

George Kubler

5. Toward a Reductive Theory of Visual Style

Style is a word of which the everyday use has deteriorated in our time to the level of banality. It is now a word to avoid, along with déclassé words, words without nuance, words gray with fatigue. The first step is to restore limits and shape to the shapeless objects of verbal abuse; to rediscover the purposes to which the word in question was appropriate; and to demonstrate its present unacceptable uses.

Furthermore, a conscientious search for scholarly discussion of the concept of style in this century shows a decline in its appearance among serious works of reference. For instance, the long article on style in the fourteenth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, signed by Sir Edmund Gosse, is entirely and only about literary style.¹ No mention of visual style appears in that article, and there is no separate entry for that topic in that encyclopedia. Furthermore, there is no entry on style in the *Encyclopedia of World Art*, appearing in Italy and in English in fifteen volumes between 1959 and 1968. The huge *Enciclopedia italiana di scienze lettere ed arti*, appearing in 1949, has only one entry for style under the binomial *stil novo*. An influential philosophical study, Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art*, which appeared in 1968, does not include style in the index, although Goodman did correct this oversight in an article on "The Status of Style," in *Critical Inquiry*.² He concludes apologetically with the bland remark that "the discernment of style is an integral aspect of the understanding of works of art."

¹"Style," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th ed. (Chicago, 1929), 21:488.

²Nelson Goodman, "The Status of Style," *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1975): 811.

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In brief, the task of writing about the history of art has become increasingly difficult within the traditional framework of the binomial system of the historic styles. Part of the difficulty arises from the incongruity of writings that treat historic styles as though they were persons in a generational novel. This habit endows styles with attributes like those of allegorical figures in stone or bronze in a palace park.

On the other hand, it is not hard to find valiant champions for the cause of style. Three papers on the theory of style, written since 1950 by Meyer Schapiro, James Ackerman, and E. H. Gombrich, seem to mark a growing concern among art historians to delimit and reduce the terrain where the concept of style is applicable. The following remarks on their papers isolate this concern at the expense of comment on many other important points raised by these three authors.

Meyer Schapiro insists upon style as "constant form" in the art of individuals and societies.³ He recognizes that "the development of forms is not autonomous, but is connected with changing attitudes and interests" appearing in the "subject matter of the art."⁴ His effort to affirm the constancy of style reappears when he says that a "style is like a language with an internal order and expressiveness,"⁵ and that style appears in the "forms and qualities shared by all the arts of a culture during a significant span of time."⁶ Beyond the confusion between style and language, it will be demonstrated later on that a common confusion between *style* and *format* may have led Schapiro here to deny the evanescence of style in diachronic studies.

James Ackerman, on the other hand, regards the concept of style "as a means of establishing *relationships* among individual works of art."⁷ But he resists the translation of any "preordained pattern of evolution" during the history of art into "another version of the materialist success story."⁸ He sees the individual work of art "as the prime mover of the historical process revealed by style." It needs interpretation "in terms of the total context in which it was per-

³"Style," in *Anthropology Today*, ed. A. L. Kroeber (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 287-312, later published in *Aesthetics Today*, ed. Morris Philipson (Cleveland: World, 1961).

⁴Ibid., p. 292.

⁵Ibid., p. 291.

⁶Ibid., p. 287.

⁷"A Theory of Style," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20 (1962): 227-37.

⁸Ibid., p. 230-31.

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formed.”⁹ In this way he avoids that allegorization of style postulated by Schapiro as “the constant form, and sometimes the constant elements, qualities and expression in the art of an individual or a group.”¹⁰ He also notes that other great defect in the loose concept of style, which is to lay upon the past the burden of an evolutionary line that was never known to its participants as a necessity. Such evolutionary lines are least misunderstood as what *did* happen rather than what had to happen. When we speak of it, evolution in art should always be understood as more contingent than necessary.

More recently, E. H. Gombrich has further delimited the theory of style by reviving the distinction between descriptive and normative usages.¹¹ This separation allows him to reject as normative¹² the view that artistic styles obey some vague law of intrinsic *destiny*. He urges instead that we limit the word *style* to cases where there is a choice between procedures.¹³ For Gombrich, as for Schapiro, constancy of form persists only “as long as it meets the needs of the social group.”¹⁴ This formulation, however, implies that “constant form” is subject to pervasive change at every instant, and that the history of style is therefore a history of continuous *change* rather than of constant *forms*, as Schapiro proposed.

Since 1950, then, the unit of study represented by the concept of style has been continually diminished. Schapiro still asserted in 1953 a “constancy of form” in personal and historic styles among the art of individuals and societies. But Ackerman preferred in 1962 to stress the autonomy of “the individual work of art,” releasing it from the straitjacket of historical styles. And Gombrich in 1968, following Karl Popper, went further. Gombrich discarded normative uses of the concept of style in favor of the study of acts and artifacts, preferring descriptive to judgmental treatments of art.

In the following remarks a further reduction of the applicability of *style* to historical matters will be proposed, first on etymological grounds, then with postulates separating style from duration, and finally with a componential analysis of what we mean when visual style is discussed.

⁹Ibid., p. 237.

¹⁰Schapiro, “Style,” p. 287.

¹¹See his article “Style,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Sills, 18 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1968–79), 15:352–61.

¹²Ibid., p. 356.

¹³Ibid., p. 353.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 354.

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Stilus and Stylos

The true, original signification, or the etymon, of style is double. In Greek it is *stylos* and in Latin it is *stilus*. English shares the spelling with *y* only with French, while Italian, Spanish, and German share the spelling with *i*. Apart from spelling, however, the adaptations of *stilus* have to do with writing, while the adaptations of *stylos* are related to columnar forms and to the verb $\sigma\tau\omega$ and thus to ancient Mediterranean architecture.

Both these etymological traditions have been in existence since antiquity, but the literary associations of *stilus* have long overshadowed the architectural meaning of the Greek term. Yet Vitruvius in books 3 and 4 firmly established the spatial aspects of a large family of terms derived from the Greek *stylos*, as used by architects in the time of Augustus, to designate proportional differences and expressive varieties among the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian orders in the Greco-Roman world.

Thus the family of the Greek etymon, *stylos*, has always pertained to the arts of spatial organization, whereas the Latin family, descended from *stilus*, has always been related to the arts of temporal form. In effect, this double etymological history of our word *style* differentiates time and space from one another.

But not so in the compact edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1971), where eight columns are given to *style* in sixty-four "senses," under five principal headings as a noun, and six as a verb. This entry has never been changed since its first appearance in 1919. The editors then and now regard the *y*-variant in spelling as "meaningless" under the "erroneous notion that L. *stilus* is an adoption of $\sigma\tau\upsilon\lambda\omicron$, column." Their view disregards entirely the large corpus of architectural terms which underlies classical practice in the building arts for over two thousand years. Their entry adverts to architecture only in the twenty-first "sense" of the "historic styles of architecture from Grecian . . . to Palladian and the like," and it ignores all the terms of Greek derivation found abundantly in Vitruvius.

Today, however, an accepted distinction exists between precise etymology and the history of usage. In addition, neither derivation nor custom can prevent the separation of visual style from literary style. The existence of two derivations, one from Latin *stilus* for the temporal arts and another from Greek *stylos* for the spatial arts, will aid greatly in the reduction of the present confusion surrounding the concept of style. Earlier English orthographic forms such as "steel" (spelled *stile*) are unlikely to be revived for this purpose, but it should

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become public knowledge that the Greek derivation is both etymologic and customary for visual art, the *OED* notwithstanding.

The preceding account of the ongoing reduction of the theoretical scope of the concept of style might also be documented with a recent revision of some observations I offered at a conference in 1966 held by the New York Academy of Sciences on *Interdisciplinary Perspectives of Time*. In that paper, titled "Style and the Representation of Historical Time," I sought to connect several "axioms" about duration with "propositions" about style in order to test the position of the idea of style in respect to duration.¹⁵

Today it is desirable to revise and submit those remarks anew, more as "postulates"—which are merely claims to take an observation for granted—than as self-evident axioms or propositions. These are now fewer than before and less redundant and more sequential, and they are more categorical in dissociating style from any duration.

- I. General postulates about the duration of human acts:
 1. More than one act by the same doer cannot occupy the same now.
 2. The same doer ages with each repeated action.
 3. Actions by the same or by different agents can be only similar, but not identical, being in change at different times.

From these we may deduce that the moment, the actor, and the action are never twice the same.

- II. Special postulates about visual style:
 1. Style comprises acts undergoing change.
 2. Style appears only among time-bound elements.
 3. No human acts escape style.
 4. Different styles coexist at the same time.
 5. Style is more synchronic than diachronic, consisting of acts undergoing change.

Here we see that no style can entirely fill any period, nor can it resist the alteration of time. Thus, whether we consider duration or style, the same conclusion emerges: that the presence of change precludes assumptions about enduring constancy.

It was noted at the conference that "the necessary solution of this difficulty with style is to restrict the use of the word to discussions

¹⁵See *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 138 (New York, 1967): 849–55.

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removed from duration . . . style is a notion unsuitable to diachronous durations, because of the composite nature of every imaginable class as a bundle of durations, each having widely different systematic ages."¹⁶ In short, style is taxonomic and extensional rather than a term suited to duration.

A Componential Analysis of Style

Given the present erosion of the term and concept of style into near-formlessness, we may attempt its recutting along new lines. I would like to submit a manifold of six dimensions corresponding to the chief preoccupations of art historians since 1850. I use "manifold" in the Kantian meaning of the sum of particulars furnished by sense before their unification in understanding. This manifold comprises the disagreements among technicians and connoisseurs, formalists and iconographers, historians and semiologists; but it disregards the disputes between art and literature, as well as between them and the social sciences, as humanists and scientists. All of these disputes, parenthetically, may be resolved within the principle of complementarity as formulated by Niels Bohr. He said that "the integrity of human cultures presents features the account of which implies a typically complementary mode of description." By this he meant that clarity requires an "exhaustive overlay of different descriptions that incorporate apparently contradictory notions."¹⁷

Componential analyses are performed on carefully isolated collections, such as in stratigraphic archaeology, or in semiology, where a miscellany of meanings is likewise isolated in time.¹⁸ Part of the analysis of style has already been presented as etymology: we now can consider visual style as a manifold of six dimensions. These may be labeled as shown in Figure 1.

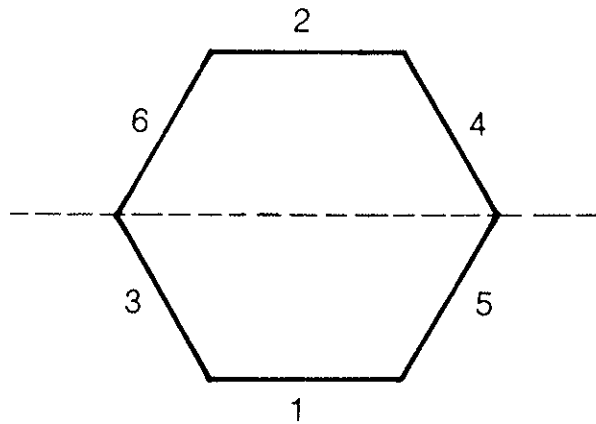
They may be grouped in a hexagon of lower and upper halves with opposite sides corresponding to infrastructure and superstructure as odd and even numbers. In addition, the opposite pairing of parallel sides corresponds to a grouping by shape, meaning, and time. This triadic pairing accounts for all essential characteristics of works of

¹⁶Ibid., p. 855.

¹⁷Gerald Holton, "The Roots of Complementarity," *Daedalus* 99 (1970): 1018, 1045.

¹⁸See, e.g., Umberto Eco, "A Componential Analysis of the Architectural Sign/Column/" *Semiotica* 5 (1972): 97-117.

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- | | | |
|-------------|---|---------|
| 1. craft | } | shape |
| 2. format | | |
| 3. signage | } | meaning |
| 4. modus | | |
| 5. period | } | time |
| 6. sequence | | |

Figure 1. Visual style.

visual art, when they are considered as anonymous products by craftsmen working within inherited collective traditions.

This analysis of what may be regarded as the constitutive components of the phenomenon of visual style might be attacked as excluding consideration of individual temperamental differences among artists. The containing framework for the individual expressions, however, is amply provided within the boundaries set by shape, meaning, and time. This can be shown in the archaeological cases where an anonymous ancient work of art reveals to us a rich expression without assistance from biographical information of any sort. This is the case with Paleolithic cave paintings and in ancient American sculpture, to pick only two from the enormous repertory of anonymous ancient and exotic works of art. In these cases, the discovery of artistic individuality is usually epiphenomenal to the perception of the high quality of work.

In detail, the six components in the phenomenon of style are:

1. *Craft*, being skill and artifice, can be articulated as reciprocals of material and technique in varying relations of harmony and tension. These relations will affect all other dimensions. Craft is therefore like a fundament on which the hexagon rests.

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2. *Format* is a term taken from the arts of the book, where it refers traditionally to volume sizes, as well as to typefaces, like Bodoni or Bembo, which are designs cast as fonts, having great permanence and durability of form. In general usage, the term *format* concerns the size, shape, and composition of a written communication or publication. For our purposes of componential analysis, *format* seems preferable to *style*, because of the fact that in respect to durations, style is in unending change. *Format*, on the other hand, identifies stable configurations enduring through time as recognizable entities. It is also a term better suited to diachronic studies than *style* because it is less heavily freighted with evolutionary associations than *style*. We can think more easily of format as devoid of "period," unlike a particular style. In ordinary usage, a style not only implies but demands exclusive domination over its "period." In brief, *format* is more pluralistic and less restrictive as to coexistence than *style*.

3. *Signage* is a neologism used in the profession of designing sets of signs for a business or an institution.¹⁹ Here it is adopted to mean any complex of structured symbols which can be subjected to iconographic or iconological analysis. The recent proliferation of structuralist theories, such as semiology, semiotics, semasiology, and so on and so on, seems to require a more humane and humanistic designation that approaches self-explanation. *Signage* conveys the infrastructural character of iconographic methods and results.

4. Latin *modus*, meaning "measure" or "quantity," seems preferable to the ambiguous English word *mode*, with its many meanings. *Modus* in the Renaissance signified one of a variety of manners selected by the artist according to the content needing expression.²⁰ This sense seems appropriate to the visual order, and especially to architectural decisions, as with the different expressive manners codified by Vitruvius in the classical orders. For the architect of the emperor Augustus in the first century of the Christian Era, the Doric order was the earliest, corresponding to the Peloponnesus in the reign of the Dorian kings of Achaea. The Ionic order spread later when the Athenians colonized Asia Minor. The Corinthian order was invented last by a sculptor wishing to imitate the growth of acanthus leaves. Each order had definite expressive properties conveyed also in its proportions and modulations. The Doric was manly, Ionic womanly, Corinthian of slighter, maidenly proportions. These expressive

¹⁹John Follis, "Vital Signs," *Interiors*, June 1976. This point was kindly called to my attention by Alvin Eisenman.

²⁰Jan Bialostocki, "Das Modusproblem in den bildenden Künsten," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 24 (1961): 124-81.

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intervals have persisted to the present: when the orders were depaganized in the Renaissance, Christ and the saints, both male and female, were assimilated into the Vitruvian orders.²¹

5. *Period* generally conveys meanings of cyclical return and completion in physics and biology, as well as in mathematics and rhetoric. It is likely that notions about which the period is unclear therefore lack definiteness, and that their uncertainty may be measured by our inability to define their period.²²

6. *Sequence* is defined in mathematical usage as an open-ended, ordered class such as the positive integers. In the history of visual form, such a sequence is the dated succession of gradually altered repetitions of the same trait.

All these components of the concept of style are part of it as different semantic and functional levels. It is also likely that they are equal to all of it, under the present aim of a reductive theory of style.

But it would now seem also that one component is more questionable than others. In fact, the crippling limitation of the current concept of style is most clear in the mention of period. Here the uncertainty of the notion of style is evident in the absence of definition, as to the period, of what we loosely call *style*.

No one wants to eradicate *style* from historical diction, although many art historians find it possible to write about artists and works of art without using or abusing the term. To reduce the existing confusion, however, style might more commonly be clarified than it now is, with some index such as an integral sign to designate the scale of the time that is being defined. For example, "medieval style" implies the millenary scale, or style \int^{1400} as contrasted with the "style" of a single painting by Picasso, which may be assigned in some cases to a specific quarter-hour on a known day. In this sort of indexing, the time-scale would be referred to whenever ambiguity might appear, between style as summation and style as temporally fixed, whether for a long or short duration.

Synonymy, Choice, and Synchrony

The intentions of artists have not been approved as a criterion of quality by recent or "new" literary critics, such as W. K. Wimsatt

²¹Eric Forssman, *Säule und Ornament* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1956), p. 159.

²²George Kubler, "Period, Style, and Meaning in Ancient American Art," *New Literary History* 1 (1970): 127-44.

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and Monroe Beardsley, but in the realm of visual art, the intention of the maker is regarded as central to the aesthetic act. Stephen Ullmann has said that "the pivot of the whole theory of expressiveness is the concept of choice. There can be . . . no question of style unless . . . [there is] . . . the possibility of choosing between alternative forms of expression. Synonymy, in the widest sense of the term, lies at the root of the whole problem of style."²³

The passage was a confirmation for Gombrich on style in 1968, but its synonymic message was rejected by Nelson Goodman in 1975, in "The Status of Style," and neither author perceived its importance for a reductive theory of style.

For Ullmann the linguist, four principles underlie stylistic analysis: choice, polyvalency in the variety of effects arising from any one device; deviation from a norm; evocation by connotations. But all four principles are variations on the requisite presence of choice among words. Synonymy is the common factor.

In effect, Ullmann's stylistic analysis reveals the atomic structure of style as consisting of infinitesimal decisions in an immediate present at "that subsoil of stylistic creation where images are generated and where a new vision of the world is involved."²⁴ In other words, synonymy is inherently synchronous.

Such an infinitesimal method of analysis is like a confirmation from literature of the reduction proposed here. Visual stylistics also reduce to instantaneous acts of choice in the sixfold domain just described, and in every part of it from craft decisions to replications in sequence. This context for stylistic happening is sharply contrastive to the long tradition of stable "historic styles" adorning the art-historical park with their static allegorical figures.²⁵

The Constancy Phenomenon

The concept of style may be a *failed* constancy phenomenon. Konrad Lorenz, building on the work of Erich von Holst, has discussed as an ethologist the function of abstracting in perception. This is the constancy phenomenon in elementary functions of perception such as color and form under changing conditions, as of light and

²³*Style in the French Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), p. 6.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁵Meyer Schapiro, H. W. Janson, and E. H. Gombrich, "Criteria of Periodization in the History of European Art," *New Literary History* 1 (1970): 113-26.

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motion. These studies of animal perception all relate to objects. Lorenz writes in awe of the constancy mechanism that "permits us to perceive the three-dimensional form of an object as constant while it is moving—for instance, turning to and fro—and thus causing considerable variations in the form of the image on our retina," which we interpret as "spatial movements of an object with an unchanging form, not as a change in the form of the object itself."²⁶

Now the phenomenon of style is not an object but a concept. We wrongly assign to style the constancy of an object in perception whenever we examine it diachronically. We have seen, however, that style depends on synchronous choices among synonymous possibilities, and that style itself is a phenomenon in perception without objective properties as to duration.

If we were to divest style of all its failed associations as a phenomenon of constancy through time, we would be left with style as extension in space rather than as duration. This purified residue would be an appreciably more useful tool of thought than when it is made to describe time as in conventional histories of the arts of expression. In conclusion, I have argued for the restriction of visual style to the description of nondurational, synchronous situations composed of related events.

²⁶*Behind the Mirror* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), p. 117.

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