I conclude that it is probably impossible to portray the content of any duration, without invoking the idea of style, if only as a classificatory convenience. Yet when style is mentioned the problem arises as to which one among many entities or components is regarded as having style. Even an isolated, single object, such as the Parthenon, or a human body, belongs to several different developmental systems. Each of these—the blood, the skin, the kidney—displays differing systematic ages. The rose window, for example, at Chartres Cathedral, has a systematic age unlike that of the ogival vaults, and the two pieces, vault and rose, should therefore be ascribed to different styles, which the usual classification as "Gothic" lumps together.

Thus a major contradiction arises from the use of the term style. The idea of style is best adapted to static situations, in cross-cut or synchronous

section. It is an idea unsuited to duration, which is dynamic, because of the changing nature of every class in duration.

The necessary solution of this difficulty with style is to restrict the use of the word to discussions removed from duration. When flow and change are ignored, and when development is disregarded, style remains useful as a taxonomic convenience. But wherever the passage of time is under consideration, with its shifting identities and continuous transformations, the taxonomic notion, represented by the term style, becomes irrelevant. Thus style and the flow of happening are antinomies. Style pertains to a timeless sphere; and flow concerns change.

I conclude that the idea of style is best adapted to the description of synchronous situations involving groups of related events. But style is a nomic notion, represented by the term style, becomes irrelevant. Thus style of every imaginable class as a bundle of durations, each having widely different systematic ages.

In short, the idea of style is better suited to extension than to duration. When we are dealing with large durations, words describing time work better than extensional words like style.

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