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Lessing's *Laocoon* and the 'as-if' of aesthetic experience

'VIEL FEIND, VIEL EHR'

Is the German proverb 'Viel Feind, viel Ehr' ('many critics, much honour') more than a consolatory topos that comes in handy when our work has failed to convince our peers? If so, then the *Laocoon* ranks high among the texts proving its truth. It is simultaneously famous, arguably one of the most prominent treatises in the field of aesthetics, and the object of vehement criticism, even outright bashing. Only three years after the *Laocoon* came out, Herder published his first *Kritisches Wäldchen*, a response that, running over more than 250 pages in the original edition, is as disparaging as it is detailed.¹ More recent reception features attacks no less fierce. Critics have, in particular, unveiled the chauvinist agenda underlying Lessing's comparison of poetry with painting. There are strong nationalistic overtones, as Lessing, enlisting British authors such as Shakespeare and Milton as allies, rants against the decadent French who corrupt poetry through pictorialism.²

The entanglement of the aesthetic with political issues is palpable in the borderline-metaphor for the relation between poetry and painting:

But as two equitable and friendly neighbors do not permit the one to take unbecoming liberties in the heart of the other's domain, yet on their extreme frontiers practice a mutual forbearance by which both sides make peaceful compensation for those slight aggressions which, in haste and from force of circumstance, the one finds himself compelled to make on the other's privilege: so also with painting and poetry.³

The imagery used to illustrate the relation between poetry and painting seems to unmask the political program underlying an aesthetic argument.

¹ Herder 1993 (1769): 63–245.

² See especially Mitchell 1986: 105–06. On the nationalist agenda of the *Laocoon*, see also Gombrich 1957: 139.

³ Lessing 2012 (1766): 130 (English tr. 1984: 91): 'Doch, so wie zwey billige freundschaftliche Nachbarn zwar nicht verstatten, daß sich einer in des andern innerstem Reiche ungeziemende Freyheiten herausnehme, wohl aber auf den äussersten Grenzen eine wechselseitige Nachsicht herrschen lassen, welche die kleinen Eingriffe, die der eine in des andern Gerechtsame in der Geschwindigkeit sich durch seine Umstände zu thun genöthiget siehet, friedlich von beyden Theilen compensiret: so auch die Mahlerey und Poesie.'

Further agendas that are equally unpopular in current criticism map onto the political frontier in the *Laocoon*. It has been pointed out that the juxtaposition of painting and poetry is gendered: whereas the passive and beautiful bodies depicted by painting evoke the idea of femininity, the actions represented in poetry exude masculinity.⁴ The privileging of poetry over painting also bears out the Protestant esteem for the word and seems to reflect an Anti-Catholic bias. ‘There is’, as one critic (himself raised a Roman Catholic) puts it, ‘fear in the *Laocoon* that the visual might excite viewers into Catholicism...’⁵ Nationalistic, sexist and Protestant, a stronger *captatio malevolentiae* for critics today seems hard to come by.

The *Laocoon*’s argument has also proven open to challenge from the perspective of aesthetics. The paradigm of mimesis on which it is predicated began to lose its plausibility during Lessing’s lifetime.⁶ Seen less and less as imitation of the world, art was increasingly conceptualized as the expression of a creative subject. In the 20th century the linguistic turn and other theoretical approaches further discredited the idea of mimesis understood as a faithful representation of the world.

It has been noted that pictures are by no means confined to representing a single moment, as Lessing assumes.⁷ Counterexamples are easy to find, Poussin’s *Gathering of Manna* being a case in point [Fig. XX]: on the left, we see the starving Israelites, on the right, Israelites picking up the Manna. The two phases of the picture are spatially very close and intricately linked – there is a continuous group of Israelites rather than two distinct parties. In the foreground, for example, a young man leaning over an old man gestures to the right where others are busy picking up the Manna. Conversely, some of the figures who have already received the Manna turn to the left, seemingly to help those still suffering. Poussin’s painting illustrates that even the major Western tradition of painting harbors works which express a sequence through embedding more than one scene in a single frame.

However, Lessing’s assumption is not as arbitrary as it may seem; it is part and parcel of his notion of mimesis. For Lessing, pictorial representation hinges on the similarity of spatial relations. It mimics a spatial layout. Paintings that do not do so are like texts which describe objects in space.⁸ Just as such texts do not capitalize on the mimetic potential encapsulated in their sequential nature,

⁴ Cf. Mitchell 1986: 108–11; Gustafson 1993; Mattick 2003: 53–60. For a new take on gender in the *Laocoon*, see Gustafson (this volume).

⁵ Squire 2009: 107–11 (quotation from 109), with further comments in his chapter in this volume; cf. Mitchell 1986: 106.

⁶ Note that in emphasizing the imagination of the recipient, Lessing himself moves away from an understanding of mimesis that is defined as the imitation of the world. See, e.g., Halliwell 2002: 119.

⁷ E.g. Wolf 2002; Giuliani 2003: 29–34.

⁸ See, for example, Lessing 2012 (1766): 126 on texts that describe.

paintings representing more than one moment fail to deploy their mimetic means which are spatial ('means of imitation, which it can combine in space only'⁹). Lessing's idea of pictures as window-like is thus firmly rooted in his concept of mimesis. That being said, it is by no means self-evident, but a normative thesis that narrative and pictorial mimesis is temporal and spatial respectively.

If we turn from the content of representation to its reception, further challenges to Lessing's argument arise.¹⁰ We perceive words, sentences and stories sequentially, but we make sense of them synchronically.¹¹ In order to comprehend a sentence, we have to attend to its entire construction. When we interpret a tragedy, we envisage the plot in its entirety. Our processing of texts thus interweaves diachrony with synchrony. Inversely, neuro-cognitivists have confirmed that we do not process pictures in a single moment.¹² The area grasped by our eye is tiny, so the eye constantly jumps from one point to another. How long it takes to view a painting varies and ultimately defies definition, but viewing is not a simultaneous activity. Reception thus tinges pictures with sequence and poetry with simultaneity.

Our list of criticisms and counter-arguments could be extended. Still, I wish to make a case that the *Laocoon* merits our attention not only for historical reasons: its shortcomings notwithstanding, the *Laocoon* is a text that can still inspire theoretical discussions today. In this paper, I would like to show that nothing less than Lessing's association of poetry with time and painting with space can enhance our understanding of aesthetic experience.¹³ Of course, the flaws of Lessing's model will have to be kept in mind and will require some qualifications.

⁹ Lessing 2012 (1766): 114 (English tr. 1984: 77): 'Mittel ihrer Nachahmung, die sie nur im Raume verbinden kann'.

¹⁰ Cf. Torgovnik 1985: 31–6.

¹¹ For this observation in the context of a critical engagement with the *Laocoon*, see Stierle 1984: 46.

¹² Jarbus 1967 was seminal for explorations of eye-movement. More recently, see Land/Tatler 2009. Lessing 2012 (1766): 123 (English tr. 1984: 85-6) is not entirely unaware of the time needed for viewing a painting: 'We first look at its parts singly, then the combination of parts, and finally the totality.' ('Erst betrachten wir die Theile desselben einzeln, hierauf die Verbindung dieser Theile, und endlich das Ganze.'). But he adds: 'Our senses perform these various operations with such astonishing rapidity that they seem to us to be but one single operation, and this rapidity is absolutely necessary if we are to receive an impression of the whole, which is nothing more than the result of the conceptions of the parts and of their combination.' ('Unsere Sinne verrichten diese verschiedene Operationen mit einer so erstaunlichen Schnelligkeit, daß sie uns nur eine einzige zu seyn bedünken, und diese Schnelligkeit ist unumgänglich nothwendig, wann wir einen Begriff von dem Ganzen, welcher nichts mehr als das Resultat von den Begriffen der Theile und ihrer Verbindung ist, bekommen sollen.').

¹³ In Grethlein forthcoming, I tease out the ramifications of this Lessing interpretation for our understanding of aesthetic experience, using ancient narratives and pictures to put this approach to the test. For a different attempt to make the *Laocoon* fruitful for aesthetics today, see Gaiger 2013, who concentrates on the notion of imaginative freedom. See also Gaiger (this volume). Trabant (this volume) argues that the *Laocoon* juxtaposes *Poesie* and *Malerei* rather as twins than as hostile neighbours.

Nonetheless, Lessing's juxtaposition of poetry with painting is more than fodder for the deconstructivist furor of recent scholarship.¹⁴

Before I start, a clarifying word on terminology and concepts is in place. A modification of the frame of Lessing's argument as well as a shift of parameters is necessary for the use I would like to make of the *Laocoon's* ideas. This may irritate readers whose interest in the *Laocoon* is primarily historical, and yet, while twisting and tweaking Lessing's argument, such an engagement seems fully in the spirit of a text that establishes systematic claims.¹⁵

Beginning with Lessing's first readers, the terms of poetry and painting faced criticism.¹⁶ Herder noted that sequence and representation of action are not features specific to poetry.¹⁷ Lessing does not explicitly define 'Poesie', but his choice of examples implies that he thinks of metrically bound texts (and above all epic).¹⁸ It is however narrative, whether in verse or prose, that is most closely tied to time. The doubling of time at the level of representation and the level of represented that is key to Lessing's argument has been conceptualized in the dichotomy of narrative and narrated time: on the one hand, the action narrated takes time; on the other, its narration unfolds in time.¹⁹ This is not the place to enter into the debate whether this distinction provides a satisfying definition of narrative. For my purposes, it suffices that the doubling of time is without a doubt a salient aspect of narrative in a wide range of media such as oral speech, writing and film.

Even more puzzling than the deployment of poetry is the reference to 'Malerei' in a treatise that derives its name from a sculpture. As Nicolai observed in 1768: 'In my view, he considers painting not from the right perspective; he fails to distinguish it sufficiently from sculpture from which it is essentially different.'²⁰ Lessing deals not so much with painting as, more generally, with static visual artworks. To avoid confusion, I will speak of pictures. I will focus on pictorial representations that are two-dimensional, but my argument, *mutatis mutandis*, will also apply to sculpture.

¹⁴ See especially Mitchell 1986; 1994, and, for a concise summary, 1996.

¹⁵ See Gaiger 2011, taking Hegel's philosophy of art as his test-case, and providing a thought-provoking reflection on how historical and systematic inquiries can enrich each other.

¹⁶ Lessing 2012 (1766): 10 himself felt forced to comment on his terms.

¹⁷ Herder 1993 (1769): 191–200.

¹⁸ See Décultot (this volume) for the fascinating argument that the *Laocoon* itself, despite being a piece of criticism in prose, exhibits crucial features of poetry.

¹⁹ Müller 1968. Sternberg 1992 bases his definition of narrativity on the dynamic between narrative and narrated time.

²⁰ Nicolai in a letter to Eschenburg from November 24, 1768, Lessing (1974) 857: 'Meines Erachtens betrachtet er die Malerei nicht ganz aus dem rechten Gesichtspunkte, er unterscheidet sie nicht genug von der Bildhauerei, von der sie wesentlich unterschieden ist.'

I would thus like to replace Lessing's dichotomy of poetry and painting with that of narrative and picture. While not true to the letter of the *Laocoon*, this shift redefines the objects under discussion to fit Lessing's argument. The focus on narrative instead of on word or text in particular advances its plausibility. It will also pave the way for my attempt to demonstrate the significance of the time-space dichotomy for aesthetic experience.

My starting point will be one of the most comprehensive approaches in recent aesthetics. In his theory of 'make-believe', Kendall Walton shows that our response to representations is predicated on an 'as-if'.²¹ One of the points where Walton's theory falters is with regard to the differences in the 'make-believe' triggered by different forms of representation (II). Here, I will argue, Lessing's *Laocoon* can help if we are willing to change some of its parameters. This use of the *Laocoon* will lead us to an aspect of aesthetic experience where the time-space dichotomy proves fruitful. To make my case, I will draw on phenomenological theory, notably from Husserl for narrative and Wollheim for pictures (III).

WALTON'S 'MAKE-BELIEVE'

Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe* straddles the rigor of analytical philosophy and the breadth of the continental tradition.²² Both the reception and ontology of art are subjected to piercing scrutiny. The representational arts that are the object of Walton's investigation cover a wide field including novels and stories as well as visual and performative arts. The clue to Walton's theory, basic but seminal, is that he understands artistic representation as analogous with children's games. When children play, they plunge themselves into fictional worlds, adopting the identities of cops and robbers, princes and princesses, etc. In such games, children often use objects as 'props': tree-stumps, for example, are taken as bears, branches become guns and lawns figure as lakes. The representational arts, Walton proposes, invite us to participate in similar plays of 'make-believe'. Texts and paintings alike serve as 'props', immersing the recipient in fictional worlds.

The analogy between children's games and representational arts admittedly has its limits. 'Props' are often marginal in children's games, which can even do entirely without them. Artworks, on the other hand, are indispensable for the artistic generation of fictional worlds. The quality of representation that is crucial for the depth of an aesthetic experience plays a minor role for the significance of 'props'

²¹ This use of 'as-if' for the oscillation between immersion and reflection in our reception of representations is distinct from Vaihinger 1911, who deploys the idea of 'as-if' to explain the usefulness of scientific, religious and other models. On 'as-if', see also Saler 2012, who uses the term to explore our relation to the kind of imaginary worlds that started to emerge with Sherlock Holmes at the end of the 19th century.

²² Walton 1990. See, for example, the 'Book Symposium' in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 51 (2), 1991; Sutrop 2000.

when children play.²³ What makes the analogy so fertile though is the tension between immersion and distance. Children may scream and run away, but they do not actually believe that they are facing a bear. Similarly, the beholder of a painting sees shoes, but knows that what is in front of her is not a pair of actual shoes. While imagining Madame Bovary and her lover and being engrossed in their dispute, the reader is aware of attending to a story. Even in cinema, endowed with great immersive potential through the combination of picture and narrative and marshalling a vast technical apparatus, the flat screen reminds the viewer of the mediation taking place. It is one of Walton's major merits to pinpoint the role of the 'as-if' in the reception of a wide range of artworks. Novels, dramas, films, sculptures and painting are aligned by evoking worlds in which recipients delve without forgetting that what they are attending to is only a representation.

Taking some liberty, one could say that Walton reassesses Kant's notion of disinterestedness. Kant contrasts the free and disinterested pleasure ('*Wohlgefallen*') triggered by beautiful objects with the pleasure that pleasant ('*angenehme*') and good ('*gute*') objects instill in the subject.²⁴ The latter two interact with the '*Begehrungsvermögen*' and make the subject take interest in the existence of the object. In the case of beautiful objects, on the other hand, the subject feels pleasure by merely regarding the object without linking it to himself. It is the free and harmonious play of the cognitive faculties that gives the subject pleasure ('*Lust*'). Walton's approach envisages the detachment of the recipient differently. Not confined to beautiful objects, it is defined as the tension between immersion and distance. Artistic representations direct our attention to what they represent and simultaneously bracket this attention with the frame of 'as-if'.

Walton's approach is not without problems, however.²⁵ The issue that is most exigent for my purposes is that 'make-believe' seems to work differently in texts and pictures. Walton fails to account for this difference. In his argument, there is a bewildering asymmetry in that, while 'pictures are fiction by definition',²⁶ texts can be either fiction or non-fiction: 'It is not the function of biographies, textbooks and newspaper articles, as such, to serve as props in games of make-believe. They are used to claim truth for certain propositions rather than make propositions fictional.'²⁷ A confusion of different concepts of fiction seems to be at work here. Walton introduces fiction as synonymous with representations,²⁸ thus understanding it as 'things with the function of being props in games of make-believe'.²⁹ In this sense, pictures, even abstract ones as Walton argues, constitute fiction. Now when he considers biographies as non-fiction and

²³ Cf. Carroll 1991: 385–7.

²⁴ Kant 1793: 5–16.

²⁵ Besides the critique unfolded above, see, for example, the critical discussion of Walton's concept of 'quasi-fears' by Schaeffer 1999: 193 and Sutrop 2000: 219–20.

²⁶ Walton 1990: 351.

²⁷ Walton 1990: 351; 70. See also Ryan 2001: 108–10.

²⁸ Walton 1990: 3.

²⁹ Walton 1990: 53–4.

therefore rules them out as props, a different concept of fiction has crept in: fiction is here defined as referring to invented instead of real material.³⁰ The category of representation, however, cuts across this dichotomy: factual as well as fictitious stories are represented. Games of make-believe can immerse us in events that have actually taken place.

Walton himself seems to be not entirely comfortable with his exclusion of non-fictional texts; his discomfort becomes apparent when he admits that some histories, ‘written in such a vivid, novelistic style that they almost inevitably induce the reader to imagine what is said, regardless of whether or not he believes it’,³¹ can be read as fiction and thus serve as props in games of ‘make-believe’. Walton’s qualification, while still stuck in the confusion of different concepts of fiction, highlights that ‘make-believe’ is not confined to fictional (as opposed to factual) stories.

Even if we save Walton’s theory from the confusion generated by the Protean concept of fiction, the ‘make-believe’ of texts does not map onto the ‘make-believe’ of pictures. This problem comes to the fore in Walton’s discussion of deictic references to pictures. His example is Stephen pointing at a picture, namely *Shore at Scheveningen*, and saying ‘That is a ship.’³² Walton is mostly concerned with the semantics of this sentence, whether it refers to the picture or only to a specific part of it, to a fictitious entity or to the representation. Truly disconcerting, however, is the observation, raised only in passing, that nobody would refer to the description of Pequod in *Moby Dick* and say ‘That is a ship’ - although ‘Moby Dick is a ship-representation too, to which one can refer by pointing’.³³

‘The difference’, Marie-Laure Ryan points out, ‘resides in the fact that while paintings depict iconically, words signify conventionally.’³⁴ More poignantly, the role of sense perception in textual and pictorial games of ‘make-believe’ varies: whereas the signs of texts that we see trigger our imagination, the pictorial ‘make-believe’ is inherent in our perception of the painting.³⁵ While providing an impressive model that covers a wide range of representational arts, Walton glosses over the fundamental difference between the aesthetic experiences triggered by pictures and narratives. I will now try to show that the *Laocoon*, with some twisting, can help us better understand this difference.

³⁰ For a survey of various ideas of fiction, see Cohn 1999: 1–17.

³¹ Walton 1990: 71.

³² Walton 1990: 218–20.

³³ Walton 1990: 219.

³⁴ Ryan 2001: 107.

³⁵ This is the reason for which Wollheim rejects the notion of ‘make-believe’ as concept for pictures and, despite striking similarities, insists on his idea of ‘seeing-in’, cf. Wollheim 1991.

TIME AND SPACE IN AND BEYOND THE *LAOCOON*

As we have seen, Lessing's definition of poetry as temporal and of painting as spatial is problematic. It hinges on an idea of mimesis that conflicts with the practice of both poets and painters. Moreover, the reception of narrative and pictures disturbs the neat juxtaposition of space with time: the signs of language follow upon one another, and yet our understanding of them is also synchronic. Likewise, we do not view paintings in a single moment, but our eyes dart across the picture. Our response to both narrative and picture is premised on an intricate dialectic of synchronic and diachronic comprehension. That being said, I contend that the *Laocoon*'s juxtaposition of space and time holds good exactly at the point where Walton's concept of 'make-believe' falters. The 'as-if' of our response to narrative is primarily temporal, while the 'as-if' involved in pictorial seeing is primarily spatial. My use of 'primarily' here anticipates an important qualification: just as there may also be spatial aspects to the 'as-if' of narrative, pictures are capable of triggering a temporal 'as-if'. Before making this point though, the basic distinction between the narrative and pictorial forms of 'as-if' needs to be argued fully.

The temporal nature of the 'as-if' actuated by narrative can be elucidated with Husserl's analysis of the temporal structure of our consciousness. Leaving aside objective time, Husserl dissects time as it appears to us.³⁶ How, he wonders, is a temporal continuum constituted that consists of various phases? What secures the identity of '*Zeitobjekte*' 'that are not only unities in time but that also contain temporal extension themselves'?³⁷ A sound, Husserl's example of choice, starts, continues and fades, but nonetheless it appears to us as a single unit. The key to Husserl's answer is the notion of retention. Impressions make way for new impressions, but instead of simply vanishing, past impressions are retained in the modified form of retention. These retentions coexist with the actual impression that is itself about to be transformed into a retention including the retention of its own retentions:

The tone-now changes into a tone-having-been; the impressional consciousness, constantly flowing, passes over into ever new retentional consciousness. Going along the flow or with it, we have a continuous series of retentions pertaining to the beginning point.³⁸

³⁶ Husserl 1966 approaches the issue of objective time hesitatingly in §§30–33 on the basis of his phenomenological analysis.

³⁷ Husserl 1966: 23 (English tr. 1991: 24): '... die nicht nur Einheiten in der Zeit sind, sondern die Zeitextension auch in sich enthalten'.

³⁸ Husserl 1966: 29 (English tr. 1991: 31): 'Das Ton-Jetzt wandelt sich in Ton-Gewesen, das impressionale Bewußtsein geht ständig fließend über in immer neues retentionales Bewußtsein. Dem Fluß entlang oder mit ihm gehend, haben wir eine stetige zum Einsatzpunkt gehörige Reihe von Retentionen.'

Perception is thus not a mere point incapable of generating a continuum, but contains an ‘*Abschattungsreihe*’ (series of adumbrations) in which previous nows have sedimented.

Distinct from this continuously moving chain of retentions is memory or secondary retention. Memory is not the presence of nows that have just passed, but the representation of something that is not present anymore in the continuum of perception. This representation recalls not only the past moment to which our attention is directed, but also the chain of retentions of that passed moment. Husserl takes pains to set off the reproductive consciousness of memory from primary retention³⁹ as well as from phantasy, which does not relate to a past impression.⁴⁰

The goal of explaining the notion of continuum lets Husserl focus on retention, both primary and secondary, but he also introduces the concept of protention and expectation, though much more fleetingly. Protentions correspond to primary retentions just as expectations mirror memory. Our impressions have not only a chain of retentions retaining the impressions that have just passed, but also come with protentions, intentions of the consciousness that are directed towards what is to come.⁴¹ Likewise, besides recalling past impressions including its field of pro- and retentions, the consciousness can also produce images of the future.⁴² Husserl introduces the notion of protention only when he discusses the ‘*Erwartungsintentionen*’ (expectation-intentions) in memory⁴³ and elaborates on expectation only by comparing it with memory,⁴⁴ and yet for a systematic analysis of the temporal dynamic of consciousness the orientation to the future is as important as the openness to the past. Heidegger, replacing Husserl’s focus on perception with his emphasis on ‘*Sorge*’ (care), would even privilege the future dimension.

Now, the value of Husserl’s *Vorlesungen zur Struktur des inneren Zeitbewußtseins* for my argument is that it also describes the process by which we receive stories.⁴⁵ When we follow narrative, our consciousness directs its series of pro- and retentions to the linguistic signs and the action they convey. While our memory can evoke parts of the plot that have already faded from the present series of adumbrations, expectations arise as to the further course of the plot. Differently from real-life experiences, however, our attention to the plot is framed by our awareness of attending to a representation. No matter how much the story entices us, our real-life environment remains present as the horizon to our experiencing of the narrative world. The intensity of immersion varies

³⁹ Husserl 1966: §§19–22.

⁴⁰ Husserl 1966: §23.

⁴¹ Husserl 1966: §24: 52–3.

⁴² Husserl 1966: §26: 55–7.

⁴³ Husserl 1966: §24.

⁴⁴ Husserl 1966: §26.

⁴⁵ Cf. Grethlein 2010; 2015a; forthcoming ch. 2.

significantly, but there is always a residuum of distance balancing immersion in aesthetic experience.

The vicarious nature of our experience of narrated worlds is a point that is fully captured by Walton. But what Walton does not note – and what we find in the *Laocoon* – is the specific character of the ‘as-if’. Lessing’s juxtaposition of *Poesie* with *Malerei* encapsulates the crucial point. The association of *Poesie* with time paves the way for the insight that the narrative ‘as-if’ is directed to the temporal extension of our consciousness. When we follow a narrative, then it is first and foremost the field of our pro- and retentions that is bracketed.

But doesn’t this temporal structure define our consciousness in general, regardless of the object of our attention? If so, doesn’t it therefore also apply to our viewing of a picture? Indeed, the sequence of eye-movements in which we take in a picture, while less defined than the fixed sequence of signs constituting a narrative,⁴⁶ embraces a series of adumbrations. However, and this is decisive, the ‘as-if’ of an aesthetic experience generated by a picture is not directed to this set of pro- and retentions. Here, as Lessing’s understanding of *Malerei* suggests, the ‘as-if’ refers to space. Richard Wollheim’s concept of ‘seeing-in’ can help us grasp its distinct character.

Wollheim develops his theory of pictorial seeing in a critique of Gombrich’s illusion-theory.⁴⁷ Gombrich adduces the notorious drawing that can be seen either as a duck or as a rabbit as evidence for his thesis that we see either the canvas or the object represented, but never both simultaneously. The example of the duck-rabbit, however, made famous by its discussion in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, has no bearing on the dichotomy of canvas and object of representation. The choice between rabbit and duck is mutually exclusive indeed: one can see only either, but it is a choice between two different objects of representation, not between representing object and represented object. In his ‘twofold thesis’, Wollheim argues that it is not only possible, but necessary to attend simultaneously to the object of a representation and its material features.⁴⁸ Seeing pictures is based on ‘a special perceptual capacity, which presupposes, but is something over and above, straightforward perception’.⁴⁹ This special mode of perception is labeled as ‘seeing-in’: when we see an object in a picture, we are aware of the canvas as well as the represented object.

Wollheim subsequently refined his model of ‘seeing-in’. Initially, he introduced seeing a *represented* object and seeing a *representing* object as two experiences. Later, he treated them as ‘two aspects of a single experience that I have’.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Giuliani 2003: 27–9.

⁴⁷ Wollheim ²1980: 213–14; 1987: 46 n. 6.

⁴⁸ Wollheim ²1980: 215–16.

⁴⁹ Wollheim ²1980: 216.

⁵⁰ Wollheim 1987: 46; cf. 2001: 20.

‘Discerning something in the marked surface’, on the one hand, is the ‘recognitional aspect’, ‘our awareness of the marked surface itself’, on the other, is the ‘configurational aspect’.⁵¹ ‘The two aspects are distinguishable but also inseparable.’⁵² While the two aspects can be described in analogy with the separate single experiences, they are ultimately incommensurable with them.

What is crucial for my argument is that the ‘as-if’ of pictorial seeing hinges on the simultaneous attention to the represented object and the representing object.⁵³ It is thus not temporal, but spatial: the attention that is bracketed by ‘as-if’ is directed to an object in space. The tableau, for example, lets us see a three-dimensional scene in a two-dimensional surface. For all its differences – while working in a three- rather than two-dimensional space – sculpture is also predicated on a spatial ‘as-if’. We see in statues not only the surface but the body with its muscles, bones and veins. While being aware of having a stone in front of us, we apprehend a full-blown body. Richard Neer makes the point nicely in his discussion of Greek statues from the Classical period: ‘Seeing a sculpted garment, we tend automatically to imagine that it covers a body, even as we know that it does not.’⁵⁴

As with narrative, Lessing’s *paragone* leads the way, this time binding up pictures with space. The spatial nature of *Malerei* for which Lessing argues gestures to the distinct character of the aesthetic experience pictures provoke. If we read a novel, we also look at an object, the book in our hands; here, however, the ‘as-if’ of our aesthetic experience does not qualify our perception of the book, but our imagination of the action narrated. In both cases, our attention is suffused with a residual awareness of the ontological status of its object, but the vicarious character of the experience is different. While narratives let us experience an action *when* it is not taking place, pictures let us see something *where* it is not. The reception of pictures and narrative is both synchronic and diachronic, and yet both forms of presentation provoke a distinct form of ‘as-if’.

The *Laocoon* also encapsulates the qualification that we now have to make: our response to pictures can imply a temporal ‘as-if’ just as narratives can trigger a spatial ‘as-if’. Lessing emphasizes the significance of the moment chosen to be depicted in painting: ‘But only that which gives free rein to the imagination is

⁵¹ Wollheim 1987: 73; cf. 2001: 20.

⁵² Wollheim 1987: 46.

⁵³ Note that I only accept Wollheim’s analysis of the reception of pictures. Wollheim’s intentionalist frame – he defines the object of ‘seeing-in’ by the intention of the artist – is as problematic as unnecessary: we can also ‘see in’ objects that are not shaped by human hands: we sometimes see animals and other beings in clouds and on rocks. Cf. Grethlein forthcoming ch. 5.

⁵⁴ See Neer 2010: 104–41 (quotation from p.5).

effective. The more we see, the more we must be able to imagine.⁵⁵ It seems to be the before and after in particular of which Lessing is thinking here:

However, bodies do not exist in space only, but also in time. They persist in time, and in each moment of their duration they may assume a different appearance or stand in a different combination. Each of these momentary appearances and combinations is the result of a preceding one and can be the cause of a subsequent one, which means that it can be, as it were, the center of an action. Consequently, painting too can imitate actions, but only by suggestion through bodies.⁵⁶

A ‘pregnant’ moment, in particular, will incite the viewer to conjecture about what has happened before and what is to follow. She will thus in her consciousness form pro- and retentions that refer to the represented scene. Note, however, that this temporal ‘as-if’ is derivative.⁵⁷ It depends on the spatial ‘as-if’. Only after seeing a scene on the canvas can the onlooker speculate about the temporal sequence in which it is embedded. This holds true even for pictures the very point of which seems to be narrative, for example the works by Hogarth frequently invoked for the purposes of an intermedial narratology.⁵⁸ The title, well-known motives and indexical representation all prompt the onlooker to think about the larger action of which the depicted scene forms part. Before conjecturing about the full action, however, the spectator needs to ‘see in’ the canvas the represented scene. The secondary status of the temporal ‘as-if’ in the response to pictures is highlighted by the fact that not all pictures trigger pro- and retentions referring to the represented scene. Many still lifes, for instance, lack a ‘narrative sting’ and present only a setting.

Visual studies have drawn our attention to the great variety of modes of viewing. Vision is defined ‘in terms of class, gender, sexual and racialized identities’.⁵⁹ While not preceding the culturally specific mode of viewing, ‘seeing-in’, it seems,

⁵⁵ Lessing 2012 (1766): 26 (English tr. 1984: 19): ‘Dasjenige aber nur allein ist fruchtbar, was der Einbildungskraft freyes Spiel läßt. Je mehr wir sehen, desto mehr müssen wir hinzu denken können.’

⁵⁶ Lessing 2012 (1766): 115 (English tr. 1984: 78): ‘Doch alle Körper existiren nicht allein in dem Raume, sondern auch in der Zeit. Sie dauern fort, und können in jedem Augenblicke ihrer Dauer anders erscheinen, und in anderer Verbindung stehen. Jede dieser augenblicklichen Erscheinungen und Verbindungen ist die Wirkung einer vorhergehenden, und kann die Ursache einer folgenden, und sonach gleichsam das Centrum einer Handlung seyn. Folglich kann die Mahlerey auch Handlungen nachahmen, aber nur andeutungsweise durch Körper.’

⁵⁷ Mitchell’s argument against a difference of kind between time and space in picture and word is in many regards different from my argument (1986: 95–115). He concentrates on reception, medium, and content in general. Moreover, my focus on narrative is different from his focus on word. That being said, Mitchell’s relies on a sleight of hand when he bases his argument on the rejection of the dichotomy of ‘indirect’ vs. ‘direct’ (101–02). It is indeed unfortunate to use this dichotomy when speaking of representation, but this does not detract from the value of the observation that space and time play different roles in pictures and texts.

⁵⁸ Cf. Grethlein forthcoming ch. 5; Wolf 2002.

⁵⁹ Mirzoeff 1999: 4.

forms part of all different modes of viewing pictures. The Hindu receiving ‘*darshan*’ from the exchange of gazes with a representation of Shiva engages in a different activity from the European who looks at the same picture in an art exhibition. But while interacting with the deity in the picture, the beholder ‘sees’ the divinity ‘in’ the picture. She has to recognize the represented in the representation. The pigments on wood, including two symmetrical dark circles with white circles around them, are not seen as such; rather they represent the eyes of a divinity from which the blessing emanates. The reverential gaze involves the same process of ‘seeing-in’ as that of a European art connoisseur comparing the eyes of Shiva with the calculating eyes of a merchant portrayed by Jan van Eyck. As Davis points out: ‘Some things are cultural about vision. But not everything.’⁶⁰

When we turn to narrative, Lessing, his emphasis on the sequential character of narrative notwithstanding, allows for the representation of bodies:

On the other hand, actions cannot exist independently, but must be joined to certain beings or things. Insofar as these beings or things are bodies, or are treated as such, poetry also depicts bodies, but only by suggestion through actions.⁶¹

Involving bodies, the narration of action brings the recipient not only to attend to its sequence, but also to imagine spatial settings. And yet, the spatial ‘as-if’ is only grafted on the temporal ‘as-if’.

This may sound surprising, for there are texts that only describe and therefore primarily or exclusively induce a spatial ‘as-if’. Here, however, it is important to distinguish the medium of language from narrative as a mode of representation. Language can be used for description as well as narrative, but whereas description, in the canonical definition, is static,⁶² narrative represents an action in a sequential medium. Since stories seem to require agents, it is hard to imagine narratives without spatial ‘as-if’. And yet, due to the form of narrative, the temporal ‘as-if’ is primary. The recipient retains the fading signs and anticipates the coming ones, thereby attending to the action which involves a spatial setting.

While in need of qualification, the emphasis on time in the *Laocoon* can serve as a helpful corrective to a trend in current literary studies.⁶³ Cognitive scholars in

⁶⁰ Davis 2011: 8.

⁶¹ Lessing 2012 (1766): 115 (English tr. 1984: 78): ‘Auf der andern Seite können Handlungen nicht für sich selbst bestehen, sondern müssen gewissen Wesen anhängen. In so fern nun diese Wesen Körper sind, oder als Körper betrachtet werden, schildert die Poesie auch Körper, aber nur andeutungsweise durch Handlungen.’

⁶² Genette 1969: 56–61. For a more recent intermedial take on description, see Wolf and Bernhart 2007.

⁶³ Cf. Grethlein 2015b with the responses by Palmer, Fludernik and Ryan in the same volume; 2015c.

particular have taken a strong interest in the means by which narrative establishes presence and entices readers. Most of them emphasize mind-reading as essential to the reader's engagement with narrative, some even contrast presence with plot.⁶⁴ However, as the Husserlian approach sketched above illustrates, time is crucial to how readers respond to narrative. Besides the portrayal of characters, action has the capacity to adsorb readers. Both are in fact tightly interwoven with each other, as the plot features protagonists whose characters are revealed in the course of the action.

Lessing's idea of action in the *Laocoon*, however, is disturbingly weak.⁶⁵ He defines the action to be represented in poetry merely as a sequence,⁶⁶ but a comment in the *Paralipomena* indicates an awareness that more than pure sequence is at stake: 'A series of movements which aim at a final telos is called an action.'⁶⁷ Surely one can recount simple sequences, but the immersive narratives of which Lessing thinks have plots. In *Vom Wesen der Fabel*, published in 1759, Lessing himself had harked back to Aristotle, arguing that an action is 'a sequence of changes which together form a whole'.⁶⁸ Furthermore, narrative time not only mimics narrated time, it may also reconfigure it in order to establish what Sternberg calls the three master tropes of narrative: suspense, curiosity and surprise.⁶⁹ Defining action as sequence is insufficient, for most narrative, and especially the kind of narrative Lessing envisages, features a plot. Nonetheless, despite this qualification, the *Laocoon's* focus on time as defining feature of poetry highlights an aspect of narrative that the current infatuation with fictional minds is in danger of sidelining.

Seen from a different perspective, Lessing's approach ties in nicely with so-called second generation cognitive studies in narrative. Drawing on research into the embodied nature of perception, scholars such as Troscianko argue that the reader's imagination is triggered more strongly by enactive narratives than detailed descriptions.⁷⁰ An account of the movements of the protagonists is more effective in 'transporting' the reader to scene of the action than a minute vignette. The representation of action, it seems, is crucial to the imagination of space. This

⁶⁴ Palmer 2004; 2010 and Zunshine 2006 are prominent advocates of 'fictional minds'. Presence is contrasted with plot for example in Kuzmičová 2012: 33.

⁶⁵ Cf. Giuliani 1996: 21-3.

⁶⁶ Lessing 2012 (1766): 115: 'Gegenstände, die auf einander, oder deren Theile auf einander folgen, heissen überhaupt Handlungen.'

⁶⁷ Lessing 2012 (1766): 220: 'Eine Reihe von Bewegungen, die auf einen Endzweck abzielen, heißet eine Handlung.'

⁶⁸ Lessing 1997 (1759): 357: 'eine Folge von Veränderungen, die zusammen Ein Ganzes ausmachen'.

⁶⁹ Sternberg 1992; Grethlein forthcoming ch. 2.

⁷⁰ Troscianko 2014. From a phenomenological perspective, see Grünbaum 2007. For a survey of second-generation cognitive studies in narrative, see the special issue of *Style* 48, 2014. For an attempt to distil the most important points of enactment theory for literary analysis, see Grethlein/Huitink 2017.

insight is implied and given a normative twist in Lessing's idea that narrative should focus on action in order to fire the imagination of the recipient.

By no means are narrative and picture necessarily separate from each other. There are representational arts that combine narrative with picture, film being the obvious case. If a sequence of pictures is used to represent a sequential action, then spatial and temporal forms of 'as-if' are interwoven. The spectator follows an *action where* it is not taking place. On the one hand, the pictures on the screen are premised on a spatial 'as-if', on the other, their sequence triggers a temporal 'as-if'. While pictures can graft a temporal 'as-if' on their primary spatial 'as-if' and the temporal 'as-if' of narrative encapsulates a spatial 'as-if', film combines both forms of 'as-if' in a way that makes it hard to give priority to either.

Lessing, it seems, envisaged dramatic performance as a medium capable of establishing a particularly strong effect on the audience. Not only do words represent words on stage and thereby become natural signs, but movements and gestures are also represented by movements and gestures themselves. Beside the temporal 'as-if' of the action, there is also the 'as-if' of actors who are not identical with their roles. In both cases, arbitrary signs have become natural signs. It is therefore not surprising that Lessing intended to tackle drama as the 'highest genre of poetry' in a third part of the *Laocoon*.⁷¹

To be clear, the reflection on the different forms of 'as-if' just sketched cannot be found in the *Laocoon*. Lessing does comment on the effect of art on its audience, but he does not note any differences between the 'illusions' created by poets and painters.⁷² What is more, contrary to the concept of 'as-if' used here, Lessing seems to believe that poetry is able to generate a complete immersion that, at least for a moment, is not balanced anymore by distance. Elaborating on what distinguishes the poet from other authors, he asserts that the poet:

wants rather to make the ideas he awakens in us so vivid that at that moment we believe that we feel the real impressions which the objects of these ideas would produce on us. In this moment of illusion we should cease to be conscious of the means which the poet uses for this purpose, that is, his words.⁷³

⁷¹ Quotation from a letter to Nicolai dating to May 26, 1769 (2012: 271). On drama and the planned third part of the *Laocoon*, see Vollhardt 2012: 445-6. For the conceptual problems to which this third part would have lead, see Nisbet 2008: 431.

⁷² E.g. Lessing 2012 (1766): 7; 123-4.

⁷³ Lessing 2012 (1766): 123 (English tr. 1984: 85): '... will die Ideen, die er in uns erwecket, so lebhaft machen, daß wir in der Geschwindigkeit die wahren sinnlichen Eindrücke ihrer Gegenstände zu empfinden glauben, und in diesem Augenblicke der Täuschung, uns der Mittel, die er dazu anwendet, seiner Worte bewußt zu seyn aufhören'. Strube 1971: 112 with n. 1 notes that this idea converges with Mendelssohn's discussion of aesthetic illusion in *Hauptgrundsätze*. On Lessing's concept of imagination, see now van Laack 2014. See also Gaiger (this volume),

In the *Laocoon*, the dichotomy of space and time is applied to signs and objects. In order to enter a *'bequemeres Verhältnis'* with the representing signs, the object of narrative should be action, a temporal sequence, and the object of pictures should be bodies, i.e. figures in space. I have thus transferred the time-space dichotomy from the represented objects and the representing signs to the response of the recipient. This modification notwithstanding, it is Lessing's intuition that has helped us clarify an important point about aesthetic experience. Both pictures and narrative elicit from us responses that are predicated on an 'as-if'. However, the pictorial 'as-if' is primarily spatial, while the narrative 'as-if' is primarily temporal. The dialogue staged here between Lessing and Walton illustrates the undiminished value of the *Laocoon*. Lessing's argument surely needs to be historically contextualized, its essentialism obviously invites deconstructivist readings; at the same time, if we approach it with the kind of flexibility that its Protean form invites, the *Laocoon* is a fountain of aesthetic reflection that has yet to dry up.

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