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7  
2  
12

Baxandall

# The language of art history

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## The language of art criticism

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MICHAEL BAXANDALL

... it is very difficult to say a great deal about a painting, except by talking about its relationship to something else, whether to other paintings, other arts, contemporary social movements, contemporary beliefs, or contemporary ideas.<sup>1</sup>

### LIMITATIONS OF THE LEXICON

The specific interest of the visual arts is visual, and one of the art historian's specific faculties is to find words to indicate the character of shapes, colors, and organizations of them. But these words are not so much descriptive as demonstrative: I am not sure how firmly we have grasped the implications of this. Unlike a travel writer or the man who writes about exhibitions in a newspaper, we are not primarily concerned to evoke the visual character of something never seen by our audience. The work of art we discourse on is to some extent present or available, if only in reproduction or in the memory or even more marginally as a visualization derived from knowledge of other objects of the same class, and though the form of our language may be informative – "there is a flow of movement from the left towards the center" – its action is likely to be a sort of verbal pointing. What distinguishes it from manual pointing is mainly that along with direction ("left to center") goes a category of visual interest ("flow of movement"). We are proposing that our audience compare the one with the other.

It is this that goes some way towards extenuating the crudeness of our language. If I apply half-a-dozen simple terms of visual interest (a phrase I am not going to define) to the pencil I am writing with – "long," "thin," "shiny," "green," "of hexagonal section," "with one conical end" – that is a quite inadequate description: to someone who did not have experience of pencils it would not carry an accurate

image, and equally to someone who did have such experience some of the terms would be otiose. But if my purpose is not to describe but rather to indicate (a) to someone who has seen it (b) such kinds of visual interest as I am finding in it, then the half-dozen terms do cover some of what I have to offer. My blunt words (e.g., "green") are sharpened for me because what I have done is to instigate, or offer to instigate, a guided act of inspection of the particular object by the hearer, and he knows really that that was my intention. Neither of us expects him to think, if he does elect to follow my prompting. "Oh, not red then": rather, he will elaborate and refine my category "green" for himself. Of course the matter is more complicated than this, but the immediate point is that the art historian's use of language invites the receiver to supply a degree of precision to broad categories by a reciprocal reference between the word and the available object. It is ostensive.

But my pencil is an untypically simple object, which is why I could cover so much of its visual interest with so few words. If I try to do the same even to my typewriter ("square," "mat," "gray," and so on), I get less far: the words cover less of what I find interesting in it. If I try to do it with a painting or a sculpture, I will hardly get anywhere at all: direct descriptive terms can cover very little of the interest one wishes to indicate. I can use them – it is not vacuous to point to Michelangelo's Moses as "square" – but the fit between sense and reference is now becoming very loose, and I can only use them by assuming that my hearer will interpret them in a sophisticated and specialized way: he must supply a great deal in the way of mental comparison with other works of art, of experience of the previous use of such words in art criticism,<sup>2</sup> and of general interpretative tact. The words have become things of a rather different kind.

Indeed, if one is not careful, the lack of the right, or adequately determinate, word reduces one to someone just making an emphatic noise; it becomes quite unclear why one should be taking it on oneself to address other people about the picture at all. A thing the practice of art criticism quickly teaches one is that the European languages discriminate very finely in some areas (e.g., underlying Euclidean form) and very coarsely in others (e.g., seen surface texture): this has its own fascination as an object of study, but it also sets a practical problem because there is a limit to how much one can enlarge the lexicon by coining and borrowing. It is not so much that one wants to avoid academic jargon as that novel coinages and loanwords are cultural orphans, not properly part of the collective framework of our

thinking. Thus, I might like to have genuine access to the Nigerian Yoruba critical term *dídón*,<sup>3</sup> which indicates a degree of smooth but not glossy luminosity in the surfaces of sculpture, closely related to the contrast of these with sharp shadows and edges: it would cover much of an interest I find important in some European sculpture. But *dídón* is a fragment of a complex of Yoruba critical concepts and takes its rich meaning from just this set of relations. Even for my private exploratory purposes I cannot possess it except in a crude and shallow, a dissociated way.

### THREE KINDS OF INDIRECTNESS

But in fact most art critical language is not of such direct descriptive background as "green" or "square"; rather, it is variously oblique or tropical. And while there seems nothing to be said for working out any very crisp or general classification of the types of indirect art critical words, it will suit my purpose here to group them in three rough divisions or moods.

(I) Some words seem to point to a kind of visual interest by making a comparison of some sort, often by metaphor: "rhythmic," "fugal," "dovetailing," "a forest of verticals," "striplike" – these words used of a picture work comparatively. Among them I will also include words like "square" in the extended use involved in calling Michelangelo's Moses "square": thus, "Apollo and two of the Muses ... forming a broad triangle." And a special class of comparative words (I *bis*, let us say) refers to representational works of art as if the things or persons represented were actual: "agitated" figures or "calm" or "spirited" figures. (II) Some words characterize the work of art in terms of the action or agent that would have produced them: "tentative," "calculated," "sensitive," "elaborate," "difficult," "skilled," this or that "treatment" or "development" or "virtuosity." (III) Some words characterize a work of art by describing its action on the beholder or his reaction to it: "imposing," "unexpected," "striking," "disturbing," "unpleasant," this or that "effect," "a feeling of crowding." One could refer loosely to these moods as (I) comparative or metaphorical, (II) causal or inferential, and (III) subject or ego words, and might visualize them in a field something like Fig. 1 (on page 70). But of course they are all projections of the subject, the speaking beholder, as we all know perfectly well. Equally they are nearly all in a weak sense metaphorical, though some of the metaphors are more educated than others.



there from the stream, walking back along the bank, and getting in again to float alertly down a particular stretch once more. When the literary critic does engage with a particular stretch of a text, his language can pace its language, each linearly progressive. My point is weakened here by the failure of many literary critics to make athletic use of their advantage, no fault of mine, but the possibility is there and is used in the literary criticism I most envy from over the fence – to offer a hostage, William Empson on Donne's "A Valediction of Weeping." And in any case I think the point is not so much that the literary critic can work in parallel with his text as that the text and our reception of it have a robust syntagmatic progression of their own which the linear sequence of an exposition cannot greatly harm. The language of the descriptive critic can run with, run away and back, run round the firmly progressing language of the text, like an active dog on a walk with a man.

A picture on the other hand, or rather our perception of it, has no such inherent progression to withstand the sequence of language applied to it. An extended description of a painting is committed by the structure of language to be a progressive violation of the pattern of perceiving a painting. We do not see linearly. We perceive a picture by a temporal sequence of scanning, but within the first second or so of this scanning we have an impression of the whole – that it is a Mother and Child sitting in a hall, say, or a sort of geometricized guitar on a table. What follows is the sharpening of detail, noting of relationships, perception of orders, and so on. And though the sequence of our scanning is influenced as to pattern by both general scanning habits and particular cues in the picture, it is not comparable in regularity and control with progress through a piece of language. One consequence of this is that no consecutive piece of verbal ostension, linear language, can match the pace and gait of seeing a picture as it can match the pace of a text: the read text is majestically progressive, the perception of a picture a rapid irregular darting about and around on a field. There are various ways of meeting the problem. One can work the ostensiveness of one's language hard, so as to draw the hearer sufficiently into his own active act of perception for his attention to shift away from one's own. One can also shun expository sequences that look like representations of perceiving, e.g., descriptions, in favor of ones that assimilate themselves to thinking. The history of art history offers other techniques, too.

## INFERENCEAL CRITICISM

I have been making three kinds of suggestion: first, that the art critical lexicon is strongly ostensive; second, that art critical language is largely and variously oblique, and at more than one level; third, that the linear form of our discourse is curiously at odds with the form of its object, whether this is considered to be the work of art itself or our experience of it. These seem to me basic facts of art critical life, and one would like to come to some sort of constructive terms with them. Four hundred years of good and very diverse European art criticism certainly suggest that there are ways of doing so. It seems characteristic of the best art critics that they have developed their own ways of meeting the basic absurdity of verbalizing about pictures: they have embraced its ostensive and oblique character positively, as it were, as well as bouncing their discourse out of the pseudodescriptive register that carries the worst linear threat. I repeat that they have done this in many different ways; about all Vasari and Baudelaire have in common is conspicuous success. This seems something to insist on in the present climate of discussion: the linguistic facts of our life may be general and pressing, preliminary conditions one may well want to take account of in working out a way of doing whatever it is one wants to do, but they do not direct us to one kind of art history.

For instance, I am anxious not to suggest that there is a simple affinity between the orientation of a critic's overt interest and the orientation of a mood of language – between, say, those of us who like occupying ourselves with the circumstances in which works of art are made, on the one hand, and inferential language on the other. What worries me about much criticism that offers itself as social-historical analysis of art is precisely an un-self-aware Type III quality at the lowest verbal level marshaled at a higher level in large a priori Type II patterns – soft impressions sloshing about in hard causal schedules. For contrast one can read the early books of Adrian Stokes<sup>5</sup> for local inferential muscle, however subject-assertive the total manner and effect.

Words inferential about cause are the main vehicle of demonstrative precision in art criticism. They are active in two distinct senses. Where ego words are formally and often substantially passive, reporting something done by the work of art to the speaker as patient, causal words deal in inferred actions and agents. At the same time they involve the speaker in the activity of inferring and the hearer in the

activity of reconstructing and assessing the pattern of implication. For my taste, I will say, all this activity is cheerful and absolutely more wholesome than a lot of comparing of impressions, but the real point is that it seems to yield adequately determinate and properly stimulating ostensive words. One of the details my description of the pencil on p. 67 omitted was the sort of scalloped edge of the green paint at the point where it meets the conical end. If I wanted to, I could register this quite sharply and economically by inferring cause – the blade of a sharpener revolving circularly at an angle of 15° to a hexagonal cylinder. I do not think I could register it with ego language at all: I am too uncertain a quality to my hearers for my reaction to a scalloped edge to register the scalloped edge or its visual interest – unless my share is indeed to infer the revolving blade. In a more complex way the same is true of art criticism, where a mature inferential vocabulary in full play can have formidable demonstrative precision and punch. The eighteenth-century critic Shen Tsung-hsien<sup>6</sup> – to dramatize the matter with something exotic – gives a glimpse of the resources classical Chinese criticism had for inferential characterization of the painter's brush marks: among much else he distinguishes between wrist-dominant and finger-dominant strokes; between dead and live strokes, in the sense that there is variation of power within the single live stroke; between dragged marks and slippery marks, splashed-ink ones and broken-ink ones, between the marks of a straight brush and those of a slanting one, between cutting strokes and led strokes; he can speak of an individual brush stroke having a center or core and opening and closing phases, and he could wonder how far the closing phase of a stroke carries the suggestion of further development; he could even characterize a brush mark by the noise the stroke would have made, as a "sousing" noise. Of course, there are reasons for the activeness of this language: both Shen Tsung-hsien and his readers were themselves active users of the calligraphic brush so that there was a firm background of reference in everyone's experience. But still it is enviable language: to find anything comparable in Europe, one must go to things like Delacroix's occasional remarks in his journals on the technique of Rubens – remarks addressed by a painter to a painter. We cannot compete with it in this area, but there are other areas of inference we can work towards, including – to twist John Passmore's remark a little – "relationships ... to ... other arts, contemporary social movements, contemporary beliefs, [and] contemporary ideas."

## NOTES

This paper is an abbreviated version of "The Language of Art History," published in *New Literary History*, 10 (1979), pp. 453–465.

- 1 John Passmore, "History of Art and History of Literature: A Commentary," *New Literary History*, 3 (Spring, 1972), pp. 575–587.
- 2 "Square" has a splendid history; its use in Greek and Latin art criticism has been investigated in an ingenious paper by Silvio Ferri, "Nuovi contributi esegetici al 'Canone' della scultura greca," *Revista del R. Istituto d'Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte*, 7 (1940), pp. 117–139.
- 3 For *didón* and its context, see Robert Farris Thompson, "Yoruba Artistic Criticism," in *The Traditional Artist in African Societies*, ed. Warren L. d'Azevedo (Bloomington, Ind., 1973), esp. pp. 37–42.
- 4 For which see E. H. Gombrich, "Art and Scholarship," in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (London, 1963), p. 108, coining the term, and also "On Physiognomic Perception," *ibid.*, p. 51.
- 5 Particularly *The Quattro Cento* (London, 1932) and *Stones of Rimini* (London, 1934). The remarkable comparison between carving and modeling "conception" in the latter is included in the Pelican edition of *The Image in Form: Selected Writings of Adrian Stokes*, ed. Richard Wollheim (London, 1972), pp. 147–183. The kind of quality I have in mind is (from an account of Donatello's *Dead Christ with Angels* in the Victoria and Albert Museum [in Wollheim, *The Image in Form*, p. 168]): "To Donatello, changes of surface meant little more than light and shade, *chiaroscuro*, the instruments of plastic organization. The bottom of the angels' robes is gouged and undercut so as to provide a contrast to the open planes of Christ's nude torso. The layers of the stone are treated wholesale. Though some of the cutting is beautiful in itself, the relief betrays a wilful, preconceived; manner of approach. In brief the composition is not so much founded upon the interrelationship of adjoining surfaces, as upon the broader principles of *chiaroscuro*" (my italics).
- 6 There are translated excerpts – all I know of the author – in Osvald Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting* (Peking, 1936), pp. 224–233, and Lin Yutang, *The Chinese Theory of Art* (London, 1967), pp. 169–219.