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The New *Laokoön*: A Periodic System of the Arts

Bulat M. Galejev

The diversity of the arts is quite obvious, leading artists and critics to constantly ponder the following questions: What kinds of artistic activity can be singled out as self-contained arts? How many arts are there? In what ways are these arts related to each other, and is there any regularity or logic to these relationships?

The first work specifically devoted to the morphology of art forms is considered to be Lessing's *Laokoön* [1], in which the peculiarities of poetry and painting and the boundaries of their interaction are treated in detail. Many of the subsequent studies devoted to the classification and systematization of the arts can be said to have been conducted under the banner of the *Laokoön*. However, the approaches, and consequently the results, of these morphological studies have varied greatly, depending on the author's initial aesthetic position. Thus T. Munro confined himself to a detailed differentiation of the existing forms of artistic creation, making no attempt to carry out their strict systematization [2]. The desire to see order and hierarchy within the family of Muses has prompted others, such as E. Souriau [3], to draw up special classification tables.

Questions of art morphology became particularly pressing during the last century when artistic practice witnessed the emergence and active development of new art forms. That new art forms could arise came as a surprise to many people; in fact, even the statement of the problem itself appeared absurd until the end of the nineteenth century. Thus M. Nordau asserted in his infamous book *Degeneration* (1893) that the system of arts had long been completed and that humanity did not need, nor would it ever need, any other art forms [4]. But it was literally only a few years after the publication of Nordau's book that the Lumière brothers' first film-projecting apparatus began to cause a stir.

Nowadays, one is unlikely to be surprised by the claim that the system of arts is open and incomplete. The triumph of the cinema and television makes such a claim seem natural. What is striking, however, is that few of the classifications of

the arts, even the most recent ones, include these new art forms. One exception that should be mentioned is the work of M. S. Kagan [5].

But how can one ignore other present-day experiments with artistic forms that make use of new techniques and technologies? Laser art, video art, music-kinetic art and electronic music are but a few of the new forms that are being suggested by modern artists. Yet, which of them are entitled to exist as self-contained art forms? Are these new names but chimeras, designating merely a temporary, transitory act? For some reason or other, certain theoreticians, such as A.

Moles [6], are now inclined to preach the boundlessness of the system of arts, which is tantamount to admitting that there is no system involved in this type of diversity.

I cannot agree with either of the extremes represented by Nordau and Moles; the truth, it would seem, lies in between the two. A more precise formulation would be to say, as Goethe once put it, that it is not the truth but the problem that lies in the middle. To solve the problem, one must take both practice and theory into account. Practice testifies to the erroneousness of Nordau's views; however, it is equally impossible to agree with Moles's theoretical suppositions, according to which the system of arts is to suddenly disintegrate into an infinite number of isolated and unrelated artistic actions.

I would like to propose some original principles for systematizing new forms of artistic creation, principles that will enable us to confirm the integrity of the developing system of arts and, moreover, to forecast their specificity and define the criteria of viability as regards their functioning within the artistic culture. In formulating these principles, I have projected S. M. Eisenstein's concept of the *Grundproblem* (fundamental problem) [7] onto a historical-morphological analysis of art.

Eisenstein's concept allows us first of all to answer one of the principal questions of aesthetics: Why has humankind

ABSTRACT

The title of this article reflects the author's attempts to systematize the arts in their present forms, thereby accommodating the series of 'technical arts' that are being added to the system of traditional art forms. The author suggests an original method of classifying the arts that makes it possible to simultaneously graph both the expanding 'universe of the arts' and the centripetal tendencies that characterize the integrity of the arts system. He discusses the types of interactions that occur between the different kinds of art forms, as well as the inevitability of strengthening synthetic trends in the artistic culture. The author's analysis of contemporary technical means of audiovisual communication, together with his system of classifying the arts, is conducted in light of S. M. Eisenstein's conclusions about the dialectical unity of the 'progressive-regressive' trends that determine the synergy of thought and feeling in art.

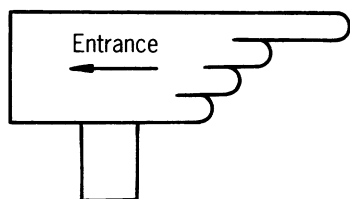


Fig. 1. Illustration of S. M. Eisenstein's concept of the *Grundproblem* (fundamental problem), relating to the dialectical unity of the regressive and progressive components found in both the process and end products of artistic creativity.

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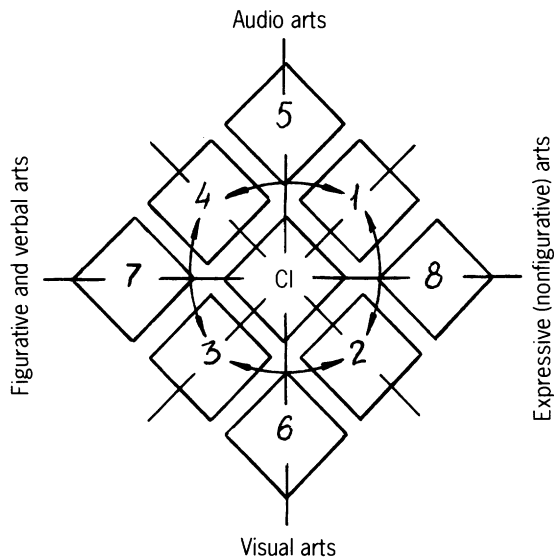


Fig. 2. Classification system of the traditional arts. The creative individual (CI) is located in the central panel. The independent art forms located in the surrounding panels are: (1) music; (2) architecture, ornament; (3) painting, sculpture; (4) the verbal arts; (5) song-folklore; (6) the applied arts; (7) drama; and (8) choreography.

elaborated this specific way of reflecting reality in concrete-perceptual images, which we refer to as art? Noting the proximity of the artistic (image) to the primeval (mythological belief), early sensuous thinking, irrational aesthetics and Freudianism were quick to decry art as ‘cultural regression’ or ‘cultural atavism’. While not agreeing with this, yet recognizing a distinction between science and art, between logical thinking and image thinking, Eisenstein arrived at the following conclusion:

The effect of the work of art is based on a simultaneously occurring dual process: the impetuous progressive ascension toward the highest mental stages of consciousness and, at the same time, penetration through the structure of form into the deepest layers of sensuous thought. The polar bifurcation of these two lines of aspiration creates that *particular tension of form and content unity* that is characteristic of genuine creations. There are no genuine creations without it [8].

The sketch shown in Fig. 1 represents Eisenstein’s effort to illustrate this dialectical unity of the archetypal and the social, the regressive and the progressive, the conscious and the unconscious, the sensuous and the rational, and the interrupted and the uninterrupted found in both the process and end products of artistic creativity.

In this paradoxical unity of the regressive and progressive components of mental activity, Eisenstein saw the specificity of art as a form of social consciousness, relating sensuous image thinking to the ‘foundation of form creation’ (the syntax of art language), and logical intellectual thinking to the mastering

and incarnation of the content. Moreover, Eisenstein considered it obvious that “while both components are strongly intensive, it is the progressive component that is leading and dominating the other one”. Our consciousness controls the “regressive, sensuous component” through a “purposeful effort of will” [9]. Without this regulating function of consciousness, Eisenstein warned that the content is bound to degrade, dooming art to “sensuous chaos, spontaneity and raving”. (Psychedelic art provides a vivid example.) Yet, at the same time, without the regressive, sensuous component, which characterizes the image-ground of art, the artwork is emasculated and reduced to sheer didactics; without this component, it is impossible to create psychologically expressive forms that would ‘thrill’ the spectator.

It is the image-emotional character of thinking, its metalogic, and, as Eisenstein repeatedly pointed out, its synaesthetic nature that provide the power, profundity and suggestiveness of artistic influence. The fact that deep thinking basically occurs beyond consciousness serves only to heighten this effect. As is known, “art does not require that works of art be taken for *reality*” [10]. This condition can be satisfied only through the dialectical dual unity of regressive and progressive forces in art.

Eisenstein’s concept, in its most obvious form, becomes apparent when one analyzes the status of poetic metaphor in which structural antiquity (metaphor being a small myth) combines with novelty, or, more exactly, with the continual, socially motivated renewal of the content. This explains

why poets need to invent personal metaphors that are not trite. Repeated use reduces them to stock phrases; using them in their denotative sense renders the regressive component ineffective, thus destroying the unity of form and content (see Fig. 1). This explanation casts new light on the inevitability of innovation in form-creation (i.e. the emergence of new forms) when mastering new content in art (i.e. when creating new works of art).

In analyzing art from the point of view of a system of art forms, I would like to note that the dialectics of the regressive and progressive forces are active here too, providing for the integrity of an expanding system of art forms. This analysis is based on a special graphic-structural method that is founded on the spatial splitting of the essential powers of the creative individual (CI), who is placed in the center as the measure of all things (Fig. 2). According to Lenin, “Bifurcation of the unity and the cognition of its contradictory parts” form the essence of dialectics [11]. This specifically provides for the differentiation of the arts into figurative-expressive arts and audio-visual arts. But such a representation of oppositions is justified only if it illustrates the interdependence of these opposites, showing the system as an integral whole.

The initial result of the artistic activities of the creative individual (CI), if we consider the genesis of art, is known to be syncretic art (represented by the central panel in this scheme). In the process of the division of labor and the specialization of artistic creation, the objectification of certain essential human powers takes place, assuming the form of independent arts: (1) music; (2) architecture, ornament; (3) painting, sculpture; and (4) the verbal arts. Although basically progressive, the process by which the arts acquire independence is fraught with deep-laid contradictions. It proves to be dialectically linked with the constant aspiration to preserve the complex reflection of reality that was characteristic of syncretic art, in which perception played just as integral a role as it does in the case of direct contact with the world and the aesthetic apprehension of nature. This aspiration facilitated the preservation of the reflection-expressive unity in (5) song-folklore and (6) the applied arts and the bisensory character of (7) drama and (8) choreography. Moreover, at the proper level of material and social development, these au-

tonomous art forms may also be intentionally involved in various synthetic combinations, such as: (3 + 4) book illustration, (2 + 3) monumental art, or (1 + 4) vocal music.

In addition, there exist between the components of the system various interactions at a distance, which characterize the process of mutual influence and mutual imitation among the arts; this is called synaesthesia of the arts if it occurs between the visual and the aural arts (similar associative interactions also exist between the figurative and expressive arts). Vivid examples are the pictorial music of the impressionist composers and the musical paintings of W.W. Kandinsky and M. K. Ciurlionis. Hence, the processes of differentiation and interaction among the arts are not only complementary but also interdependent. This analysis makes it possible to speak of the presence in the system of arts of progressive centrifugal forces as well as of some sort of regressive centripetal forces. This dialectical unity determines the possibility of preserving the integrity of the expanding system of arts, which is consistently and substantially mastering new aspects of its developing subject—reality, the world.

These conclusions are based on an analysis of the traditional arts. In its most general form, the system of audio-visual communication employed by these arts follows the scheme diagrammed in Fig. 3. In traditional music, to take an example from the sound channel, the interaction between the creative individual (CI) and the acoustic output (AO) is realized directly by means of the control panel (CP), which is designed to provide the most convenient contact between the individual and the

‘tools’ of audio communication. The keyboard is an example of a control panel. The situation is similar in the visual channel: here the creative individual (CI), by means of certain materials and tools borrowed directly from nature (e.g. paint and stone, brush and chisel), makes a material object that serves the aims of artistic communication. (For consistency within the diagram, they are designated control panel [CP] and visual output [VO].) Not only in music but also in painting, sculpture and architecture, the creative individual provides the (mechanical) energy for the tools and simultaneously controls them. This situation appears even more obvious when we consider the functioning of the sole audio-visual instrument—the creative individual. Here all the elements in the scheme are united into one whole within the or-

ganic body of the creative individual (vertical dotted arrows).

This scheme grew more complicated when scientific and technological progress led to the emergence of artificial means of communication, on the basis of which new art forms came into being (Fig. 4). In this expanded scheme, two new components have been added to each channel: an amplifier (>), which is fed by an external (electrical) energy source, and a control block (CB), which coordinates the human manipulations in the control panel with the amplifiers. This relieves the creative individual of the need to provide the energy for the tools in favor of absolute freedom in terms of controlling the tools during sound and image reproduction. In both channels, the creative individual and the control panel can be replaced by storage.

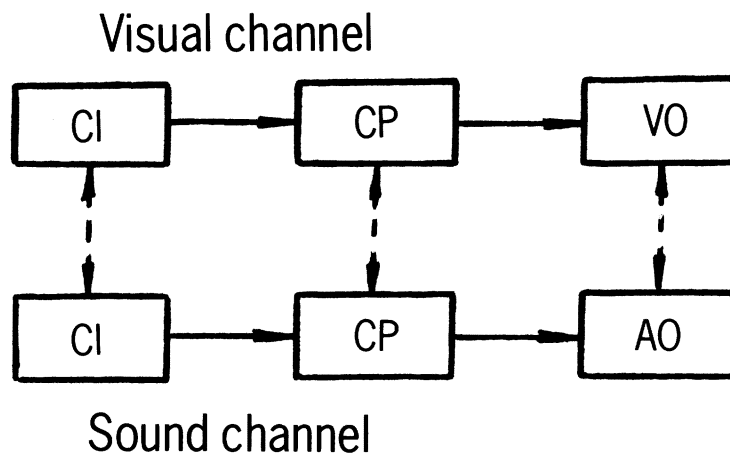
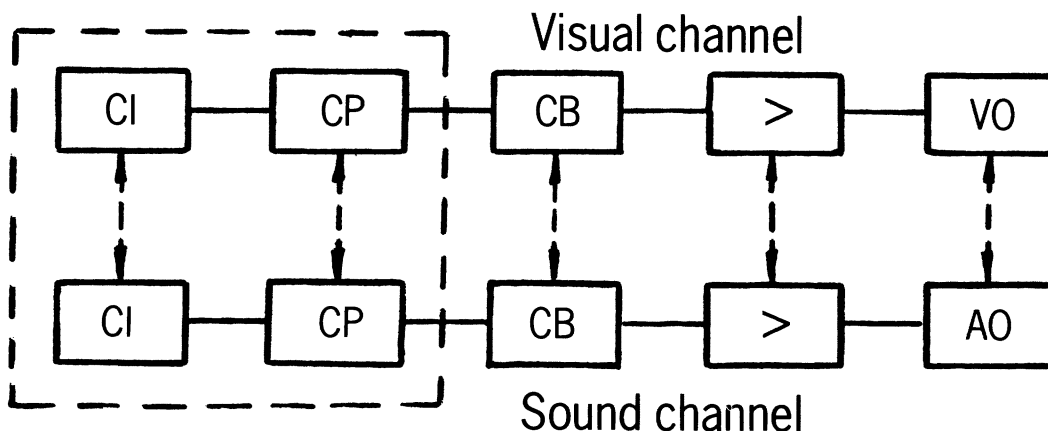


Fig. 3. Natural means of audio-visual communication. The interaction between the creative individual (CI) and both the acoustic output (AO) and the visual output (VO) is realized via the control panel (CP). The creative individual provides the (mechanical) energy for the tools of communication and simultaneously controls them.

Fig. 4. Artificial means of audio-visual communication. This expanded scheme includes two new components: an amplifier (>), which is fed by an external (electrical) energy source, and a control block (CB), which coordinates the creative individual's (CI) manipulations of the control panel (CP) with the amplifier.



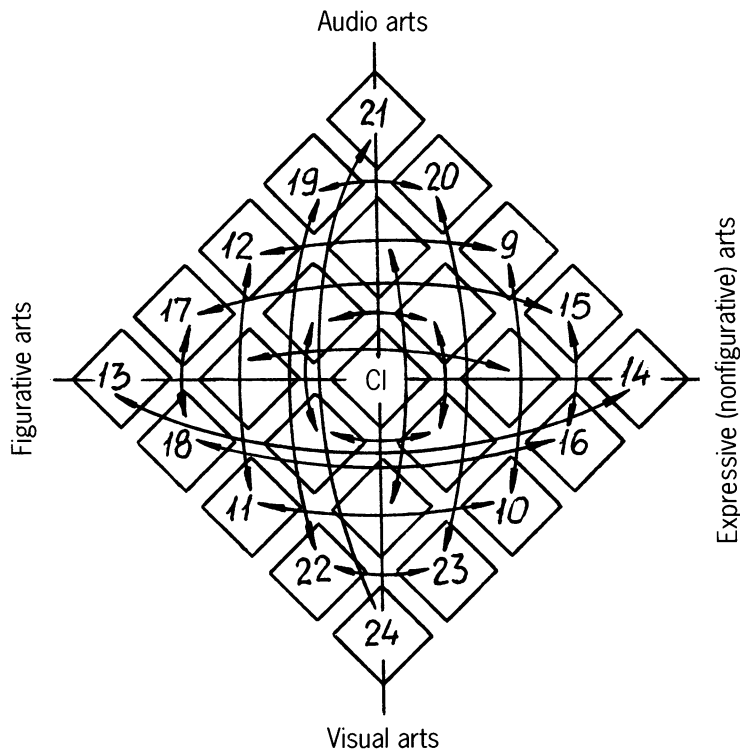


Fig. 5. An expanded classification system of the arts. As a result of scientific and technological progress in our modern age, a new layer of art forms has emerged: (9) sound recording, electronic music; (10) kinetic art (luminodynamics, video art, abstract cinema); (11) photography, cinematography, holography; (12) radio theater; (13) television; (14) music-kinetic art in concert; (15) space music; (16) labyrinth; (17) *Son et Lumière* performance; and (18) *Lanterna Magica*. Examples of bifunctional applied forms are: (19 + 20) aesthetization of the sound medium, (22 + 23) aesthetization of the light medium and (21 + 24) light and sound design.

The possibilities offered by this new technology were immediately put to use to satisfy growing artistic requirements. And so, side-by-side with the traditional arts, new art forms began to emerge, not copying the old arts but further developing their aims and possibilities as a result of the potential of the new means of audio-visual communication. Taken as a whole, they form the new outer layer of the system of arts (Fig. 5). By applying to this outer layer the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the system of the traditional arts, it becomes possible to identify the forms that emerge from the scheme illustrated in Fig. 4.

Briefly stated, these forms are: (9) sound recording, electronic music; (10) kinetic art (luminodynamics, video art, abstract cinema); (11) photography, cinematography, holography; (12) radio theater; (13) television; (14) music-kinetic art in concert; (15–18) sound and light scenography in musical and dramatic theater, revealed in such synthetic-entertainment forms as: (15)

space music, (16) labyrinth, (17) *Son et Lumière* performances and (18) *Lanterna Magica*. Examples of bifunctional applied forms are: (19 + 20) aesthetization of the sound medium and (22 + 23) aesthetization of the light medium. These are primarily exhibition and decorative arts, discotheques, light architecture, and sound and light performances in the open air. Light and sound design is located in panels 21 + 24.

An analysis of current practice shows that, parallel with the process of alienation of the artificial means of audio-visual communication used in the outer panels, the scheme of art forms under investigation preserves its unity only at the expense of a maximum increase in the intensity (tension) of the field of interkind interaction forces in it. Not being autonomous art forms, the majority of the forms of artistic activity singled out in the outer panels become viable only when they enter into the synthetic formations characterized by the action of the intrasystem ties just discussed (marked by arrows in Fig. 5).

The proposed scheme is internally rich in content. It elucidates the specific difference between cinematography and television, reveals in clear terms the character and technology of audio-visual synthesis in cinematography (11 + 12), and explains the inevitability of music-kinetic art finding expression in two specific forms: as a concert presented live (14) and on the cinema screen (9 + 10).

Within the scope of a short article, it is difficult to expound in detail the essence and heuristic potential of this 'periodic system' of the arts, as this proposed morphological scheme might be called with a touch of the author's self-irony. For example, the study of the nature of the functional asymmetry between the left and right half of my scheme is a separate problem [12]. Here, my intent has been to emphasize that as regards both the traditional arts and those of today, there exist inter-system ties that ensure the integrity of the expanding universe of the arts.

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11. Lenin [10] p. 316.
12. This problem is treated in B. M. Galejev, *Chelovek, iskusstvo, tekhnika: Problema sinestezii v iskusstve* (Man, art, technology: The problem of synaesthesia in art) (Kazan: Izd. KGU, 1987), and B. M. Galejev, S. M. Zorin and R. F. Sayfullin, *Svetomuzhkal'nye instrumenty* (Music-kinetic art instruments) (Moscow: Radio i svyaz, 1987).