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Author(s): Etienne Souriau

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TIME IN THE PLASTIC ARTS¹

ETIENNE SOURIAU

I

Nothing is more dangerous for the exact and delicate understanding of the plastic arts (design, painting, sculpture, architecture, and minor arts) than the rather banal description, "arts of space," in contrast to the phonetic and cinematic arts (music, poetry, the dance, and to this group we must now add the cinema), characterized as "arts of time."

This contrast, subscribed to by a great number of aestheticians from Hegel to Max Dessoir, has its historic origin in the philosophy of Kant, particularly in the contrast he makes between the external senses, to which the form of space would be inherent, and the internal sense whose form would be time. The desire to bring music and poetry into the realm of the internal sense (in order to see there "the soul speaking directly to the soul") has often led to a real misunderstanding of the extent and the cosmic reach of the plastic arts, stripped of their temporal dimensions, and of their content according to that dimension. This is what I would like to demonstrate in this article.

Every work of art creates its own universe. And whoever speaks of a universe speaks of a whole built upon a space-time net-work. This is as true of painting or architecture, of ceramics or of landscaping, as of music, poetry, or the cinema. I shall not consider here these last-mentioned arts (or the frequent misunderstanding of the role of space in poetry or in music).² I shall consider only the problem of plastic time.

II

Naturally, the ill-founded contrast between the arts of space and the arts of time has some foundation in sense. There are obviously notable differences in the manner in which time is used in one group and in the other. But what exactly are those differences?

One may say: the difference is self-evident: a musical, poetic, choreographic, or cinematic work is unfolded *in successive moments*, while a pictorial, sculptural, or architectural work is seen *in its entirety in a single instant*.

But this last point is *clearly false*. In the case of painting, which uses space in only two dimensions, no doubt a single glance which catches a view of the whole is possible, and it is even of great importance for aesthetic appreciation. But it is not sufficient. Can one appreciate the full beauty of a painting without a period of contemplation wherein successive reactions take place? Baudelaire went so far as to say that the period of contemplation and the prolongation of its effects in the memory constitute a sufficient criterion of artistic value. Hence his formula: "Art is the mnemonics of the beautiful." Without going that far, we see at least that in all the arts there is a "time of contemplation" filled with

¹ Translated by Marjorie Kupersmith.

² The very original works of G. Bachelard: *Water and Dreams* (1941), *Air and Dreams* (1943) constitute a direct study of poetic space (although the author does not assign them quite this significance). A study of musical space is yet to be done.

successive psychic facts, more or less prolonged, and of which the aesthetic content is important.

But when we consider the works of art which use space in three dimensions, the facts are still more topical. A statue presents aspects of itself which are aesthetically quite different, depending on the point of view from which one regards it. The sculptor himself must have foreseen these different aspects, and combined them in a specific relation wherein the block of marble or bronze is only the instrument and the material means. Is it necessary to say then that the spectator can only see these different aspects one after the other and in a certain order? His movement around the statue brings to view, as it were, melodically, the various profiles, the different projections, shadow, and light; thus the most complete appreciation of the aesthetic complexity of the work is gained only by the moving spectator.

It is the same for a cathedral as for a monument. It is only by a dangerous abstraction, favored by certain habits of teaching or of technical thought, against which we must react (consideration of diagrams, of plans, and of working-drawings) that one can conceive of a work of art as a totality seen in a single flash. In so far as it is offered to the sight, to the aesthetic appreciation, to the emotion or to the contemplation, the cathedral is successive: it delivers itself little by little in different spectacles which are never simultaneous. The cathedral of Chartres, seen from afar rising above the plain of Beauce, or from near by when one is in the cathedral court; seen from a straight-front view or obliquely, or from the side; seen finally from the interior, according to whether one has just entered by the west door or whether through a series of changing perspectives one slowly approaches the choir;—presents with each aspect an artistic quantity which is absolutely different, and no one of them is seen simultaneously with any other.

No doubt, the *physical frame* inclosing these successive aspects remains materially unchanging. No matter. The disc on which a musical composition is recorded also remains materially unchanging. The disc however is but an instrument for the orderly presentation of the work which itself is the structural law of the latter, and which governs the musical *execution*. One must see in the same way the movement of the spectator around the statue or the architectural monument as a plastic or view-absorbing execution, which unfolds in order the various aspects which are held within the physical frame, and which are the aesthetic reason for that frame as it was planned.

Are there profound and basic differences between this “plastic execution” and a musical performance? In a musical, theatrical or choreographic work, the order of successive presentation is set, constant, precisely measured and determined. In painting, sculpture, or architecture, this order is not determined: the spectator is free to stand where he likes, to move at will and in any direction he pleases, or to remain in one place for a long time while only his eyes move. The order in which he views the object and the speed with which he shifts from one point to another are up to him.

So it is. But let us exaggerate neither restraint nor liberty. The reader of a poem is free to slow down or hurry his reading, to linger in meditation or to come

back several times to a loved passage. On the other hand, the lover of cathedrals is held to an extremely set order which obliges him to regard in continuity and through a regular and sometimes irreversible succession, the various aspects through which an harmonious impression is established. He will proceed to the perspectives of the nave only after the main portal has been presented to him, like an opening chord; he will see the windows of the transept appear only as a kind of surprise of sudden modulation after the procession in regular harmony of the perspectives of the nave, modified at each step throughout its length. And who will dare to say that this ordered succession is unimportant, or that it has not been artistically foreseen by the genius of the architect?

There exists one art in which this *melodic order* of view by means of a *set progression* is structurally fundamental: that is the art of landscaping, an art too often neglected in its importance by aestheticians, but on whose aesthetics Francis Bacon, Rousseau, Kant, and Poe have all commented. There a path is not merely an ornamental line drawn upon the ground (or on the plan). It is likewise the law of the way through the garden which conditions the successive and ordered appearance of the view, sometimes gradually changed, sometimes revealed as a surprise. A park or a garden, which is well planned (that is, conceived by a true artist such as Le Nôtre, Kent, Ligorio or Forestier) is a collection of stylized scenes, appearing to the promenader according to a melodic succession which is foreseeable and artistically arranged.

If we understand this, we note immediately that even in painting there is something analogous. The movement of the eye, in a picture, is doubtless not forced or determined, but it can be directed, by virtue of a kind of gentle and firm influence without which the composition of a picture would be unintelligible. Auguste Rodin, who applied in sculpture very conscious conceptions (inspired by Rude) of the evocation of movement by a temporal displacement of the different parts of the work according to the phases of the action, insisted with reason that the same fact exists in painting. In his *Conversations*, assembled by P. Gsell, he studies from this point of view the composition of the *Embarkation for Cytherea*, by Watteau, in an authoritative manner; we shall say why presently. We know, on the other hand, that certain surrealists have attempted to extend this principle even further. (The "lithochronism" of Domingues is one of the best examples.) But here a difficulty arises, from the fact that they have presented the result of thought activity anterior to the work, without concerning themselves (on principle) with establishing in the work any means leading to a dynamism of analogous thought in the mind of the beholder. It is one of the points where theory in the hands of the surrealists has wronged artistic practice.³

III

These last facts bring us an important step forward. There is no longer a question of a simple *psychological* time of contemplation, but of an artistic time

³ The best documentation on these facts is to be found in the *History of Surrealism* by Nadeau.

inherent in the texture itself of a picture or a statue, in their composition, in their aesthetic arrangement. Methodologically the distinction is basic, and we come here (notably with Rodin's remark) to what we must call the *intrinsic time* of the work of art.

The significance of these words (valid for any of the arts) is particularly clear and striking when we deal with the representational arts, as in the normal case with painting and sculpture (and also for literature, the theater, etc.). Any work of art of this type establishes, as we were saying just now, a universe. Let us call it "the universe of the work," and let us give these words a meaning entirely analogous to what the logicians since De Morgan call the "universe of discourse."⁴

A novelist, or more precisely, a novel, presents a coherent grouping of people and things, systematically connected in place and in action. It is this universe which I accept and consider for a while as real, by hypothesis, during the whole time that the reading of the novel lasts (and even a little beyond). The content of the universe of the work is all that exists in space and in time according to this hypothesis. Now the space and time which make up the framework of this universe must be considered as intrinsic to the representative content of the work, and entirely distinct from the space and time occupied by the physical form of the work, or by the reading of it, or meditation about it. For example, the time of a novel, (that is to say the order in which its events are supposed to follow each other) is completely different from: (1) the order in which the narration is unfolded, and (2) from the time it takes to read it. The narrator may, for artistic reasons, now follow steadily the thread of the adventure, and now come back to give explanations on earlier happenings that have brought about the situation. The order of narration is then utterly distinct from the intrinsic order of the succession of events in the imagined universe.⁵

In the theater, where there is much less liberty in the narration, the time of the work and the time of the performance follow generally the same order.⁶ And yet the distinction between the two times is important. Particularly is their tempo or rate of speed constantly different. Time in the work always

⁴ Cf. Lewis, *A Survey of Symbolic Logic*, Ch. III.

⁵ Is it necessary to say that this analytical distinction is not only theoretical on the part of the aesthete but that it is inherent in the practice of art? The decision, on the part of the author, to keep the reader in ignorance of the background of the situation, then to disclose it to him suddenly and purposely by an explicit return to the past, perhaps little by little by imperceptible touches, or even to leave it quite unexplained, constitutes a deliberate method of composition basically inherent in the art of the novelist; and generally directly conditioned by his most personal and fundamental conception of the art. Nothing is more curious than to study and to contrast from this point of view Balzac, Dostoyevsky, and Conrad.

⁶ At least it has been so for a long time, and has made for a strong contrast between the time of a novel and the time of a drama. In the last twenty years, time in the theater has acquired greater flexibility; and notably there is no longer any hesitation in making use of the return to the past. But this is certainly due to an influence of the motion picture on the theater. The movies have almost from the beginning made use of the "novel time" rather than "theater time."

passes more rapidly than the time taken in the performance. (I speak, of course, of time during the stage action; it is quite a different thing for the time of the intermission).⁷

Their extension is not always the same. Time in the work outruns at both ends time during the performance: before the situation that we find when the curtain rises, the characters are supposed to have lived, to have had experiences which have brought them to that situation which the "exposition" must permit us to imagine. At the end, when the curtain falls, we are also often allowed to see in perspective, more or less clearly, the future of these people who are taking leave of us. We guess that Leandre will marry Isabelle, that Oronte will be consoled, that Columbine will have other adventures, etc., etc. We have been shown only a few selected and fragmentary moments of time in the designated universe, but it is understood that this time, continuing, extends far beyond these moments, and can be reconstructed in our mind on a much broader plane, exactly as the space that is shown on the stage is but a piece cut from the imagined universe, and extends in all directions in a way which also can be reconstructed by the mind—and in which the imagined topography is almost as exacting as real topography.

All that has just been said concerning the novel or the theater can be said about a statue or a picture, and is of extreme importance in aesthetic analysis. A picture such as the *Mona Lisa* designates in space the universe of the work on a vast scale. To speak roughly, at least two kilometers in depth are suggested by the perspective of the landscape. What there is to the right and left of the space visibly represented has as much aesthetic importance as what is actually represented. This is true of what lies outside the picture before one—before the implicit spectator, the phenomenological "I" of the witness, implied by the aesthetic structure of the work; better still, the person at whom *Mona Lisa* is looking, as if at no one. In sculpture where the content of the surrounding space is always implicit, the aesthetic importance of the entire space of the work

⁷ We must note that this relation is quantitatively measurable: I can affirm that on the French stage at present it is at a minimum of 3/2 for speaking time (three minutes of time in the play represented by two minutes of performance); and it goes much higher for silent scenes—waits, prolonged silences, etc., where fifteen or twenty seconds are easily estimated to represent two or three minutes and more in the play). But we can note also that it seems to have diminished steadily since the beginning of the seventeenth century. I have in my hands an unusual and careful study by Anne Souriau of *Space-Time in Corneille* which gives precise estimates on this subject. Besides the rule on unity of time in this period gives us precise measures (notably for the *Cid*, where the agogic excess was noted and criticised from the beginning, although the point was contested by Corneille). The theatrical sensibilities of a play-goer of the seventeenth century accepted very readily a relation of four to one. But one can show that in the plays of Dumas fils (on the French stage in the second half of the nineteenth century) the relation can be estimated at a minimum of two to one. It can go higher. (I speak of course for time in speaking.) In *L'Ami des Femmes* (1864) a monologue which cannot take more than ninety seconds at the most in real time is supposed to last (watch in hand) five minutes. It is, of course, a "gag." But considering the technical mastery of Dumas in the art of the theater, as demanded in that period, there is no doubt that he gives us there a consciously precise document on the relation of the two times, in his estimation in the theater at that date. The figures which I give here, rest, of course, on a much more detailed documentation.

is still greater. The *Victory of Samothrace* is surrounded by the sea, by the wind, by the waves cut rhythmically by the course of the ship. And the genius of the sculptor is that he has given to his block of marble, to his statue, the power of arousing *necessarily, immediately, powerfully* all that surrounds it by means of which the absolute success is evident, but which cannot be judiciously analyzed without taking account of the relation of the block with the implicit environment that it suggests, and which gives so much breadth to the created universe.

Is it necessary to say that a certain length of time and a certain rhythm in that period are likewise characteristic of that universe? The entire body of Niké has just straightened itself; her chest swells, filled with the breath which will make her trumpet sound as the ship advances. And one of the aesthetic secrets of this masterpiece is this choice of a prerogative moment that is still capable of keeping its relation with a long unfolding of continuous action, so that the psychological time of contemplation is enclosed within the time of the work and participates in it without effort and almost without limit. Study from this point of view the endless attempts of sculpture (or painting) to express movement, and you will see that the painful impression given by horses rearing, dancers or runners stopped at the wrong moment makes it impossible to have the time of contemplation (which is prolonged by immobilizing the body represented) coincide for more than a second with the time of the work, which demands that the body mementarily suspended in the air drop immediately to the ground. Compare then the *Dance* of Carpeaux (at the Opera in Paris) with the *Dance* of Bourdelle (at the theater of the Champs-Elysées): the obvious artistic superiority of Bourdelle lies in a better choice of the prerogative moment represented. If in itself this moment is not lasting, it is such at least that it must be periodically rediscovered by the effect of a rhythm imposed both on the time of the universe of the work and the time of contemplation, and that is the key of their agreement.⁸

In painting, notably, the time of the work may attain dimensions equal to and at times greater in breadth than theatrical time itself.

If I look at the *Shepherds in Arcadia* of N. Poussin, I am obliged to be aware of an immense stretch of time. One may even wonder if it is not excessive. In any case, it is obligatory: no artistic comprehension of the work is possible if one does not take account of the temporal basis implied by the ages of the various persons, the presence of the tomb recalling those who lived formerly in the same place, and in the future, that inevitable death (*et in Arcadia ego*) whose shadow falls upon love and present happiness, saddens and adds greater meaning to the tender gesture of the young woman and the expression on the face of her lover. This rhythm of life and death, in the past, the present, and the future, this return in thought to the past, with a corresponding movement toward the future are all

⁸ The importance of this choice of the moment in a given situation is well known. It has been subjected to a searching analysis using a precise example in an excellent study, the principle of which we approve completely, by Lucien Rudrauf (*The Annunciation, Study of a plastic theme and its variations, etc.*). See especially the list of the seven distinct moments possible in the theme of the Annunciation, in spite of its extreme simplicity of action. These moments are very different in their aesthetic and sentimental values.

part of the fundamental aesthetic structure of the work. And the vastness of this double movement (one of the most outstanding in art) gives to the time of this painting certain artistic traits that are essential to it.

IV

There is then no doubt about this importance of time in the plastic arts, about its double presence as time of contemplation and intrinsic time of the work and about the existence of an interplay of harmonies and disharmonies between the one and the other of these two times.⁹

I should like now to bring some order to the aesthetic study of these facts by undertaking a brief comparison of time in music with time in painting. Time in music has been the subject of many studies from Plato and St. Augustine to Bergson and many others. It might be worth while to make use of this extensive and precise knowledge to uncover the facts, analogous and contrary but less exact and less well known, that play a role in the plastic arts.

The three chief classifications of aesthetic facts relative to musical time concern (a) its dimensional extent (b) its structure, notably in the form of rhythm (c) its agogic (*tempo* or speed) variations. Let us study the same facts in the plastic art, principally in painting (but let us not neglect sculpture and architecture when these have a bearing on the subject).

V

A musical work occupies and organizes a time which varies from one or two minutes to two or three hours (the works of the lyrical theater are the longest, and may extend far beyond this limit if one considers a group such as the Wagnerian Tetralogy, the performance of which requires several days). This period of time always has an exact beginning and a precise end, characterized musically. For example, in classical music, there are strict rules governing the moment the voices begin, and when they stop on the cadences. And, between the beginning and the end, certain rules, equally precise,—the use of “broken cadences,” “interrupted,” etc.—serve to mark the continuity of the temporal development in spite of the partial and temporary stops.

With rare and accidental exceptions, outside of properly artistic conditions, (time tables of the opening of expositions or museums; ritual presentations of works of religious art during ceremonies, etc.) it is not the same in the plastic arts: the time of concrete presence (time of contemplation) is not defined. The contemplation is never very long: who remains more than a few minutes in pure

⁹ If one wished to be absolutely complete, one would have to consider still two other times: (a) the time of the conception and execution of the work. But the latter is of no aesthetic importance except as it is evoked by the finished work, and plays a part in its artistic effect. I shall note further on the dangers of confusion in this respect (particularly in connection with an article, cited below and very interesting by Marcelle Wahl). (b) The time of the material permanence of the finished work. For example, the fact that an architectural structure is visibly ancient, and bears the marks of the action of time has a certain aesthetic effect. But one can always go back in thought to the time when the work was new (“when the cathedrals were white”). It is for these reasons that we shall not linger here in these two points of view.

aesthetic contemplation before a painting? All the phenomena of contemplation take place during a period of from thirty seconds to ten minutes. A longer time would begin to be abnormal, and would suppose causes and consequences outside the purely aesthetic attitude (for example, facts relative to religious mysticism, or the iconographic study of the work, etc.). In this time, impressions are produced of which some are solely relative to the subjective attitude of the spectator (a shock of surprise or a slow captivation of the mind, attention or distraction, reverie, or a participation in a dynamism, etc., etc.). But one can say that there is always more or less rapidly, more or less lastingly, a more or less central moment of coincidence and of harmony between this time of contemplation and the time itself of the work, at least when the aesthetic effect is profound.

As for this intrinsic time of the plastic work, one can say that its organization, in general, is *stellar* and *diffuent*. The time of the work radiates, so to speak, around the prerogative moment represented. The latter makes a structural center from which the mind moves backward to the past and forward to the future in a more and more vague fashion until the moment when the image fades gradually into space.

Let us consider the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* by Tintoretto. The group composition dictates the movement by means that are topographical, morphological, and dynamic. That is, a spiral staircase between the shadowed wall of the temple and the cloudy but clear sky. Mary is half-way up the stair, walking slowly toward the group of priests about to welcome her. A slow and gentle rhythm of movement is suggested by the detail of the wide tread of the stairs, no doubt to emphasize the smallness of the young girl alone among groups of people. One feels that she has just climbed the three steps that separate her from St. Anne. One accompanies her in thought to the threshold. Any longer prolongation or more complete regression would be in contradiction to the evident theme of which the pictured moment is the stellar center. But the influence of contemplation along this course is easy and sure if one does not prolong the time of the work, and if one leaves both ends of the action undefined.¹⁰ There is a delicate charm in continuous time with misty edges.

Let us compare *Heliodorus Driven from the Temple* by Raphael: here we receive a shock in quick and dramatic time, but it is difficult to prolong (certain people and animals represented in the act of running or jumping are caught in mid-air and must fall back to the ground). A fact characteristic of most of the great compositions of Raphael is this: the time of a certain part of the picture (here

¹⁰ A kind of aesthetic accident that is rather curious may occur in this connection. It may happen that a work of art incites its spectator (or reader) to a reverie, a kind of imaginary romance lived subjectively where the work of art is forgotten, since it was but the inspiration and the pretext. No doubt this inductive power is linked very closely to certain aesthetic qualities of the work. It may even have been expressly desired by the artist. But if it goes too far, and produces effects which separate from the work, it comes in conflict with the true contemplation, and may become aesthetically abnormal. The man who likes music for the mental images it helps him form does not really like the music. On this same subject there are curious facts in the history of religious art. In general the mystics ask that the image lead to thoughts which are detached from the work itself and cause it to be quickly forgotten. And in this their attitude is clearly different from the purely aesthetic attitude.

the right side, the dramatic one) is not homogeneous with the time of the other part (here, the left): on the left side many of the people are caught in indifferent and conventional attitudes which belong unhappily to this "time in the studio", if I may say so, where Raphael is responsible for some of the worst faults of academicism. This is the great defect in his *Placing of Jesus in the Tomb*. There, time is neither fused nor suspended, it is clumsily arrested in positions that are obviously studio poses taken without any fusion with an action which might prepare them and prolong them, and which, moreover, are contradictory if one should attempt to prolong them. This is, in general, a fault of Raphael as soon as he tries to get away from those prerogative moments which may be prolonged in repose or in cyclic rhythm and in which on the contrary he excels.¹¹

One could in painting, use the terms "poetic" and "dramatic" for these two kinds of time on condition that we understand that it has nothing to do with the emotional atmosphere of the work, but only with the structure. One can call "poetic" a time when the pictured moment links and blends with the previous and subsequent moments capable of prolonging contemplation a long time, without differentiation between that prolongation and the intrinsic time of the work; and "dramatic" a time so closely connected to the prerogative moment that it cannot be linked to what follows or to what precedes without evoking images in striking contrast with the spectacle of the prerogative moment. As an example: *The Blow of the Lance* by Rubens. The close relation of the time of the work with the pictured moment is the structural key to its dramatic character along with a thousand other plastic factors unnecessary to analyze here. Compare with the *Descent from the Cross*, also by Rubens, in the museum of Antwerp. However dramatic the theme and the plastic whole may be, the linking in fusion, the gradual sliding down of the body, the agogic slowing of the action almost to immobility, create this contrast between the dramatic character of the action and the poetic structure of the time, which is one of the profound reasons for the strange character (almost voluptuous in one detail) of this work that has caused so much literary comment, because of its double moral perspective in profound contrast.¹²

I cite here facts which have as much to do with rhythm and tempo as with

¹¹ As for temporal dualism in Raphaelesque composition, consider the *Transfiguration*: the time of all the upper part is a time of slow and cyclic rhythm; the time of the lower part is one of dramatic shock encumbered in several places by those unlikely poses of which we have spoken: where it is impossible to blend with a before and an after.

¹² One may present these two moods of plastic time in another aspect. They correspond to what L. Rudrauf properly notes, in the work cited above, concerning the contrast between the "transitory moment" and the "indefinite period," for the expression of which he has recourse to the distinction the philologists make between the *perfect* and *imperfect* (temporal aspects of the verb). Consequently, he distinguishes a "present perfect" (or perpetual and unchangeable), and a "present imperfect" (or transitory moment). "In fact," he adds, "painting and sculpture know these two moods also." (He should say: these two "aspects" to maintain the grammatical analogy; cf. Vendryes, *The Language*, 1921, p. 117.) The remark is as precisely correct as it is important. To give a striking example, compare, on the Tombs of the Medicis, the temporal aspect of the *Night*, which sleeps and of the *Dawn*, which awakens. No doubt, Michelangelo's Dawn awakens eternally, if one may say so, and one could contemplate that awakening perpetually. But that

dimensional restriction or openness, and with the narrow or wide stellar structure of the time. I can separate only abstractly, in order to analyze them better, these various factors which are always systematically combined in a work of art.

One last fact is worth noting here: the prompt closing of the time of the work with a definitive ending can be no more than a seeming end, contradicted by a reopening, and the effect is more powerful. If a painter depicts a horse galloping toward a wall which is only a yard away, I know that a brutal shock is going to put an end presently to this incident. But when Rembrandt shows me *The Angel Leaving Tobias*, if my first impression is that the angel rising with beating wings is going to crash into the vaulted ceiling of the room, obviously the intention of the painter is that I imagine that it is no obstacle to the angel, so that the moment, which is, at first impression, dramatic, is reopened by a kind of spiritualization of the angel, a flight toward the heavens, and disappearance, thus prolonging poetically the initial dramatic effect, and contributing greatly to the impression made by the work.

VI

I shall insist less on the facts relating to the *organization* of the period of time, particularly to *rhythm*, because they have been more often noted and studied by aestheticians in connection with the plastic arts.¹³ What must be said is that these facts have sometimes been exaggerated by giving the word rhythm a too extensive and too vague meaning. There is no rhythm (if one gives this word a precise meaning but as general as possible) unless there is an organization of a continuous succession through the cyclic repetition of the same basic scheme (which is of course susceptible of various concrete forms). There can then be purely spatial rhythms. The history of decorative art gives us many examples. The cyclic repetition of the same motif, or of analogous motifs of the same dimension, is constantly met in decoration, especially with the primitives. One sees it also in architecture (a colonnade is the simplest type among the *functional* elements in architecture, but in a general way architectural *decoration* is rhythmic, be it in vertical or in horizontal direction). On the other hand, in sculpture which is not included in an architectural synthesis, and in isolated pictures, such spatial rhythms are rare; because forms of symmetry, balanced groupings, and more or less geometric schemes of composition are not sufficient to create a spatial rhythm, in the strict sense of the word.

Finally, if we speak of temporal rhythm (and that is what interests us here) we must be even more strict. Certainly the successive themes of visual perception can be organized rhythmically in time, as the experiments of Koffka have proved forty years ago. But are these facts constant or significant in the contemplation of plastic works, or in the intrinsic time of these works? One must be very reserved in saying so. No doubt when contemplation becomes reverie, and produces phenomena that bring it close to hypnosis, one sees a rhythmic plan

eternal instant remains transitory in its essence, so that there is contrast between the eternal and the transitory, between the contemplation, and the time of the work. While with the *Night* there is harmony no matter how long contemplation may be.

¹³ For example, by W. Drost, Pinder, v. Schmarsow, Marcelle Wahl, etc., etc.

established. But most often, normal conditions of contemplation prevent such an occurrence. Thus the fact that the attention of the spectator moves from one part of the picture to another at will works against the formation of a rhythm in the true sense of the word. Finally when the time of the work is clearly rhythmic (for example by the depiction of a rhythmic action: dancing, walking, the movement of waves, or reflections on the water, the fluttering of leaves, etc.) we must note that art in general tends, by the choice of a prerogative moment, to suggest a kind of mental equivalent to rhythm, by the permanence of this prerogative moment, rather than to demand that the mind actually travel the complete rhythmic cycle. If for example one studies psychologically the contemplation of a work such as the *Dance* by Bourdelle (one of the most powerful plastic portrayals of rhythm that exist), one will see that there is produced with regularity as a kind of *thesis* or accented time, a coincidence of the subjective rhythm and the objective time; while with the *arsis* the representation becomes mentally vague, when a kind of discrepancy should occur between the mental image (which would show another moment of the action) and the visual image. If from time to time a rhythmic plan is thus suggested, most often one's thought tends to take a kind of "pleasure in repose" in a participation with the element of stability, which is a function of rhythm, and on which the artist has based his work in the choice of the pictured moment.

There are other facts of the organization of time to which the idea of rhythm is wrongly imputed, but which are none the less very important: for example this group movement, the general "arabesque" of a picture, that the spectator at one time contemplates in desultory fashion, at another grasps intuitively as a whole. It is a powerful influence in the organized plan of contemplation as well as in the over-all understanding of the composition, its expressive value, and its style. It is often expressed by technical details, for example by the sense of touch. Marcelle Wahl, among others, has shown in her book on *Movement in Painting*, its importance in the composition and aesthetic characterization of works such as the *Creation of Man* by Michelangelo, *Venus and Music* by Titian, *The Death of Sardanapalus* by Delacroix. This author is mistaken, in my opinion, to speak of rhythm in this connection, not only because the term is not scientifically exact, but because it leads to phrases such as "rhythms of creation and emotion," which seem to me mythical notions.¹⁴ But once this error in terminology is corrected, there is no doubt that the quest, in the form of characteristic arabesques, of a kind of ordered movement of the dynamism of the work through space and time, corresponds to something positive and important.¹⁵

The profound nature of this concept will be better understood, and the positive study of it more successful, if we think of such an organization, in its temporal aspect and scope, as corresponding exactly to what is called in music the *phrasing*;

¹⁴ M. Rudrauf (quoted above) is also wrong to speak of rhythm for facts which belong both to phrasing and tempo. But except for this faulty term, the facts which he observes and notes in regard to the dynamic organization of the picture in its relation with the time of the action are very carefully and thoroughly studied.

¹⁵ Notably in the Case of Eugène Delacroix such aims are entirely normal. Certain precise indications in his memoirs show that he was consciously preoccupied with artistic factors of this kind. It is what he called the "torsion" of the picture.

distinguished both from the melody (which is based on the differences of pitch) and from the rhythm (based on the repetition of an *arsis-thesis* system). Like rhythm it is based on facts of intensity (nuances) even while its form is extended over a dimension analogous to that of melody.

Whoever distinctly grasps these ideas, will feel the importance of what we must call the *phrasing* of a picture; and for example, the stylistic importance of the differences observable between the slow, full, majestic *phrasing* of a Veronese (that of Tintoretto is more suave with equal plenitude), the rugged phrasing of Caravaggio, powerful in its boldness, brutal, even a bit melodramatic; the essentially polyphonic and architectonic phrasing of N. Poussin; or again the pathetic and tormented phrasing of Delacroix. It is entirely reasonable to note a likeness with these characteristics in the music of Palestrina, Monteverdi, Bach, or Berlioz.¹⁶

VII

Plastic tempo is very closely allied to all the preceding facts. But it is distinguished from them in principle. In music, the tempo is the *qualitative*¹⁷ impression of slowness or of speed expressed by indications such as: *adagio*, *andante*, *presto*, etc.; and of which the slightest variations often have a great expressive value. It is understood that in painting and in sculpture, it is impossible by objective means to account for an impression of slow time, very slow, to the point of immobility almost (as depicted in works such as the *St. Jerome in his Cell* by Dürer, or the *Song of Love* by Burne-Jones, or *Mourning* by Saint-Gaudens); or an impression of moderately rapid, truly agitated or fantastically violent movement, as demonstrated in these three stages by the *Spring* of Botticelli, the *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*, by Rubens, and the *Horse Frightened by the Storm* by Delacroix. But one must not forget that it is the same in music where no count of the number of notes per second can suffice to indicate the temporal rapidity which comes from causes which are aesthetically much more subtle.¹⁸

¹⁶ We are not dealing in vague analogies. For example, on the subject of the close relationship in style (and in aesthetic doctrine) between Caravaggio and Monteverdi, one may read an excellent and thorough article by René Jullian (*Pro Arte*, January 1946). And perhaps this historian of art, who is also a learned aesthetician, has not made use of all the elements which not only permit of a comparison but make it necessary. Thus, one of the characteristics of the *phrasing* of Monteverdi (the unprepared attack with certain dissonances) is easily comparable with certain characteristics of the rather brutal dynamism of the compositions of Caravaggio (the attack by grouping people in a luminous ray of light producing violent contrasts of shadow and light, and modelling detail only at the other extremity of his trajectory: see for example his *Death of the Virgin*). Naturally, Caravaggio never thought of imitating Monteverdi, or vice versa. But the normal evolution of art has inspired both of them not to fear the boldness, the formal violence of successive dynamism that their predecessors would not have dared.

¹⁷ Cf. Hugo Riemann; or Liszt, preface to the *Dante-Symphony*; or Lionel Landry, *Musical Sensibility*, 2nd ed., p. 35.

¹⁸ A passage in demi-semiquavers of an *adagio* pours out more notes per second than a *presto* in white and black notes. Even the length of each measure is not a sufficient criterion of the agogic (rate of speed), although certainly it is a most frequent and most

Thus, a slow *tempo* or a sprightly one, sliding gradually to a limit which has almost an eternal quality or animating the universe of the work with speed toward a future opened up or soon closed, is among the essential characteristics of a picture, a statue, and, up to a point, of an architectural work. No doubt, in this last case, (architecture), since there is no *depicted action*, the nature of this "tempo of the monument" is more difficult to grasp. But it is easy to understand that the physical or psychic *work* of a monument can imply a very clearly characterized rate of speed. The *tempo* of the Greek temple, of the Romanesque church, of the Gothic cathedral in the primitive style, the middle period, and then the flamboyant, is obviously more and more rapid. One could comment upon this along spiritualistic lines taking account of many elements, among which the character of the decoration has a great symptomatic value. But in the realm of pure technique it is also easy to find positive criteria. The examination of the forms of bell-towers from the eleventh to the sixteenth century (for example, a group like Brantome, Morienval, Senlis, and Notre Dame de l'Epine in France) will suffice to illustrate the facts. Forms which are at first square and squat, then much less heavy and more perforated, with more absolute elevation in height, and a basis of support less broad with a greater vertical elevation, make a dynamism from low to high which is more and more rapid in its tempo. It is connected with the idea of "*élan*", which, however subjective it may appear, can be studied morphologically in profound and exact fashion. Thus it is impossible to separate it from the idea of the rapidity of an essential movement, which has become spiritual, going in the opposite direction from the forces of gravity and decay.

These last facts of course suggest the idea of a symbolic relationship between the concretely structural facts positively presented in the "cosmos" created by the work, and a transcendental content which would prolong and surpass it. But I do not wish to enter upon these considerations, which belong properly to philosophy and metaphysics. What we have already seen is sufficient to permit certain useful conclusions. Here they are.

VIII

1. The positive analysis of a work of plastic art cannot be sufficient unless it takes account of those time factors of which we have just spoken, as well as of the facts reducible to spatial considerations. The more scientific one wishes to make aesthetics, the more one must consider these factors. The universe created by a plastic work always involves a time of which the principal characteristics—dimension, "aspect" (in the philological sense), rhythm, tempo etc.—must be considered in a complete analysis, and often have an importance essential to the study of the art of which the particular work is an example.

2. These facts would be of great significance also (although we have not

normal proceeding to shorten the measure to give an impression of acceleration. But there are also purely harmonic means (for example the "retard" and the "anticipation") and polyphonic ones. In the "stretto" of a fugue, the "entrance" of the voices at brief intervals of time gives the characteristic impression of haste.

insisted on this point of view) for the psychological, philosophical, and even scientific study of time. Because one would have but an insufficient and imperfect conception of the way in which man thinks of time, if one did not take account of the documentation which aesthetics furnishes on this subject. In that immense and fundamental activity of the human race, the realm of the arts, man exercises the power to master time, to fashion and form it, to vary it qualitatively, and to generate it by means of which the greatest plastic masterpieces form the most authentic evidence.

3. In so far as there is a difference, in regard to time, between the plastic arts and others, the advantage is on the side of the plastic arts. I do not hesitate, in fact, to say that time is *more important* aesthetically, and more worthy of study, in painting, sculpture, or architecture than in music, the dance, or the cinema. Here more delicate and more profound perspectives are opened up. Why?

Because, in the arts which are obviously temporal, time is the palpable stuff of which the works are fashioned. The symphony, the film, and the ballet are spread out, laid down, on a bed of time; the time spent by the auditor or spectator is practically predetermined. His psychological experience must pass through a mill, as it were, where the work is measured out to him moment by moment according to the creator's will. The composer and the dramatist are the masters and tyrants of a direct and obvious time. If they make good use of it, let us applaud, of course. But their task is quite simple in this regard.

But the painter, the architect, and the sculptor are masters, by a more subtle magic, of an immaterial time which they establish when they create a universe whose temporal dimension can extend or contract in a moving and curious way. Now a brief and fragile moment is brought to life brilliantly, perfectly; again the extent of the universe can reach to the equivalent of eternity. On this temporal frame is modeled a content that can be as rich in rhythm, in impetus, in variation of speed or slowness (and hence in human or transcendental significance) as all musical or literary temporality. But this time is never suggested except by means that are indirect, oblique, and subtle. However fragile, delicate, unsubstantial may be these means of suggesting time, they are the key to the greatest success in these arts. Plastic time is an essential time, of which the particular characteristics in each work form the most moving evidence of the power of the artist, in creating a masterpiece, to flash before our eyes a world to which he invites us, and where we may live.