

Narrative Interrupted: Painting Between Progression and Duration

Catalogue essay for the MFA Painting program, Concordia University, Montréal
Emily Rosamond
2012

“Even the *Mona Lisa*, even *Las Meninas* could be seen not as immovable and eternal forms, but as fragments of a gesture or as stills of a lost film wherein only they would regain their true meaning.”

- Giorgio Agamben¹

The film still exemplifies the complexities of modern relationships between stillness and movement. For Roland Barthes, the very notion of a film still was paradoxical; for what, exactly, could a static image represent of the passage of time?² The still was taken from the film – was even, ostensibly, the stuff from which the film was made. Yet it was also an artificial construct which, extracted from its quick succession, was not “of” the film at all. A tiny fragment – a cutting from a story line – it radically cut apart the very idea of diegetic progression, introducing completely different experiences of temporality into the act of looking, even as it incited us to imagine a narrative progression.

In an era awash with moving images, the still – yet still gestural – medium of painting tests the myriad ways we experience movement and time, even when they appear to be frozen. Many of the works produced in Concordia’s MFA Painting and Drawing program incite us to reconstruct a plot line from a depicted scene, imagining plausible “befores” and “afters” from the clues depicted in a privileged instant. Yet they can never evoke this narrative, progressive conception of the passage of time without also radically undermining it, cracking it open so that many different kinds of temporal experience stream out of its seams. Interrupted, the notion of a narrative *progression* of time gives way to non-linear *duration*: Henri Bergson’s term for the felt quality of time as pure, heterogeneous, rhythmic flux and flow, which can never be measured, can never be narrativized, but can only be experienced.

So many works by Paul Hardy, Nathaniel Hurtubise, Collin Johanson, Jenna Meyers, Bronwen Moen, William Patrick, Tammy Salzl, Matt Shane, Mona Sharma, Anna Run Tryggvadottir, Ted Tucker and James Whitman compellingly and complexly explore the myriad felt relationships between progression and duration. For the sake of space, I’ll examine only a few. In James Whitman’s *Loft Party*, awkward, expressionistic marks precariously lean on each other, entering into a delicate, syncopated cadence: a field of bodies, represented mid-party as if

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without Ends* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 55-6.

² Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning,” in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 67-8.

in an infinitely-elongated moment. Through the thickness of the present, gestures cut across causal time. A massively enlarged hand (enlarged as if to reflect the vast numbers of nerve endings in that part of the body, the imagined sensorium impinging on the image) reaches up from the foreground, appearing to touch the fictitious hand of a painted portrait placed in the background. A recursive representational loop delicately clasps the hatch-marks together, a lateral time weaving through the semblance of the frozen party. Thus suspended, the scene asks us to perform the ethical task of the witness. Unlike the depicted characters, we are not absorbed in the acts of partying; instead, our distanced, yet intimate witnessing elongates the scene, placing it into an eternal time frame as an address to the species, to life, to being.

Matt Shane's *Spring Thaw* explores relations between the representation of land and narratives of power. The fantasy landscape – a stage set in which industry, voyage or epic battle might unfold – invites us to enter a fictitious realm of unbridled future potential, playing out romanticism's fascination with the sublime grandiosity of nature. We float above the scene, as if from the perspective of a sovereign: an onlooker or overlord, free from the laws of the imagined world. (In Lacanian terms, this is the perspective of the phallic father, the one imaginary character in his intricate, complex psychoanalytic microdramas who encapsulates the possibility of an outside, an exception to the laws of subjection.) Yet as we follow the brushstrokes with our eyes, we slowly become aware of the precariousness of this fantasmal freedom. Just as the brushstrokes trace both the time of painting and the imagined, epic folds of geological time, the fantasy landscape both renders an idea of freedom *and* the impossibility of conceiving of such freedom apart from a thoroughly subjectified desire to experience it.

For Slavoj Žižek, narrative is the vehicle of ideology *par excellence*; it “emerges in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession.”³ Historical events do not “actually” progress in simple chains of cause and effect. Heterogeneous, incompatible fields rupture, clash, and break apart. (Though, of course, I can't even utter that sentence without having narrated that which I'm arguing is outside of narration.) Then (I rely on saying “then”), they are sutured into narratives: simplified, symbolic fantasies which retroactively, teleologically ascribe events and their actors with purpose, causality, identity. “The very form of narrative... bears witness to some repressed antagonism”⁴ – and yet also creates the conditions through which certain kinds of understanding come to be elevated to ideological status, while others become repressed. Yet, for all narrative's ideological underpinnings, can we ever do away with it?

When we experience what Bergson calls pure duration, time resists narration. As Bergson describes it, duration is not reduced to the simpler terms of narrative progression. Multilayered, overlapping qualitative flows affect a heterogeneous, rhythmic whole. To experience duration, we must refrain from even the most basic forms of representing experience to ourselves: measuring time. To count a clock's pendulum swings and conclude that, say, ten seconds had passed would be to abstract time, to falsely quantify what can only be qualitative: the continual, rhythmic shifts in the continuous experience of the pendulum swing.⁵ Writing early in the twentieth century – an era of increasing scientificity – Bergson's argument for the illusory nature

³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997), 11-12.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will* (London: Elibron Classics, 2005), 104.

of quantification had high stakes: for in duration, he argued, we were free. If, after all, “our action was pronounced by us to be free, it is because the relation of this action to the state from which it issued could not be expressed by a law, this psychic state being unique of its kind and unable ever to occur again.”⁶

Anna Run Tryggvadottir’s work grapples with this Bergsonian, durational time. Working as far away from representation as possible, she constructs complex contraptions which exploit the machinic potentials of the spaces in which they are situated, directly recording the passage of time. Clear plastic channels the air flow from a gallery’s vents; sheets of paper absorb paint slowly dripping from nylon sacks. The spills produce their own, singular, idiosyncratic logics for recording time, forming concentric rings which speak to the sense in which the present is simply the most contracted point of the past – a past which subsists virtually in the everyday forms which are ever so slowly in flux all around us. In some sense staged to be “without human hand,” the machinic rigging simply “helps” time to record itself; yet it also prompts us, a little, to narrate the machine’s production, as part of a joyful practice of “listening” to the potentials in the spaces we traverse.

For Bergson, the free, unique and singular decision (which is not a human property *per se*, but a property of duration) emerges from all that is heterogeneous and singular in experience; the realm of the measurable – which describes a regular, predictable world – is a mere abstraction placed on top of duration. Yet as Mary Ann Doane argues, even this identification of freedom with the contingency of duration is ideological; given the increasingly routinized, mechanized conceptions of time that apparatuses such as cinema and factory work made possible, “chance and the contingent are given the crucial ideological role of representing an outside, of suggesting that time is still allied with the free and indeterminable.”⁷ Narrative, ideological understandings of time cannot simply be “freed” by duration; rather, progression and duration lean on each other, infuse each other, act out each other’s exclusions. Capitalizing on their own complex and paradoxical relationships to time, works produced in the Painting and Drawing program examine the myriad ways in which progression and duration come into contact within a still image. Their very contact is a field of felt, qualitative shifts.

⁶ Ibid., 239.

⁷ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 230.