

Pictorial Slippage

Craig Barber, Coventry University, UK

Abstract: Where is the time in painting? This paper will consider the temporal dislocations associated with the painted image. The primary focus will be upon the temporal complexities associated with the painting process. These will be contextualised through an initial analysis of the temporal effects of paintings as static imagery upon the time perceptions of spectators. The paper draws upon my own painting practice, through which some of the points made are placed into context. Key to this paper is the notion of a time away from measured clock time. This is built from Paul Ricoeur's (1980) Heideggerian notion of "reckoning" with time. This reckoning is considered in terms of the proximity between the artist and the work during the painting process and the way that different proximities in the process may relate to creativity and critical viewing. Lastly, the paper considers where the time of painting might end and whether there is a clear end point. The text slips through theoretical, process-based, and reflective modes of thought and thus echoes some of the crucial points within the content of the paper.

Keywords: Painting, Temporality, Reckoning

Introduction

Where is the time in painting? Is it somewhere else? For Rudolf Arnheim, 'the space of the pictorial surface offered itself as an alternative realm', which detached paintings and drawings from 'the three-dimensionality of space' (1992, 16). This pictorial realm may be spatially alternative but is it also temporally alternative? If so, to what extent? Is it autonomous? Where are its parameters? Where does the time of the image end or begin?

This paper will consider the time of painting. Its primary focus will be upon the temporal dynamics of the painting process and this will be contextualised through a consideration of the painting as a static artefact. My own painting practice will be referenced during the text but this paper is not intended to be a reflective document about my painting practice. Indeed it may be noticed that a large amount of content within this paper relies upon theory rather than the words of other painting practitioners. Perhaps this paper, therefore, is indicative of the critical distance, which I seek when making work. The text will slip through theoretical, process based and reflective modes of thought and thus echo some of the crucial points within the content of the paper.

I will first consider the painting as a static artefact and question the way that it may affect the time perception of the viewer. Then I will question the way that an artist perceives time during the act of making. What type of time does the artist make the work in? Lastly I will consider when this time, during making the work, ends for the artist. Where is the edge of the time of the painting act?

Paintings Affect the Spectator's Perception of Time

In his text *Time and Painting* (1979), John Berger contextualizes the temporality of the painted image through a comparison with photographic imagery. Berger identifies the photograph, as Barthes did, as a truth from the past¹. Painting, by contrast, is considered, both as an act of prophecy and as a 'timeless object', depicting a moment that 'never existed as such' (Berger 1979, 205). For Berger, the painting inhabits a location which is affected by time but the image itself remains fixed, with no end nor beginning. But how certain can we be of the fixed nature of the image? Carlos Nather and José Bueno (2012) developed a well-considered study of the way that one perceives

¹ This territory has been less certain for a number of years, certainly since digital photography and editing software rose to prominence. In *New Technology, New Painting?*, an article for Contemporary Visual Art magazine in 1998 Mick Finch remarked that, '(t)he indexical status of photography as true evidence of a raw reality can no longer be maintained.' Within this article Finch considered the narrowing distance between painting and photography.

time in relation to the work of Degas. They observed how the different poses of the figures that Degas painted (and sculpted) resulted in observers feeling that time was passing either slower or faster. In their studies participants were shown images of dancers displaying either more or less body movement for a controlled amount of time. Where more movement was implied by the pose of the dancer, the participants felt that they were looking at the image for longer than for images where there was less movement implied. This feeling of time within the image was exploited by Degas who incorporated many different poses into a single painting, resulting in images with many levels of temporal dynamism. Although not limited to painting (they were also considering Degas' sculpture and photography), the work of Nather and Bueno draws to our attention the power of static artefacts to infiltrate our perception of the time that we are living in. This power is the result of a dislocation, or 'snag', between the perceived time of the painting and the measured clock time that passes during the act of viewing. The way that we perceive time within images relates to our expectations. If we are presented with an image that suggests dynamic movement, then a greater difference between the static nature of the painting and our expectations, provoked by suggested movement, creates a greater snag in time resulting in the perceived time of viewing being longer. Or, to put this another way, the indication of movement in the image has sped up the time within the image in relation to the actual viewing time of the spectator. This means that more perceived time fits into the time of viewing when compared with a less dynamic image. Where there is less movement implied there is less of a snag created in relation to expectations and so time is not so distorted or rather time relative to the image seems to be travelling slower.

The Waiting Game (Figure 1) is a painting that was made at a time when I used black and white found photographs as the basis for paintings. Here both the photograph and the resultant painting could be considered as static reference points. The castle – the ruin – indicates a greater passage of time and decay but fundamentally runs in line with the spectator's expectations of viewing time since it is, for all intents and purposes, the depiction of an inanimate object. The signs of figures within the painting, although not displaying movement, could feasibly move since they are depictions of animate beings - they could move. This possibility creates a closeness between the time perceived within the image and the painting's status as a static image; a flicker of uncertainty resulting in an unhinged temporal experience for the spectator.



Figure 1: Craig Barber, *The Waiting game*. 2008. Oil on canvas, 120 x 103 cm.

There are Multiple Time Dynamics in the Act of Making a Painting

In *Travelling eye: the elusive digital frame and the elasticity of time in art* (2012), Anne Robinson considered the language of passing time in painting and film. She questioned how ‘the artist or the spectator may [...] be moved by a work, or by working’ and may feel that ‘time has slipped or been suspended, that we are in some way positioned outside of time’ (2012, 216). For Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997), when one is at work and a number of complementary factors are present, it is possible to become totally immersed in what one is doing and to enter into what he calls ‘flow’. One of the characteristics of flow is a distortion of the perception of time for the person at work, in fact they may totally lose track of time, forgetting to eat, drink or sleep. Csikszentmihalyi interviewed a range of individuals from many professional backgrounds for his study, with the record of the exchange with the poet Mark Strand providing a good example of this. Strand speaks of his ideal state when at work as being ‘so saturated with it that there’s no future or past, it’s just an extended present’ (Strand in Csikszentmihalyi 1997, 121). Here Strand points to an insular focus toward the work at hand, where outside concerns recede into insignificance and outside time becomes detached and irrelevant.

The temporal detachment of the ‘extended present’ seems compatible with Arnheim’s assertion that the pictorial is spatially detached, in an ‘alternative realm’ (Arnheim 1992, 16). But the visual dynamics often pertinent to painting can lead to complexities in how the painter deals with the flow state. John Berger positions the process of making a painting as a future-focused activity proceeding ‘to when the *foreseen* ideal moment of it being looked at is filled as the painter feels or calculates it should be filled’. Berger identifies how painters view their work in a mirror

to see the work afresh. For Berger, this process enables the painter to ‘half forget their own present vision as a painter, and to borrow something of the vision of a future spectator’ (Berger 1979, 206). By mentioning the ‘future spectator’, Berger is suggesting that the artist is stepping out of the role of maker and out of the time state of the making activity. But rather than an activity of prophecy, viewing the work in a mirror could really be considered as an activity that happens firmly in the present. It is about stepping out of what Csikszentmihalyi terms the *extended present* and out of Arnheim’s *alternative realm* and reflecting upon and coming to terms with what one has in front of oneself. When contemplating the work in the mirror the painter is taking stock of the formal characteristics, such as colour, tone, line and angles. When progressing along the extended present in flow the painter was constantly progressing and moving the painting on. Strand suggested a time when flow breaks down and he begins ‘jumping ahead’ of himself (Strand in Csikszentmihalyi 1997, 121). Similarly, during the act of making a painting, the order that the marks are applied and the order that they happen in the painter’s imagination sometimes can get confused. When looking in the mirror the phantom marks of the future are erased and the artist can fathom the painting as it is here and now. Once the artist has taken stock they may then reassess their next goals for the work and enter into flow once more.²

The Process of Making a Painting Is a Narrative Act of Reckoning

Rudolf Arnheim considers the difficulty that one has to comprehend time in his essay *Space is an image of time*. He uses the example of an orator who, in order to remember a speech, attaches different portions of his argument to different objects. To remember the speech the orator must simply remember the sequence of objects (Arnheim 1992, 38). According to Arnheim, using such a method means that time is displaced in favour of space. If we consider painting as a process, that takes place over time, leading to the production of a static outcome, then it is in some ways analogous to the process adopted by the orator here. It could be considered, therefore, that the painting is a static index of the time spent making the image; a reconfiguration of time onto the picture plane. As has already been suggested the perception of time for the artist may be distorted and associated with an extended present. This extended present is not the *clock time*. As Anne Robinson states, ‘we can throw away our watches because in art, time is elastic’ and ‘[o]ur encounters with art take place in the expanded space of here and now’ (2012, 216). But to say that the painter is working outside of clock time is not to say that the painter is oblivious to time within the context of his or her working practice.

In *Narrative Time*, Paul Ricoeur reconnects narrative with time. He uses a Heideggerian stance to build a model of ‘within-time-ness’ which ‘makes the description of our temporality dependant on the description of the things of our concern’. Our relationship with time here is not about clock time; to be within-time is ‘to reckon with’ time. For Ricoeur, this reckoning is a calculation, which precedes the measure of time; ‘it is because we do reckon with time and make calculations that we have the need to measure, not the other way around’ (Ricoeur 1980, 172-173).

The orator in Arnheim’s example is not necessarily existing outside of time but using a Heideggerian sense of being-in-the-world. He or she remembers the narrative of the speech as result of remembering his or her relationship to objects. Paintings are not made over time but within time. Painting methods and subjects may vary, but fundamentally the building of a painting is a narrative act of reckoning: reckoning with the painting, its material characteristics, its image. Layers of paint, paint hidden, paint visible. *Lean before fat*; *fat over lean*³. What happens next? Where will it end? The painting is negotiated through a reckoning with time.

² For Csikszentmihalyi clear and achievable goals are essential for the flow state to be possible

³ This relates to the technical process of building an oil painting where paint of higher oil content (fat) should be applied on top of layers of lower oil content (lean).

In the paintings of Pia Fries⁴ we can see time mapped out onto the pictorial surface. Fries (2010) said that painting for her is about ‘the movement in the picture, about process, and the energies that emerge, and that want to be seen’. In her paintings we can read across the surface from one narrative event to another, a process of viewing that plays out in time just as the making process was executed in time. We can see the narrative of the reckoning in an almost linear way. The energies of the paint dance across the surface of the painting.

The Reckoning Happens In both Smooth and Striated Space-Time

The narrative of reckoning, however, is not linear. In *Richter's Willkür* (2012), Christine Mehring considers the temporality in the painting process of Gerhard Richter. She comments how ‘Richter’s emphasis on the dialectic of making and unmaking suggests, this is not a one-dimensional temporality’ (2012, 24). The artist applies paint, removes paint; covering and unearthing; painting on and painting in. In *A Fragment of Time in the Pure State; Painting in Search of Haptic Time*, Beth Harland views painting’s time ‘in relation to haptic visuality and to filmic time, subsequently moving towards the notion of a form of *Haptic Time*’ (2009, 37). This model of haptic time is neither concerned with linear nor cyclical modes of narrative but rather a Deleuzian ‘disjointed time’ (Harland 2009, 54). Harland uses Deleuze and Guattari’s notions of ‘smooth space’ and ‘striated space’ as an important part of her argument. For Deleuze and Guattari ‘smooth’ relates to the proximal sensations and haptic space, while ‘striated’ is more aligned to the optical and auditory senses and operates at distance (1980, 493). As Harland identifies, Deleuze and Guattari align painting with the smooth and haptic but she herself reflects upon a painting process which is an interaction between the smooth and the striated. For Harland, the link between painting activity and the smooth space model is strengthened through the admission of digital processes into her work. These digital processes interrupt the striated aspects of her painting process, ‘rendering the established strategy and space, not so much obsolete as *unresolved*’ (Harland 2009, 43). Here the painting practice unfolds as a critique between the near and far. This reflective attitude serves to develop a robust methodology which is both critically astute and allows for creative flow. The near or smooth perhaps is a reckoning which, by placing the artist and work at extremely close proximity, further dislocates the artist’s process at that moment from clock time. So close as to be within the work; within time; reckoning with the painting within time.

Within my own painting practice I am now more aware of the material properties of the paint than had been the case with earlier works, such as *The Waiting Game* (Figure 1). With paintings such as *Gerty* (Figure 2), I have dispensed with source imagery and focused much more on the movement of paint on the surface and the image. This focus is much more inward facing, into the work, without a clearly defined external visual source. The experience with the painting is more intimate; more proximal; more haptic. The brush drags the paint through the image. This sense is consistent with Ricoeur’s notion of a reckoning (a calculation rather than a measure), since as Deleuze and Guattari identify, ‘Boulez says that in a smooth space-time one occupies without counting, whereas in a striated space-time one counts in order to occupy’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 477). Within smooth space-time we can disregard our watches and engage in the process of reckoning. But making the painting in what could be called smooth space-time needs to be kept in check in order to attain critical distance. Ricoeur himself recognizes the fact that we measure after the reckoning (Ricoeur 1980, 173). Luckily this is a natural relationship between the smooth and striated since ‘smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being revised, returned to a smooth space.’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 474) One method that the artist may use to gain critical distance, which has already been alluded to, is the mirror. The mirror creates an optical distance from the painting and in doing so also creates a temporal distance from the painting act; from smooth space-time. The painting act then involves a slip between the insular smooth and the objective, critical, striated.

⁴ Examples of Fries’ work can be found at <http://piafries.com/>



Figure 2: Craig Barber, *Gerty*. 2013. Oil on canvas, 36 x 25 cm.

The Intrinsic/Extrinsic of the Painting's Timeframe Is Uncertain

Up to this point this paper has focussed upon the time within painting, and in particular the temporal dynamics within the painting act. I have made the supposition that there is a place and time within the image as opposed to outside of it. Where there is an internal and an external there is normally a boundary indicative of separation. I would now like to question where the parameter of the time of the painting is. Is there a clear parameter?

In *The truth in painting*, Jacques Derrida (1987) questions Kant's clear distinctions between *ergon* and *parerga*. For Kant the *ergon* of a work of art is absolutely what is within the work, it holds an element of certainty and purity. *Parerga*, on the other hand are fundamentally external to the work although they may be in close proximity to it. For Kant, one example of a *parergon* would be the frame around a painting. It was Kant's belief that where the frame is ornamental it should be considered as 'finery' and detrimental to the 'genuine beauty' of the work's *ergon* (Kant 1952, 68). As Derrida identifies, Kant starts to unravel his own distinction between *parergon* and *ergon*

when in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* Kant identifies the ‘General Remarks’ appended to the end of each section as being *parerga*, since they are ‘not integral’ to the main text but rather to ‘verge on it’ (Kant in Derrida 1987, 55).

Derrida then escalates his argument through an analysis of the transparent veil and dagger held by Cranach’s *Lucretia*. Kant had suggested that the drapery on statues should be considered as external to the work. Through shifting the argument from drapery on statues to drapery within depiction Derrida is implying the presence two *parega*, one as the frame around the image and one within the image. This escalation through questioning the parameters and placement of the *paregon* destabilizes Kant’s argument of considering the frame as absolutely external to the work. This in turn disturbs the certainty about where the work ends and where the non-work begins both in terms of the object and its social and historical context. If Kant aimed for beauty through certainty then Derrida questions and destabilises this certainty and as a result brings the periphery into the centre and vice versa.

Derrida’s critique breaks down notions of opposition and difference between the outside and the inside; the outside can exist inside. This lack of a clearly defined boundary allows for the space and the time of the work to slip through different notions of intrinsic and extrinsic. In *This Place* (Figure 3), the edge is questioned through a slip of the image. The paint application has been localised, leaving an unpainted border across the top of the image. This unpainted border could be considered to reveal the edge of the painted image. This acts to pin the image down as being of pictorial descent (in this case a photograph); the image is not a window onto the world but rather a picture of a picture. But if we consider the temporal relationship between the painting and the image further there is confusion about the status of the border, since it sits on the same plane as the painted image. It is easy to consider the marked surface as being imbued with time but the border will also have been a factor in the decisions made during the painting process. The marked surface is only one part of the making process. The reckoning with the painting, during the making process, is characterised by the time that the artist is concerned with the painting. This concern involves both the intrinsic and the extrinsic.

I have already mentioned the overlap between the intrinsic and the extrinsic as characterised by the smooth and striated model of space-time. This idea of the overlap between the two is important since it supports the case for an overlap between the time within the work and the time outside of the work. But what of the parameters to the outside of the extrinsic? Here too, if we consider the temporal implications, the parameters are open ended. An extreme extrinsic point in the time of the painting process may be when the painting is finished, perhaps hanging in a gallery, perhaps the painting was made many years ago. Such a work may hold many overlaps with a current work for the artist and be an important critical factor in any intrinsic act of reckoning. Works influence one another. The making of one work may lead to the making of another. Although the works may be considered as entities in their own rights they are contextualised within the greater timeframe of the artist’s practice. The extrinsic of the time of making one work becomes intrinsic to another work; a critical factor, which has direct impact upon the artist’s reckoning.

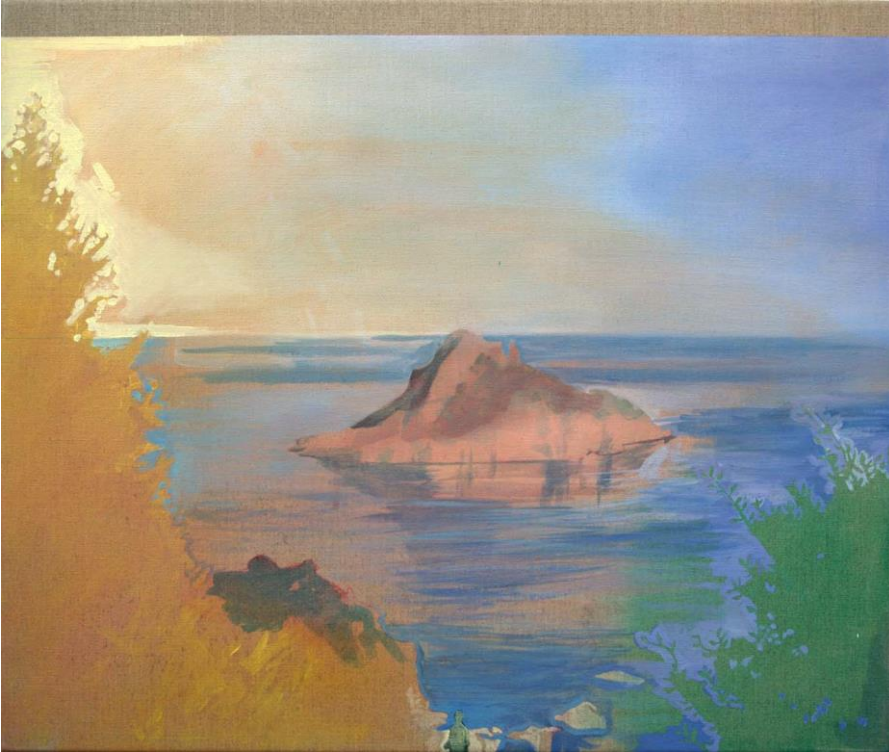


Figure 3: Craig Barber, *This Place*. 2008. Oil and acrylic on linen, 51 x 61 cm.

Conclusion

Between intrinsic and extrinsic; between the smooth and the striated; the extended present; the reckoning- the painting process is riddled with temporal complexities. This is partly since it slips through multiple temporalities. The painting process is partly insular and detached from clock time, but not exclusively, it also requires more distant acts of critical viewing. Either of these stances, the near and the far, employed independently, would prove dissatisfactory when aiming for a practice that is both creative and yet shrewd. One could be forgiven for thinking that there is a clear temporal division between the inside of the work and the outside of the work, since there are many points of opposition apparent. For example the static image versus the time-based process, and the smooth versus the striated, but the many overlaps between these serve to confuse attempts at clear demarcation of temporal parameters. The process is not about snapping into and out of particular modes of making but rather a slippage which brings balance to the painting process. There are, however, traits which identify with particular parts of the making process; to say that there are overlaps is not to say all parts of the process are essentially the same. Words such as intrinsic and extrinsic still hold an identity within the context of the working process.

One may attempt to dislodge the painting from time in terms of its status as an artefact and in terms of its process but this would prove a fruitless pursuit. Paintings exist and are made within-time. The spatial dynamics of near and far during the painting process are intrinsically linked with the temporal dynamics of the painting process, the problem is when to employ different modes of working. Of course it is possible to be strategic and to manufacture pre-defined times at close proximity and times at a distance. But does this not lead to an overarching distance from the process? Rather the process should be reactive and adopt the temporal stance needed at any one time to achieve balance. The reckoning is always in flux; always moving; always within time despite leading to the outcome of a depiction of something that never existed. Within-time the

painting is reckoned with at close proximity within smooth time-space but the artist's concern is also carried into the critical viewing from afar. Any exit point or parameter seems to lead to another reckoning for the artist as their practice continues. When no longer being painted the work of art is still a factor in the reckoning of future artworks; the artist's reckoning is carried through their working practice slipping between works and between temporal positions.

REFERENCES

- Arnheim, R. 1992. *To the rescue of art: Twenty-six essays*, University of California Press.
- Berger, J. (1979) 1985. 'Painting and time.' In *The White Bird*, Chatto and Window.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997) *Creativity : flow and the psychology of discovery and invention*, New York, NY. : HarperPerennial.
- Deleuze, G and Guattari, F. (1980) 1987. *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. Translation by Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press.
- Derrida, J. 1987. *The truth in painting*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 'Pia Fries Krapprhizom Luisenkupfer.' YouTube video, 7:44. Posted by Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, December 30, 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5nlXVKpaLg
- Harland, Beth. 2009. 'A Fragment of Time in the Pure State; Painting in Search of Haptic Time.' *Journal Of Visual Art Practice* 8, no. 1/2: 37-58. doi:10.1386/jvap.8.1and2.37_1
- Kant, E. (1790) 1973. *The Critique of Judgement*. Translated by James Creed Meredith, Clarendon Press.
- Mehring, Christine. 2012. 'Richter's Willkür.' *Art Journal* 71, no. 4: 20-35.
- Nather, Francisco Carlos, and José Lino Oliveira Bueno. 2012. 'Timing Perception in Paintings and Sculptures of Edgar Degas.' *Kronoscope* 12, no. 1: 16-30. doi:10.1163/156852412X631628
- Ricoeur, P. Autumn, 1980. 'Narrative Time.' *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, On Narrative pp. 169-190 Published by: The University of Chicago Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343181>
- Robinson, A. 2010. 'Travelling eye: the elusive digital frame and the elasticity of time in art'. *Journal of Media Practice* 11: 3, pp. 215-229. doi:10.1386/jmpr.11.3.215_1

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Craig Barber: Senior Lecturer, Design and Visual Arts, School of Art and Design, Coventry University, Coventry, West Midlands, UK