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Why Doesn't Laocoön Scream?
Autopoiesis in Art

Abstract: Lessing famously poses the question "Why doesn't the marble Laocoön scream?" to draw the constitutive difference between painting and poetry as based on the specific nature of their media. I argue that while his reasoning is ill-founded *contentwise*, it is also *structurally* sound and, as such, might be extended to the whole of experience. Here, it establishes what might be called its *narrative model*. Focusing mainly on drama and music, I contrast this model with the *causal model* of experience employed particularly in the positive sciences and claim that they are not exclusive but embedded in a dialectical way. Against this background, I take the narrative model to manifest the *autopoietic nature* of experience and the joint role that both causality and narrativity play in it.

Keywords: Lessing; Hegel; autopoiesis; narrativity; emplotment; music

1 Introduction

In his *Laocoön; or the Limits of Poetry and Painting*,[1] Lessing takes the Vatican Laocoön group and asks why the depicted figure of Laocoön, in a situation of obvious agony, does not scream. In answering this, he arrives at what he interprets as the substantial difference between two types of art: painting and poetry. Unlike poetry, Lessing argues, paintings lack the temporal dimension, and thus, in dealing with actions, must create the required effect by spatial means. These consist in creating tension between the executed moment (the here and now) and the moment to be stipulated so that we can get the given piece of art right. And that is why the depicted Laocoön does not scream as he should, showing, instead, what seems to be an expression of rather mild discomfort.

I find the given explanation compelling if only because of its *structural* rather than purely *descriptive* nature, as represented by Lessing's main antagonist Johann Joachim Winckelmann and his *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek*

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1 In the following, I am using the English translation Lessing (1836) and the *Studienausgabe* (Lessing 2012) of the 1766 original.

Works in Painting and Sculpture.[2] As such, it can be used for epistemological purposes and linked to what I would call a *narrative model of experience.* – At first, of course, "narrative model" is just a fancy term representing the rejection of the standard theories of truth based on the correspondence between the cognition and the cognised matter. I call it the *causal model of experience*, with an extended use of the word "causal". So, for example, Winckelmann's competing explanation that Laocoön's expression depicts the nature of the Greek spirit that is too noble to scream might be called causal in this sense.

I will arrive at the full-fledged narrative model later, in connection with identifying the main shortcoming in Lessing's argument in the underlying *homogeneity principle.* According to this, the temporal and spatial structure of the given media is directly transferred to the depicted objects as well. This is easily shown to be unsustainable, obscuring the essential point of Lessing's structural analysis. Based on examples from other temporal arts such as music and drama, I elaborate on this point, transposing it, first, to the art in general, and second, to the experience as such. Along this line, the narrative model turns out to manifest the experience's *autopoietic* nature and, most importantly, the specific role of art in it.[3]

2 Homogeneity Scrutinised

What I would like to call the *homogeneity principle* is fully expressed in section 16 of Lessing's *Essay* (1836, pp. 150 – 151):

> Now, as it is evident that the signs employed must bear a suitable relation to the things represented, it follows that those signs which are arranged in juxtaposition with each other, can only express co-existent objects, or an object whose parts are co-existent, while those signs which are consecutive, can only express things which, either of themselves, or in their component parts, are consecutive.

> Those objects which are co-existent, or whose parts are co-existent, are called bodies; consequently bodies, with their visible properties, are legitimate subjects of painting. Those things, on the contrary, which are consecutive, or whose parts are consecutive, are termed, generally speaking, actions. Actions are therefore the legitimate subjects of poetry.

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2 See Winckelmann (1986) for the new English translation of the 1755 original, and the modern German edition in Winckelmann (2013).

3 The basic structure of my argument and some of the examples used here draw on my Czech article Kolman (2017), which outlined a related distinction between causal and intentional explanations.

Thus, the *spatial* signs represent legitimately, via their own *juxtaposition*, the *co-existent* objects, or *bodies*, and, the *temporal* signs, via their own *consecutiveness*, the *consecutive* objects, or *events*. The given conclusion quickly follows. Because of the described "legitimacy", the painting cannot represent things directly, but by a detour, via the moment of action "which is at once expressive of the past, and pregnant with the future" (Lessing 1836, p. 152). This is why Laocoön does not scream or, inversely, why Homer depicts Agamemnon's robe via a description of the king dressing with it (Lessing 1836, p. 156).

The homogeneity principle stipulates the direct link between the arrangement of the representations and the nature of what is represented, inferring from this the object's legitimacy. What begs the question now is how the juxtaposition of signs on a page make them co-existent rather than consecutive. In a musical score, for example, they can be both, and we in fact owe the enterprise of polyphony and the whole modern development of the musical action to the possibilities of its spatial arrangement. By way of convention, the horizontal order stands for consecutive events and the vertical for co-existent ones. From this, of course, the inseparability of both forms of intuition in the aesthetical dimensions might be inferred, for which Adorno (1978) and Scruton (1997), to name a couple of examples, argue in some detail.[4]

But it is not necessary to get proto-Einsteinian here to identify the homogeneity principle's main weakness. In fact, one can easily make do with elementary Kant, arguing thusly: To see the Laocoön group as representing something, I have to understand it, which is already an action. As such, it consists not only in the basic apprehension of the sensuous matter, but in capturing its representational meaning. Otherwise, I cannot even phrase the difference between the sequence of representations and the representation of sequence. And this is what the apperception is for. Its role, as known from Kant's *Critiques*, is delicate, standing for both the reflectivity of the human mind as well as its productive and reproductive nature.

The central point is this: In order to see the Laocoön group *as* a statue, I not only register the given data, but also take into account the other side that I do

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4 Adorno's paper is rather straightforward in this, pointing out not only the interconnected nature of spatial thinking with the temporal medium of music (the symphonies of Bruckner being a rather obvious example), but also that "the act of notation is essential to art of music, not incidental. Without writing there can be no highly organized music; the historical distinction between improvisation and *musica composita* coincides qualitatively with that between laxness and musical articulation" (Adorno 1995, p. 70). As for Scruton, his concept of musical aesthetics is based on the idea that spatial metaphor is a point of difference between a mere acoustical experience and a musical one. See particularly Scruton (1997, pp. 73–77).

not actually see, using the power of my imagination. By analogy, one might say, in order to see the statue as a piece of art rather than a piece of marble, I must see Laocoön as screaming even if he is not. Thus, what Lessing has shown is not the spatial dependency of painting but the ability of art to bring cognition's productivity to a higher and more transparent level.

3 Counterexamples

Now, I do not claim there is not some real and vital difference between *Zeit-* and *Raumkunst*. The problem of the artistic *falsum*, for that matter, might serve as an example here simply because temporal art, unlike paintings and sculptures, seems to be rather indifferent to it. What the previous objections have shown, though, is that the homogeneity principle and the argument based on it does not work. The structural part of Lessing's explanation, on the other hand, is not affected and might be extended to the whole of art and, later, to the whole of experience. Allow me to focus on the former extension first.

The structural part of Lessing's argument might be phrased like this: The aesthetical quality of the piece of art, no matter whether of spatial or temporal kind, consists in creating tension between what might be called the *executed gesture*, in the here and now, and the gesture that I expect, in my intention. Let me call it the *intended gesture*. The executed gesture is introduced more or less causally, pertaining to the spatiotemporal dimension of the given piece of art; the intended gesture is defined by the overall context, such as the mythological narrative or the musical style in which Laocoön's figure or this or that musical piece is situated.

The purpose of this rephrasing is, primarily, to make the overall temporalisation of the spatial (as anticipated by Kant) understood in its intended generality. Thus, we can still think of the given difference as that of the executed moment that is pregnant enough to evoke something not present but intended. But we are also invited to take into account the underlying social nature of all knowledge so as to arrive at the full-fledged narrative model of experience. Now, to illustrate all these points, let me start with the musical drama as something both substantially different from painting and, for terminology's sake, almost excessively gestic. I will provide three counterexamples to Lessing's homogeneity principle by meeting the given structural condition of executed vs. intended gesture while being increasingly temporal and decreasingly spatial.

Counterexample 1 (Strauss' *Elektra*)

For a start, let me take Strauss' and Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*. In all the relevant scenes, including Elektra's invocation of Agamemnon, her digging out the axe or her final dance of victory and death, the gestures are suggested almost graphically by music. But, obviously, they would also easily turn into nothing or become just painful if treated too literally. Good artists usually know that aiming for the effect is not dissimilar to that of the Laocoön sculpture. So, in Kupfer's Vienna production under Abbado's baton (Wiener Staatsoper 1989, cond. Claudio Abbado, Arthaus 2009), there is, for example, the following memorable detail: After agonising expectations of Orest's coming, filling more than half of the opera, Elektra finally recognises her brother. The music culminates, loud and slow, with a protracted phrase suggesting the siblings' intention to embrace each other. But exactly when this is about to happen, Kupfer has them pass each other, thus amplifying the theatrical effect. The similar effect is achieved at the very end of the opera where, after the murder of her mother and her mother's lover, Elektra executes her dance of victory and, at the height of it, falls dead. Again, the attempts at dancing to Strauss' broken rhythmic figures would lead to a rather choreic and often painful experience. Kupfer's solution, on the other hand, is to let Elektra follow the rhythm only partially, based on the trajectory of the rope attached to the remnants of Agamemnon's statue. The result is both adequately expressive and expressively stimulating, leading quite naturally to the protracted moment of Elektra's death.

Counterexample 2 (Verdi's *Il trovatore*)

For the second example, by way of contrast, consider Stölzl's Berlin production of *Il Trovatore* (Staatsoper Berlin 2013, cond. Daniel Barenboim, Deutsche Grammophon 2014). Here, all the suggested gestures *are* executed to the last detail, which balances on the verge of ludicrousness. But this is obviously for a reason: The performance is conceived in the style of *commedia dell'arte*, including costumes and the combination of morbidity and grotesque. Hence, the same principle is taken advantage of, so to say, on the higher level, thus showing its general flexibility.

Counterexample 3 (Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*)

Finally, let us switch to the medium of music only, including its absolute variant. Nothing is more temporal and less pictorial than music, at least according to Lessing's original standards. But one can argue, as Leonard B. Meyer (1956, p. 14) did, that music's meaning arises only from the tension between the expectations evoked (such as the regular rhythm, the key, standard cadence etc.) and their intentional violations (syncopation, modulation, deceptive cadences etc.). As an easily recallable example, take the melodic line from the *Ode to Joy*, contrasting the basic melody (the intended gesture) with its subsequent syncopation (the executed one), as coming with "*Alle Menschen werden Brüder*". Since both gestures are, in fact, executed here consecutively, let me, for the sake of generality, consider also the beginning of Beethoven's *Fate* Symphony (Fig. 1):
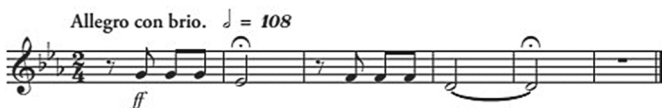

Fig. 1: Beethoven's *Fate* Symphony

As Ball (2010, p. 217) points out, it starts with a downbeat put on a rest. Gesturally, this is easily describable as the raising of Fate's hand in order to strike, but the point is that one is supposed to hear something which is not causally there but arises exactly from the interplay of the executed and the intended gesture.

I will not go further here, just stressing that Lessing's structural analysis can be easily transposed to other instances of *Zeitkunst*, showing it is not the underlying temporality but the superimposed contrastive structure that makes the difference. In this, the sensuous, causal part of music plays an important role (it is important to hear the music here and now, or to be right there, as in the theatrical performance). But it is not the decisive factor in making music aesthetically relevant. The internal contrast between two kinds of gestures is.

4 The Narrative Model and Positive Sciences

After the given series of counterexamples, the Laocoön example might be easily applied to the positive sciences, that is to experience in general: as a kind of manifestation that there is more to reality than what might be seen with the naked eye. So, contrary to Brecht's *Life of Galileo* and in accord with Feyera-

bend's *Against Method*,[5] you cannot just see how planets move in the sky, no matter how good your telescope is, if only because for many of them it takes hundreds of years to complete the orbit. In fact, you cannot see anything unless you come up with some additional hypothesis, as both Aristotle and Kepler did. Hegel's (in)famous "so much the worse for reality" that he allegedly said when told that his dissertation *De orbitis planetarum* (Hegel 1801) contradicts reality,[6] expresses just this, leading to the complex rejection of the causal model.

The overall idea of a viable alternative to the causal model of experience is based exactly on the internal contrast rather than external justification. In this, we still work with something which is just here and now, thus keeping the causal model within, but only as a side of the contrastive difference between two rep-

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5 This is just a short reference to two well-known and extreme positions. The position of Brecht corresponds to the "public opinion" identifying the essence of the modern scientific method in its heroic struggle with the dogmatic method of the Church and philosophers. See the dialogue below (Brecht 2013, p. 27):

> Galileo: Your Highness, why don't you come and look at these impossible and unnecessary stars through the telescope?
> The Mathematician: One is tempted to reply that your tube, in showing us what cannot be, must not – must it not? – be a very reliable tube?
> Galileo: What do you mean?
> The Mathematician: It would be so much more expeditious, Galileo, if you told us the reasons which move you to the supposition that in the furthest sphere of the immutable heavens there are other stars which support themselves and jiggle about.
> The Philosopher: Reasons, Galileo, reasons!
> Galileo: Reasons? When you can look at the stars themselves?

Feyerabend (2010, p. 125), explicitly, contradicts this shared opinion under the provocative statement that: "The Church at the time of Galileo not only kept closer to reason as defined then and, in part, even now; it also considered the ethical and social consequences of Galileo's views. Its indictment of Galileo was rational and only opportunism and a lack of perspective can demand a revision."

6 Interestingly, as regards the matter in which Hegel's dissertation allegedly contradicts reality, the validity of the Titius-Bode Law, Hegel is rather more right than wrong, not only nominally, in the sense that the law does not predict correctly the distances of the planets from the Sun, but also content-wise. Hegel did not attempt to refute the Law but simply ridiculed it by suggesting its replacement by another one based on Plato's *Timaeus*. The discovery of the asteroid Ceres, made ironically in the same year in which the dissertation was published, might have been the reason for taking Hegel's critique as obsolete since it filled the gap between Mars and Jupiter as predicted by the Titius-Bode Law. But, as we know today, while Ceres is the largest object in the asteroid belt, it is certainly not the only celestial body in the area. Furthermore, the Titius-Bode Law significantly failed in the cases of Neptune and Pluto. Hegel's claim thus easily reads along the lines of another famous maxim: "*Se non è vero, è ben trovato.*"

resentations rather than between the absolute difference of representation and what it represents. The reason, of course, is the standard one, amounting to the claim that "what the representation represents" is only another "representation".

In this, as Hegel maintains in the *Introduction* to his *Phenomenology*, one representation is used as a *measure* for the correctness of the other one, which only puts the whole picture into motion (see Hegel 2018, § 84). The planetary orbits were circular *for us* while being elliptical *in themselves*, at least until we found that they are not even that. Thus, rather than a report of how matters stand independently of us, our epistemic situation resembles that of two foreign languages, let us say English and Italian, the one which we know better and, as such, use as a measure for assessing the meaning of the other. This makes the whole of experience into a certain kind of cosmological story in which all parts are important for the understanding of what is happening here and now. Its protagonists are not always what they seem to be, and the plot consists basically in disentangling how the matters stand for them, or what is their true nature. This nature, however, is not separable from the plot, which, in fact, is why we might call the relevant model of experience a narrative one.

This delimitation of the narrative model is, of course, very simplistic and rough. But it allows for more flexibility than, for example, the popular and static concept of the fictional world (see Pavel 1986 and Doležel 1998). Take, for example, the case of mathematical knowledge. Obviously, it eludes the fictional paradigm because of its presupposed necessity: you cannot imagine a world in which it does not hold. But, as any kind of experience, it has an obvious narrative structure. Every school child, for example, knows the concept of the real number in its infinite expansion shape, say in 1.6180339887... What he or she usually does not know is that this shape recapitulates the whole story of incommensurability and thus provides the link to the original problems of practical measurement. If this link is neglected, as in the official axiomatic and model theoretic approach, one simply does not know what real numbers *really* are.[7]

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7 See my book (Kolman 2016) for an elaboration on this point. I am mentioning this rather occasionally here, but the example is important since mathematics seems, as the realm of allegedly eternal objects and forms, to be defying narrativity as such. Recently, Ladislav Kvasz argued otherwise, sketching an epistemic theory that not only takes the story of mathematical development into account (Kvasz 2008) but also considers explicitly the narrative form as a way of approaching mathematical knowledge (Kvasz 2020).

5 The Narrative Model and Art

The intelligibility of the narrative model consists primarily in its comparison with the causal one that basically stands for what Hegel calls the natural consciousness. It is characteristically adopted by both common sense and the positive sciences together with the dualism of the cognising subject and the cognised object (compare to Hegel 2018, §§ 26, 78). The goal of philosophy, as Hegel says in his *Differenzschrift* (Hegel 1977, p. 89), is to overcome such dualities.

The importance of art in this quest consists in its ability to make this need transparent, mainly by showing the unsustainability of the causal model without abandoning its salient features. This is how I read Hegel's dictum from his *Aesthetics* that beauty is the sensuous manifestation of truth (Hegel, 1975, p. 111). What is meant, of course, is not some particular truth, but the truth about the very nature of our experience, or: the truth about truth. I look at the narrative model as the complex sign for that. The fact that it leads to the self-contained concept of experience will give art the role of the organon of autopoiesis.

In introducing the narrative model properly, one can proceed in steps. The idea is to confront the causal model with the artistic experience and use this confrontation in a productive way, not as the rejection of the causal model, but its full-fledged transformation into the narrative one. This is a natural step since causality, as we have already mentioned, is a necessary part of the artistic experience, though not the exclusive one. What we want to arrive at is a certain kind of "*Aufhebung*", given in the above-mentioned accord of the executed and intended gestures. Accordingly, the undertaken steps will be presented also as particular models of experience, that is, not just as a preparation for establishing the particular one:

Model 1 (*Natasha Rostov*)

The basic inadequacy of the causal model is demonstrated in what might be called the model of Natasha Rostov due to Tolstoy's description of Rostovs' visit to the opera. What Natasha sees there is not the scene, but basically what is built from the here and now: the planks from which the set pieces were made, the ballerinas' fat legs etc. But this is obviously not what we are about to see or hear there. Interestingly, the description is rather autobiographical, as is indicated by Tolstoy's (1995, p. 104) account of his own visit to the performance of Wagner's *Siegfried* in *What is Art?:*

On stage, amid scenery supposedly representing a cave in the rocks, in front of some object supposedly representing a blacksmith's apparatus, sat an actor dressed in tights and a cloak of skins, wearing a wig and a false beard, with weak, white, non-labouring hands (from his slack movements, and above all from his belly and lack of muscle, one could see that he was an actor), beating with a hammer such as never was upon a sword such as never could be, and beating in such a way as no one ever beats with a hammer, all the while opening his mouth strangely and singing something that could not be understood.

Model 2 (*Hamlet*)

In the second step, the more refined version of causality arises in an attempt to give the arts some extraneous function, be it within biological evolution, therapeutic sessions etc. Let me call it the model of Hamlet, considering his attempt to use the theatrical performance to confirm Claudius' crime. Here, *mutatis mutandis*, Wittgenstein's (1958, p. 178) critique of the idea that music is to express some extraneous emotions might be applied:

What repels us in this account is that it seems to say that music is an instrument for producing in us sequences of feelings. And from this one might gather that any other means of producing such feelings would do for us instead of music. To such an account we are tempted to reply "Music conveys to us *itself!*"

This is *autopoiesis* in a nutshell.

Model 3 (*Laocoön*)

Along this path, finally, the Laocoön model arises in a dialectical way. It does not reject the previous models, and the causality and purposefulness present in them, but keeps them within, as responsible for arts' overall affectivity, social role, and their subsequent classification according to their epistemic adequacy. As for the model 2, the art is undoubtedly useful, but in the exact same self-reflective way in which it is true. By making the immanent nature of human experience transparent, model 3 captures this usefulness in an adequate way: there is no usefulness beyond the meaningful social life, beyond the sense that we give to the things around us by correcting them – as Axel Hutter (2007, p. 69) put it – through the stories we make.

This last model is also the coveted narrative model of experience acquired now in an adequate way, that is, according to the same principles that it makes explicit. As for the adequacy of individual arts *vis-a-vis* these principles, Hegel provides such a classification in his *Aesthetics*, starting with architecture

and sculpture and ending up with poetry and musical drama. Scruton's (1998, chaps. 9, 10) belittlement of photography and films as parasitic forms of art because of their substantial causal dependency is of the same origin. My differentiation between the causal and the narrative model, in fact, draws on his differentiation between causal and intentional explanation, reading the intentional structure of experience in a narrative way.

6 Conclusion

The concept of narrativity was used as a final expression of the explanatory strength of the structural part of Lessing's argument and as a suggestion to treat the analysis based on the executed and intended gestures as a universal one, covering not only the arts without discrimination but the whole of human experience. What makes Lessing's model narrative in the usual sense of the word is that it presents the experience not as a mere sequence of representations, but their organisation into a very simple plot that reads: *It was like this, but it is not anymore.* And this narrow sense of narrativity is also the way to its generalisation for which the art is here to help us. Let me illustrate how this might be done against the background of music as something rather counter narrative in the usual sense of the word. The generalisation of the narrative model of art to the narrative model of experience will then follow easily:

Example 1 (False tone)

To hear some tone as a false *A* is not just to hear some frequency, which is simply as it is, but something which differs from the standard of the Western scales that serve as a kind of *measure*. The measure, then, stands here for the intended gesture, what is not positively there, but which serves as a musical re-evaluation of the executed acoustical phenomena which, *per se*, is fine as it is.

Example 2 (Tune)

In the course of my listening, I might realise that what I am listening to is, in fact, some jazzy tune. Accordingly, I must reassess the false *A* as one of the *blue notes*. To use Hayden White's narrative terms, this might be read as that I am providing a completely different *emplotment* of the given acoustic data, that is, finding a story which fits them better or more adequately. The stories

and data are, of course, not independent, representing the complicated relations between the categories of being and meaning.

Example 3 (Composition)

This narrative structure of cognition becomes even more transparent on the level of musical composition. If I say that this looks like an authentic cadence but, in fact, it is a deceptive one, I do not just describe things as they are but make them into a meaningful whole. In this, the seeming quality of the authentic cadence that, in reality, turned out to be the deceptive one is not just a wrong guess but an essential part of the story, contributing to the aesthetical value in the same way the surprising quality of Laocoön's unconcerned face is. To put it concisely: In order to understand the meaning as intended by the composer, the listener must be deceived first. This is a case of what Hutter (2017, p. 84) calls "narrative irony", in which what there simply is (the causally defined being) is corrected by the overall meaning (the narrator's intention). You can imagine other, higher-order examples, such as the *Interlude* to *Tristan und Isolde*, in which you are deceived to the very end.

The most important point of this last example (3) is that the two representations contrasted there are only derivative, mirroring the contrast of two competing subjects, the composer and the listener. In this, the standard delimitation of narrativity by means of a narrator appears, but in the broadest epistemic sense which takes into account that every story is told by somebody to somebody else. The whole enterprise of overcoming the subject-object duality, described by Hegel as the "Calvary of the Spirit" (Hegel 2018, § 808), follows this proto-social pattern in which a dualistic model of experience is continuously transformed into a monistic one.

In this, the duality is somehow both cancelled and preserved, in a similar way as that in which we have cancelled the causal model within the narrative one. Along the lines that were suggested, this "*Aufhebung*" consists in replacing the object of my cognition by another subject that is both the same and different from me. The resulting structure of Spirit is obviously the most general and autopoietic one: there is no sense in placing the given cosmological story beyond the community of speakers and the intentionality of gestures they use. At the same time, it is the community of those that call themselves us that provides for the story's overall unity. In this, art, and the narrative model of experience based on it, are both one of the story's chapters and the means by which its autopoietic structure is made explicit. As such, to speak in Hegel's terms, they sensuously manifest the truth.

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