

VIRTUAL SIMULTANEITY IN LESSING'S AESTHETICS ¹

DRAGOȘ GRUSEA

Abstract. This paper aims to show that Lessing develops in his aesthetics a pre-Kantian philosophy of consciousness. The concept of virtuality that the German writer puts forward in his essay *Laocoon* implies an interweaving of temporal dimensions similar to the threefold temporal synthesis described by Kant in the transcendental deduction of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. But whereas Kant thematizes an *a priori* of consciousness, Lessing is in search of an *a priori* of fine art. It will be seen that perfect sculpture presupposes the choice of that moment in time which can open the imagination to the past and the future in a way that enriches the present by transforming it into a "pregnant moment". The final aim of the article is to trace the genesis of the concept of simultaneity of temporal dimensions presupposed by the idea of the pregnant moment, and its implications for the idea of the temporality of consciousness.

Keywords: sculpture; non-linear time; consciousness; virtuality; aesthetics; contemplation.

THE CONCEPT OF TIME IN AESTHETICS

If we want to describe the evolution of the concept of time in the 17th century, we think mainly of Kant's theoretical philosophy and the philosophers who followed him. It is clear that the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, the doctrine of schematism of the first *Critique* or the genesis of time by the oscillation (*Schweben*) of the imagination in Fichte's *Fundamentals* represent key moments in the history of the concept of time and especially in the attempt of German philosophy to go beyond the notion of absolute time as inherited from Newton's *Principles*. The philosophical disciplines called upon to analyze time in all its manifestations seem at this time to be metaphysics and natural philosophy. Yet Kantian aesthetics also brings a new understanding of time, different from that of

Dragoș Grusea ✉
University of Arts, Bucharest

¹ Paper supported by UEFISCDI research project PN-III-P1-1.1-TE-2021-0439, "Be You" (Being yourself in the age of social networks – an approach to the aesthetics of authenticity from the perspective of virtual ontology), TE 64, 12/05/2022.

the first *Critique*². The aesthetic contemplation described in paragraph 12 of the *Critique of the Faculty of Judgment* involves a “pause”³ in the triple synthesis of theoretical consciousness⁴, which leaves the synthesis “to reproduce itself”, and the climax of the *Analytics of the Sublime*, in which the infinite and the finite seem to coincide, makes explicit use of temporal concepts such as “moment”, “sequentiality”, and “simultaneity”⁵.

The aestheticization of the concept of time and the temporalization of the aesthetic are not characteristics only of Kant’s philosophy. Various pre-Kantian thinkers have used temporal notions to explain and order aesthetic phenomena. Thus, for example, in the extension of Alexander Baumgarten’s *Aesthetics*, Moses Mendelssohn distinguishes between arts that arrange representations successively and those in which representations are placed alongside one another, wishing to delimit that moment in which the creator of art can achieve maximum sensitive perfection⁶. Lessing will take this attempt further in his *Laocoon* by making the famous distinction between art based on the succession of sounds in time and art based on the juxtaposition of figures and colours in space. Similarly, in 1769, the year in which Kant published his famous *Concerning the ultimate foundation of the differentiation of regions in space*, the Dutch philosopher Franz Hemsterhuis related sculpture to a certain temporality of perception, that in which we comprehend the greatest number of ideas in a single moment of time⁷. In his writing on the relationship between the plastic arts and nature, Schelling seems to return to the ancient concept of *kairos* in order to understand the metamorphosis accomplished by sculpture. The true artist can, according to the German philosopher, seize that unique moment in a man’s life when the God that hides within him finally comes out. Thus, art transfigures the object by bringing its essence to light and eternalizing the moment in which the essence opens up: “In this moment it is what it is for the whole of eternity: beyond this only becoming and perishing are in store for it. When art presents the being [Wesen] at that moment, it lifts it out of time. Art lets it appear in its pure being [Sein], in the eternity of its life.”⁸

² Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 19ff.

⁴ As described in A Deduction of the first *Critique*.

⁵ Imm. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by James Creed Meredith, revised by Nicholas Walker, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 258–259.

⁶ Moses Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, translated and edited by Daniel. O. Dahlstrom, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, Part II “On the Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences”.

⁷ Franz Hemsterhuis, *Letter on sculpture* (1769), in *The Early Writings of Francois Hemsterhuis, 1762-1773*, translated by Jacob van Sluis and Daniel Whistler, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022.

⁸ F.W.J. Schelling, *On the Relationship of the Plastic Arts to Nature*, translated by Jason M. Wirth, in *Kabiri. The Official Journal of the North American Schelling Society*, Vol. 3, 2021, p. 142.

This brief outline is sufficient to give us an idea of the function that the concept of time has in the visual arts and the relevance of the visual arts for understanding temporality. Aesthetics seems to shed new light on the ideas of moment, succession, and simultaneity, placing them in a different paradigm of interpretation. For the sequence of natural time is one thing and the sequence of notes in a symphony another, the juxtaposition of certain objects in space is one thing, and the order of elements in a painting is another. In other words, the aesthetic medium seems at the same time to transform these concepts and bring them closer to us, in the space of our affectivity.

This study will focus on the notion of time that is conveyed in Lessing's *Laocoon*. As already pointed out in the literature⁹, the distinction the German writer makes between temporal and spatial arts is not new. For example, James Harris distinguishes between arts organized according to synchronic representation, such as painting, and arts using diachronic representation, such as poetry¹⁰. Roger de Piles puts the law of simultaneity at the basis of painting¹¹, and Du Bos also interprets the difference between visual and poetic arts through a temporal perspective¹².

Yet it is Lessing's vision that has remained paradigmatic. When art theorists want to redefine art's relationship to time, they always start with an extension or critique of Lessing's theory¹³. Not only does the German thinker make a stronger case, but, despite the preface's warning that we have before us "not so much a book, as irregular *collectanea* for one"¹⁴, the conceptual network that orders the ideas of space, time, and art is far more elaborate than in his predecessors' attempts. Among those notions that give unity and breadth to the conceptual unfolding of the *Laocoon* is that of *virtuality*: "But what is not actually in the picture is there virtually, and the only true way of representing an actual picture in words is to combine what virtually exists in it."¹⁵ What could be the meaning of a virtuality contained in the picture? Isn't painting limited to the actual moment of space? This study aims to show that the simultaneity that characterizes fine art belongs not only to space but also to time. The Laocoon statuary group contains a simultaneity of temporal dimensions, but not an actual one (which is impossible), but a virtual one. The virtual simultaneity within the plastic work opens up a new perspective on the

⁹ Daniel Fulda, "Temporalisation? Lessing's *Laocoon* and the Problem of Narration in Eighteenth-Century Historiography", in Lifschitz & Squire (eds.), *Rethinking Lessing's Laocoon. Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the "Limits" of Painting and Poetry*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 59.

¹⁰ James Harris, *Treatise concerning Music, Painting and Poetry*, London, 1744.

¹¹ Roger de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principes*, Paris, 1708.

¹² Jean-Baptiste du Bos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, Paris, 1719.

¹³ Paul Klee, *Notebooks. Volume I. The Thinking Eye*, translated by Charlotte Weidler and Joyce Witterborn, London, Lund Humphries, 1964, p. 78.

¹⁴ G.E. Lessing, *Laocoon. An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), translated by Ellen Frothingham, Boston, Roberts Brothers, 1887, "Preface", p. X.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 121 (Chapter 19).

Kantian concept of time, both the theoretical one set out in threefold Synthesis and the aesthetic one in *Critique of the Faculty of Judgement* where reason will command the imagination to achieve an actual simultaneity.

WINCKELMANN AND LESSING ON THE STATUE OF LAOCOON

In his early writings, Winckelmann places the artistic style of the ancient Greeks under a moral ideal that can be glimpsed in the statue of the Trojan priest Laocoon. For the German historian, the unmistakable peace on Laocoon's face originates in the fact that Greek artists went beyond nature and climbed towards the ideal images created by reason itself. Lessing's work begins with a clear distancing from this thesis. The German playwright introduces multiple examples in which the Greek gods wail, and howl, in which the Greek heroes weep, emphasizing that it is precisely their moral elevation that allowed them to strongly express their affections without being diminished by it. Homer wants to show "that only the civilized Greek can weep and yet be brave, while the uncivilized Trojan, to be brave, must stifle all humanity"¹⁶. Greek man affirms his humanity in its full manifestation. However, sculptures such as Laocoon or the Niobe group, as well as sculptures depicting gods, never show screams, howls, or other expressions that deform the human figure: "If it be true that a cry, as an expression of bodily pain, is not inconsistent with nobility of soul, especially according to the views of the ancient Greeks, then the desire to represent such a soul cannot be the reason why the artist has refused to imitate this cry in his marble. He must have had *some other reason* for deviating in this respect from his rival, the poet, who expresses it with deliberate intention."¹⁷ This "other reason" is not due to the sobriety of the Greek soul, but to the very timeless rules that underlie the fine arts.

For Winckelmann and Lessing, Greek antiquity overlapped with pure reason. The former thinks that Greek sculpture is the exemplary way in which ideality descends into the world, while for the latter, Greek art is identical to art in general: "The ancients well understood the connection between painting and poetry. *What their artists have done will teach me what artists in general should do.*"¹⁸ So, using Kantian language, in the Greek artist transcendental subjectivity is manifested as the source of timeless normativity. When we have *Laocoon* before us, we are not looking at a work of the past situated in a particular historical context, but we are looking at fine art in general, its normative model. And Homer is "the model of all models"¹⁹, art in its ideal state from which any deviation is a violation of the norm.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 15 (Chapter 1).

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 7 (Chapter 1).

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 168 (Chapter 26).

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 127 (Chapter 20).

The normative model of fine arts prohibits passions that go beyond the limits set by the law of beauty. When a passion enlarges the content of the work too much or pushes it beyond its natural limits, the artist must remove it. This is what Timantes did, the Greek painter who covered the face of the grieving Agamemnon, who had to witness the sacrifice of his own daughter. Grief could only be accepted "as far as it was consistent with beauty and dignity"²⁰. Laocoon's cry had to be transformed into a sigh to fit within the bounds of beauty: "Imagine Laocoon's mouth open and judge. Let him scream, and see. It was, before, a figure to inspire compassion in its beauty and suffering. Now it is ugly, abhorrent, and we gladly avert our eyes from a painful spectacle, destitute of the beauty which alone could turn our pain into the sweet feeling of pity for the suffering object."²¹

Now, Winckelmann was well aware that plastic art cannot choose to represent every kind of feeling. He explicitly mentions that beauty has limits incompatible with certain extreme affections such as exuberant joy or excessive pain. The German historian also acknowledges the essential difference between poetry and sculpture, stressing the greater freedom of the former, which, taking advantage of the broad unfolding of events, can also touch the "ugly" sides of the hero: "In representing heroes, the artist is allowed less license than the poet. The latter can depict them according to their times, when the passions were as yet unrestrained by social laws or the artificial proprieties of life, because the qualities ascribed to a man have a necessary relation to his age and standing, but none necessarily to his figure. The former, however, being obliged to select the most beautiful parts of the most beautiful conformations, is limited, in the expression of the passions, to a degree which will not conflict with the physical beauty of the figure which he models."²² In other words, poetry has time on its side, which allows it to balance and mitigate any extreme feelings experienced by a hero. Also, according to Lessing, the immaterial nature of poetry makes details that the artist cannot avoid, irrelevant. We can imagine a man's suffering without detailing his grimaces, his wounds, his clothes, or other aspects impossible to be overlooked by fine art. If poetry can unfold over an indefinite period of time, fine art must limit itself to a single moment and fix in time and space a single moment of action²³.

For sculpture, time is not a continuous magnitude, but rather a discrete succession of qualitatively different moments. According to Winckelmann, the artist must choose the most aesthetically dense moment, judging according to the "principles of wisdom", i.e. opting for that moment in the hero's life when his face and posture are closest to his true essence: "The frantic Ajax of the celebrated painter Timomachus was not represented in the act of slaughtering the rams, under the impression that they were the chiefs of the Greek forces, but after it was

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 13 (Chapter 2).

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 13–14 (Chapter 2).

²² J. Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, Vols. I-IV, translated by G. Henry Lodge, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1880, pp. 361–362.

²³ G.E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, pp. 37–41 (Chapter 5).

completed, and when, restored to the possession of his senses, and overwhelmed by despair, and buried in the deepest sadness, he sat and brooded over his offense.”²⁴ We can therefore make a distinction between the appearance and the essence of the character, poetry being free to move through the whole series of events in which the hero is not superimposed on his own essence, whereas fine art is forced to capture only that moment in which essence and appearance coincide. Winckelmann, however, does not apply the same grid to the suffering Laocoon – it seems that the terrible suffering brought on by the snakebites could not soften the face of the Trojan priest, who suppresses “all audible manifestations of pain”²⁵. For Winckelmann, it is not so much the choice of the right moment that gives the statue its aesthetic character, but rather the exemplary rendering of the Greek man’s moral *Weltanschauung*.

Lessing, however, keeps Laocoon within the normative boundaries of sculpture, not introducing any moral criteria into the aesthetic judgment and being convinced that the features of sculpture “lie wholly in the peculiar object of his art and its necessary limitations”²⁶. We might call this specificity a *sculptural a priori*. It first of all introduces a temporal constraint. Since fine art must embody a single moment of time, there must be a rule concerning the nature of the moment extracted from the flow of events. The beauty of Laocoon does not lie in the exemplary transposition into stone of the Greek man’s detachment, as Winckelmann believed, but in the sculptor’s great skill in capturing the moment most charged with aesthetic potential. There is therefore a sculptural *a priori* that indicates the most appropriate moment for the freezing of the flow of time, and the artist must know how to conform to this normativity. Generalizing, we could say that *aesthetic temporality is non-linear*, and the most fruitful moment is when chaos and order, spirit and matter, briefly enter into a creative equilibrium.

TIME AND IMAGINATION: LESSING AND KANT

A) KANT’S THREEFOLD TEMPORAL SYNTHESIS

If we stick to the linear and homogeneous time paradigm, fixing a time point does not pose any problems of understanding. It is enough to take a snapshot that freezes a particular moment of the multiple moments of the flow. Things get more complicated, however, if we ask what a time point is, and what a singular moment, unconnected to previous or future moments, looks like. Such a hypostasis of time appears at the beginning of the *Transcendental Deduction* of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: “As contained in one moment no representation can ever

²⁴ J. Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, p. 362.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 361.

²⁶ G.E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. 20 (Chapter 4).

be anything other than absolute unity.”²⁷ Such an isolated moment does not exist as such, because the synthesis of apprehension diversifies it by bringing to light its internal complexity. Any single representation presupposes a unified diversity, even a minimal unity of time.

Before we get to the aesthetic meaning of imagination, we need to point out that this faculty is a necessary ingredient of the act of transforming time into space. Returning to the moment understood as an absolute unity, the synthesis of apprehension not only differentiates the moment, showing its inner complexity, but also connects it to the other temporal points to generate an extended unit of time. The action that juxtaposes the synthesis of apprehension belongs to the reproductive faculty of the imagination. To make things explicit, Kant uses the example of a line, which I could not draw without the ability to reproduce in the mind the parts absent in the actual perception²⁸. In the absence of this ability, I would only see a moving point. The third synthesis is that of recognition in the concept, which preserves the identity of the act of unifying the diverse. For example, when I count from one to five, it is possible for me to think of the number *three* precisely because I reproduce in my imagination the first two units, but also because I anticipate that beyond three other numbers will follow which I will generate according to the same rule I used in the passage from one to three.

The three syntheses each determine *a priori* the pure representations of space and time. Without the synthesis of apprehension, “we could have a priori neither the representations of space nor of time since these can be generated only through the synthesis of the manifold that sensibility in its original receptivity provides”²⁹. In the absence of the synthesis of reproduction in the imagination “not even the purest and most fundamental representations of space and time, could ever arise”³⁰, and the recognition in the concept makes possible “even the purest objective unity, namely that of the a priori concepts (space and time)”³¹. Therefore, all the discussion concerning the triple synthesis was meant to point out that space and time are not only forms of receptivity but are at the same time also “products”, i.e. synthesized *a priori*, resulting in categorically determined “pure objective units” of space and time.

This triple process is therefore applied to time itself, transforming it into an orderly sequence. For time to have a definite order, I must *link time with itself*, and generate the succession by applying the triple synthesis to the perpetual passage of time, which, in the absence of such a synthesis, would be “a multiple of permanently disparate moments”³². As we saw above, if we did not remember that

²⁷ Imm. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, A 99.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, A 102.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, A 99 ff.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, A 102.

³¹ *Ibidem*, A 107.

³² Karin Michel, *Untersuchungen zur Zeitkonzeption in Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Berlin, New York, Walter de Gruyter, 2003, p. 171.

the previous moment had passed, we could not see the present moment as the successor of another moment, and if we did not anticipate the next moment, we could not see the present moment as the predecessor of another moment. Without this minimum condition of *linking* the present moment to a past moment and a future moment, no experience is possible. The condition of any experience is therefore this formal extension, through recollection and anticipation, of an identical consciousness, which cannot be deduced from the content of any experience; on the contrary, any representation becomes part of experience only because it is part of a regular synthesis of apperception.

The isolated moment of which Kant speaks thus becomes part of a categorical time in that the triple synthesis makes it have a double relationship, with past and future moments. Thus, the pure disappearance characteristic of time as a form of intuition is neutralized³³. The triple synthesis gives consistency and cohesion to time by making it possible to link moments together.

B) THE FULL MOMENT AND BLOCKED IMAGINATION

Imagination is therefore the one that contributes to the genesis of temporality ordered by consciousness through the triple synthesis. A blocked imagination, one that could not return to past moments to reproduce them, would be captive to the present. A theoretical consciousness that would only be able to perceive the present moment would not be possible, for it needs to recognize its own identity in time along the synthesis of representations. On the other hand, aesthetic consciousness can be stiffened when the work closes in on a single moment of action. The apotheosis of an action, its most “acute” stage, is that moment which closes in on itself the whole of the unfolding, like the last note of a symphony, thus limiting the viewer’s possibilities of interpretation to the maximum: “The more we see the more we must be able to imagine; and the more we imagine, the more we must think we see. But no moment in the whole course of an action is so disadvantageous in this respect as that of its culmination. There is nothing beyond, and to present the uttermost to the eye is to bind the wings of imagination, and compel her.”³⁴

The climax of an action is the one that no longer allows imagination to move. When you know that the whole process is consummated, the imagination no longer has the motivation to expand. Contrary to what we might think at first glance, it is not the climax of an action that is the most aesthetically fruitful, because it squeezes together and shrinks the whole substance of the action so that the imagination has no more room to move, or, in Kant’s terms, no more room to synthesize. A Laocoon howling with pain would no longer allow the imagination to anticipate what is to come, it would place it before a consummated fact and not an

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 173.

³⁴ G.E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. 17 (Chapter 3).

open-ended process. Winckelmann considers that one of the main characteristics of beauty is indeterminacy, which ensures that there are no interruptions within the work³⁵. In short, the artistic form must be open, in order to give the imagination room to move. Laocoon must not cry out in pain, but "Screams must be reduced to sighs, not because screams would betray weakness, but because they would deform the countenance to a repulsive degree."³⁶ A shrill scream would close in on all imaginative space and introduce too much determination into the art form. There must be a valve to give the imagination a reason to search: "What he might not paint he left to be imagined. That concealment was in short a sacrifice to beauty; an example to show, not how expression can be carried beyond the limits of art, but how it should be subjected to the first law of art, the law of beauty."³⁷

The talent of a visual artist lies not in the ability to imitate but in the ability to stimulate the imagination. But here we are faced with a paradox. The essence of fine art is to freeze a moment in time. However, the slowing down of time must not be at the same time a slowing down of the imagination. In other words, the point in time must be fixed in such a way that the movement of the imagination is not only not stopped, but intensified. We have seen above, however, that imagination is movement in time. How can it manifest its dynamics if the artist clings to a singular moment? The answer is that that moment must have a complex structure that combines the static with the dynamic. Imagination must unfold despite the frozen moment.

THE PREGNANT MOMENT AND THE TEMPORALIZATION OF SPACE

As mentioned above, aesthetic time is made up of moments of different qualities. This is a key presupposition of Lessing's theory. The moment of highest aesthetic quality is the one that allows the greatest freedom of imagination despite fixation on a single sequence. More precisely, the stillness presupposed by the materiality of the work must intensify the imaginative dynamics: "Since the artist can use but a single moment of ever-changing nature and the painter must further confine his study of this one moment to a single point of view, while their works are made not simply to be looked at, but to be contemplated long and often, evidently the most fruitful moment and the most fruitful aspect of that moment must be chosen. Now that only is fruitful which allows free play to the imagination (*der Einbildungskraft freies Spiel lässt*)."³⁸ Secondary literature has identified here the similarity between Lessing's perspective and Kant's theory of the beautiful, for

³⁵ J. Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, pp. 309–311.

³⁶ G.E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. 13 (Chapter 2).

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 13 (Chapter 2).

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 16 (Chapter 3).

the imagination must not be constrained but allowed to play freely. This constraining factor frees or, on the contrary, subdues the imagination. For Kant this is the intellect, for Lessing it is materiality in general.

A) THE PREGNANT MOMENT AS INCOMPLETE TEMPORALIZATION OF SPACE

It is precisely the impossibility of fine art to detach itself completely from materiality that greatly restricts the possibilities of activating the imagination. The moment that the artist decides to render must therefore be dematerializing – in other words, perception must be confronted with a temporally incomplete action that the imagination is called upon to complete. But what is an incomplete action? In the first place, all segments of the action are incomplete, except the culminating moment which presupposes all the others. Secondly, even between the actions that precede the climax, there is a difference: some are static, that is, they do not go beyond them, and others are dynamic because they demand the completeness that only imagination can bring. Returning to Kantian language, the apprehended moment must necessarily demand completion through a new synthesis. Paradoxically, as we have seen, the episode of maximum intensity of the action, in this case, the tearing of Laocoon and his sons by snakes, contains the least aesthetic density because it is closed in on itself. Such a moment fills the imagination too hard with matter. But the artist need not stray too far from this climax either, because the greatest possible dynamic lies in its vicinity. It's as if you could only get the most powerful propulsion from the edges of a black hole. Too close to the center would swallow up all the energy, and too far away would dissipate it. Lessing seems to favor a “penultimate moment” theory³⁹, the only one capable of giving the imagination free play.

Returning to *Laocoon*, the artist does not have to depict the character as he leaves the citadel with his children or as he warns his fellow citizens of the possible danger brought by the Trojan horse. The imagination would remain fixed in the present moment in such cases or, in any case, would not set itself in motion, but would wait for an impulse from outside to move forward. On the other hand, if it is confronted with the sigh of a Laocoon cornered by snakes on all sides, the force emanating from the image will push it to take action and extend it within the mind: “When, for instance, Laocoon sighs, imagination can hear him cry; but if he cries, imagination can neither mount a step higher, nor fall a step lower, without seeing him in a more endurable, and therefore less interesting, condition. We hear him merely groaning, or we see him already dead.”⁴⁰

³⁹ David E. Wellbery, “*Laocoon* today. On the conceptual infrastructure of Lessing’s treatise”, in Lifschitz & Squire (eds.), *Rethinking Lessings Laocoon*, p. 71 ff.

⁴⁰ G.E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. 17 (Chapter 3).

For the same reasons, the ancient painter Timomah “did not paint Medea at the moment of her actually murdering her children, but just before, when motherly love is still struggling with jealousy”⁴¹. Winckelman also gives the example of the statuary group depicting Niobe just before the moment of her daughter’s murder. The horror experienced by Niobe does not go beyond a certain limit, which makes her torment compatible with beauty: “A state such as this, in which sensation and reflection cease, and which resembles apathy, does not disturb a limb or a feature, and thus enabled the great artist to represent in this instance the highest beauty just as he has represented it; for Niobe and her daughters are beautiful according to the highest conceptions of beauty.”⁴²

If we were to symbolize the climax of the action (the moment when Laocoon cries out in pain being torn apart by snakes alongside his sons) with p , then the densest aesthetic moment is $p-1$. Imagination can only be free at moment $p-1$. At p , it is confronted with a closed phenomenon, whereas at $p-2$, $p-3$... $p-x$ the action is too indeterminate. In the case of Timomah’s painting *Ajax in a rage*, the fertile moment is situated at $p+1$: “Ajax was not represented at the moment when raging among the herds, he captures and slays goats and oxen, mistaking them for men. The master showed him sitting weary after these crazy deeds of heroism, and meditating self-destruction.”⁴³ The $p-1$ moment performs this function primarily because it allows the dematerialization of the work. In the case of fine art, this process can never be carried through to completion. The imagination hears Laocoon’s cries, but his sighs will always remain outside it as a material entity. In other words, no matter how skillful the artist may be in capturing that fertile moment for dematerialization, the work can never be fully transformed into pure imagination. This difficulty appears most clearly in art’s attempt to render the gods. Winckelmann identifies a series of ascending steps that Greek sculpture climbs towards the invisible, analyzing the form that muscles take in heroes and then gods, from Laocoon, where “the action of these muscles is carried beyond truth to the limits of possibility” to Apollo Belvedere whose muscles “are smooth, and, like molten glass blown into scarcely visible waves, are more obvious to touch than to sight”⁴⁴.

In Lessing’s interpretation, however, art cannot make such an ascent. Its material essence makes it incapable of rendering invisible entities such as gods in a satisfactory form to the imagination. True to his program of establishing boundaries between the arts, Lessing asserts that painting has no means of distinguishing visible from invisible beings⁴⁵. Art is forced to reduce the invisible to the visible, i.e. to transfer poetic substance into its material environment. Thus,

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p.18 (Chapter 3).

⁴² J. Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, p. 361.

⁴³ G.E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. 19 (Chapter 3).

⁴⁴ J. Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, p. 338.

⁴⁵ G.E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. 80 (Chapter 12).

while the poet introduces the cloud or the blackness only as suggestions of the invisible, which are thrown away as soon as we understand what they represent, the artist sees himself immobilized by these images. The real cloud cannot be used to portray an invisible being. In the poem, the cloud appears only “in order to indicate that the withdrawal took place so instantaneously that no human eye could follow the retreating form”⁴⁶. Imagination can immediately strip itself of the image of the cloud as soon as it understands that it is only used as a metaphor and that Achilles did not actually see any real cloud around Hector. But this is only possible because of the evanescent nature of the sounds that make up the poem, i.e. its temporal nature. Art, with all its efforts to grasp a fertile moment, does not allow the imagination to detach itself completely from the material image of the cloud.

B) POETRY AND THE COMPLETE TEMPORALIZATION OF SPACE

The privilege of capturing the invisible is reserved for poetry, which has a much greater temporal span. The poet does not have to concentrate his aesthetic substance in a single moment. He can also depict Laocoon screaming because the virtues of the priest described throughout the epic allow us to see no diminution of his moral being in the fact that he manifests his suffering: the artist “was right in introducing the cry, as the sculptor was in omitting it”⁴⁷. The poem’s main advantage is its temporal character – which is not simply a string of events, but a complete temporalization of space. In keeping with the inductive methodology he has used so far, Lessing starts from examples in Homer’s *Iliad*, the model for art in general. When awakened from his treacherous dream sent by Zeus, Agamemnon wakes up and puts on his clothes, which Homer does not simply describe as objects coexisting in space but understands them temporally, describing their genealogy. Similarly, the description of Achilles’ shield is not a description of a ready-made static object, but of the shield in the act of its production. The object is born within our imagination. Basically, the relationship between art and poetry in Lessing’s theory comes close to Goethe’s distinction between *Verstand* (intellect) and *Vernunft* (reason): the former deals with what has already become (*das Gewordene*), while the latter with becoming as such (*das Werden*)⁴⁸. Homer transforms the static spatial object into “a sort of history of the object”⁴⁹. Thus “the various parts, which we see side by side in nature, may just as naturally follow each other in his picture”⁵⁰. Poetry transforms any coexistence into a succession. A static object made up of several properties will be “temporalized”, or “dynamized”, transformed into action by putting all its features in successive order. The central distinction for

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 81 (Chapter 12).

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 21 (Chapter 4).

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p.100 (Chapter 16).

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 99 (Chapter 16).

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

Lessing is between *entstehen* and *das Enstandene*: “The poet shows us in the process of creation, what the painter can only show us as already existing.”⁵¹

Returning to the Goethean distinction, poetry belongs to reason, whereas painting stops at *das Enstandene* and can only belong to the faculty that unifies, i.e. the intellect. The transformation of all objects in time means their complete comprehension by the imagination. Language is the medium that makes this transfer possible. The real purpose of any work of fine or poetic art is to dissolve space and take it over in the temporal movement of the imagination⁵². Welbly points out that there is an unspoken premise of Lessing's entire argument, namely that the imagination has a temporal nature and that any element that opposes this successive nature is perceived as inadequate⁵³.

AESTHETIC CONTEMPLATION AND THE VIRTUAL SIMULTANEITY OF TEMPORAL DIMENSIONS

At the beginning of the sixteenth chapter, Lessing makes a change in methodology⁵⁴. So far the conclusions have been drawn inductively from examples of sculptures, paintings, or poems. However, the German thinker has repeatedly pointed out that the structural differences between the arts are not the result of chance, but of a normative space specific to each art. It was therefore not a matter of mere induction, but of organizing examples against the background of the search for the normative model underlying them. It was natural that at some point all the data should be organized according to the principles underlying them. To draw a comparison with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, the first chapters present a “deduction from below” that proceeds from experience to transcendental forms, whereas the sixteenth chapter represents a “deduction from above” that starts from the transcendental unity of perception. Similarly, Lessing aims to climb “up to the principles of this distinction”, i.e. the structural distinction between art and poetry that he outlined in the inductive path. The argument runs as follows: “I argue thus. If it be true that painting employs wholly different signs or means of imitation from poetry – the one using forms and colours in space, the other articulate sounds in time – and if signs must unquestionably stand in convenient relation with the thing signified, then signs arranged side by side can represent only, objects existing side by side, or whose parts so exist, while consecutive signs can express only objects which succeed each other, or whose parts succeed each other, in time. Objects

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 100 (Chapter 16).

⁵² David. E. Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoon: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 130 ff.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 118 ff.

⁵⁴ Frerik Beiser, “Mendelssohn's Critique of Lessing's *Laocoon*”, in Lifschitz & Squire (eds.), *Rethinking Lessing's Laocoon*, p. 186 ff.

which exist side by side, or whose parts so exist, are called bodies. Consequently, bodies with their visible properties are the peculiar subjects of painting.”⁵⁵

Art and poetry therefore have different structures, the former articulating its material in space, while the medium of the latter is time. We might liken Lessing’s argument to the *Transcendental Exposition* in the *Transcendental Aesthetics* of the first *Critique*, where the two forms of intuition, space and time, give rise to different sciences. Space is the source of normativity for geometry, and time grounds the science of phronomy⁵⁶. Geometry, in significant theoretical relation to fine art, is a science of space, and phronomy is a science of time insofar as it treats geometrical objects in motion. However, Lessing’s distinction has a problem, which is widely discussed in the exegesis, namely that poetry is also composed of signs juxtaposed in space. A little later Lessing introduces a further distinction within language, between the poetic use of signs and the ordinary⁵⁷. Poetic language internalizes signs by transcending their spatiality: “The poet desires to present us with images so vivid, that we fancy we have the things themselves before us and cease for the moment to be conscious of his words, the instruments with which he effects his purpose.”⁵⁸

Words, as the last remnants of space, must be transformed completely into sounds, i.e. into time. We should also not forget that Lessing has in mind especially ancient poetry, which was very late put down in writing on papyrus or parchment, preserved by oral tradition and chanted by rhapsodes. Homer’s *Iliad* was chanted in public gatherings, as was the *Rig-Veda* and other ancient creations. The poet has to transform any kind of simultaneity into sequentiality, which means transforming conventional signs, i.e. words, into natural signs. I will not dwell on the question of sign, which would extend this study too far⁵⁹.

Poetry, by transforming everything into sounds articulated in time, must therefore imitate successive phenomena, i.e. actions, whereas art must limit itself to objects. Lessing, however, introduces an observation that complicates matters: “All bodies, however, exist not only in space but also in time.”⁶⁰ The co-existence of objects in space is at the same time their simultaneity in time. Being in time, they can change, which means that art can re-enact actions, but only indirectly, with the help of bodies. Poetry can also describe objects, for actions are also related to objects, but only indirectly. There can therefore be violations of boundaries, but they must not go beyond a certain limit if the two arts are to achieve perfection⁶¹.

⁵⁵ G.E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. 91 (Chapter 16).

⁵⁶ Imm. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 41, B 49.

⁵⁷ See Avi Lifschitz, “Naturalizing the Arbitrary: Lessing’s *Laocoon* and Enlightenment Semiotics”, in Lifschitz & Squire (eds.), *Rethinking Lessing’s Laocoon*, pp. 197–221.

⁵⁸ G.E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. 102 (Chapter 17).

⁵⁹ See David. E. Wellbery, *Lessing’s Laocoon: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason*, pp. 109–134.

⁶⁰ G.E. Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. 91 (Chapter 16).

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 92 (Chapter 16).

Summing up the argument: poetry should imitate actions because it articulates sounds in time, and art should move towards imitating objects because it links figures and colors in space. Yet time inevitably enters into fine art, as space does into poetry. But we are faced with a problem: why are the fine arts, whose essence is space, defined by a temporal concept, namely “the pregnant moment”? We have seen above that the success of a work lies in the choice of that moment which neither closes the event too much nor leaves the imagination a playground. This fruitful moment has the property of sending the imagination into the future and the past to complete the image. As a present moment, it therefore contains references to the past or the future. It is to this kind of simultaneity that Lessing now turns in his argument:

“Painting, in its coexistent compositions, can use but a single moment of an action, and must therefore choose the most pregnant one, the one most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow.”⁶²

Lessing is already taking up the idea he had arrived at by induction, this time starting from principles, i.e. from space and time. Coexistence in space is also a form of time, namely simultaneity. But, going further, Lessing seems to introduce, symmetrically, a simultaneity of temporal modes that are intertwined in the “pregnant moment”. The *Laocoon* statuary group is an embodiment of this kind of simultaneity. The imagination feels pushed towards the future to complete the image, precisely because the present moment is so rendered as to be pregnant with the future moment. As indicated above, the pregnant moment is a *p-1* which, therefore, contains in itself the culminating point *p*. So the present moment rendered by fine art must not be a neutral temporal point, isolated in the uniform passage of time, not an evanescent present, but one full of possibilities that point to the past and the future. In Kantian language, art must not render the isolated temporal unity of the synthesis of apprehension, but the moment resulting from the collaboration of the three syntheses, i.e. that moment which reproduces the previous moment and anticipates the future one, thus opening up a playground for the imagination. The three temporal dimensions cannot, however, be present in a single moment. To explain this kind of simultaneity, Lessing resorts to the concept of virtuality: “But what is not actually (*actu*) in the picture is there virtually (*virtute*), and the only true way of representing an actual picture in words is to combine what virtually exists in it with what is absolutely visible.”⁶³

It must be said that Lessing here uses a Latin term, *virtute*, the ablative of *virtus*, which has been rendered in most translations as “virtuality”. The choice is not wrong since the concept of *virtualitas* has its origin in the expression by which the Latin translators of the Bible wanted to express the power of God *virtus Dei*⁶⁴.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 92 (Chapter 16).

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 121 (Chapter 19).

⁶⁴ Cf. Cornel-Florin Moraru, “De la «virtus Dei» la inteligența artificială. Schiță pentru o meontologie a virtualului” [“From «virtus Dei» to artificial intelligence. Outline for a meontology of

The presence of the past and the future is neither a potentiality that can be actualized or not, nor a full presence, but something like a virtual existence, a dimension between potentiality and actuality. The idea of virtuality would even serve to found a philosophical system a few decades after Lessing's death when Friedrich Bouterwek advanced the so-called "idealism of virtuality" or "absolute virtualism", which starts from the virtual unity of the object in the subject and the subject in the object. Fine art is therefore also a temporal art in its own way because it is based on a certain concept of the moment and simultaneity.