



An Analysis of Spatial Construction in Pictorial Art from the Perspective of Formalism

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Abstract

“Space,” as a fundamental conceptual term, has been frequently and widely applied within various disciplines, such as sociology, architecture, philosophy, math, art, and so forth. In pictorial art, the term “space” is often used as a lens to understand specific concepts or artworks. This study aims to explain and describe pictorial spatial construction in paintings by applying various approaches. However, in the field of formalist analysis over the past century, except for a few formalist critics who have engaged with pictorial space, few have attempted to use creative methodologies to systematically analyze how pictorial space is constructed in the painting, particularly in works by contemporary painters. Therefore, to fill in this lacuna in the research, this study utilizes new formal analytical methods to analyze and explain spatial construction in paintings. In terms of the method of analysis, this study analyzes a sample of Western contemporary paintings and utilizes the approaches of the overlap of the abstract and the figurative, parallel narratives existing in multiple spaces, and the juxtaposition of different material dimensions, respectively, to rethink the method of spatial construction in the painting. The result concludes that paintings are an essential research object within visual art. The construction of image space is rich and includes multiple layers of meaning. The overlapping of abstract space (sensibility) and figurative space (rationality), as well as the coexistence of this contradictory system, enables artists to discover more possibilities when creating works and effectively enrich visual effects and textures in their paintings.

Keywords: spatial construction; pictorial art; perspective of formalism; formal analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Formalist analysts, including prominent figures such as Jacob Christoph Burckhardt (1811–1897), Alois Riegl (1858–1905), Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945), E. H. Gombrich (1905–2001), Roger Fry (1866–1934), Clive Bell (1881–1964), and Clement Greenberg (1909–1994), have played pivotal roles in shaping the study of art and the development of Western art

history. In his renowned work, “The Story of Art” (1995), Gombrich highlighted Filippo Brunelleschi’s discovery of linear perspective during the early 15th century, a breakthrough that empowered painters to convey space on a two-dimensional plane (Gombrich, 1995, pp. 226–228). Similarly, in “Cézanne: A Study of His Development” (2018), Fry noted Cézanne’s use of cylinders and cones as tools to interpret the world, laying the groundwork

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for innovative spatial constructs in painting (Fry, 2018, p. 8). Cézanne's influence resonated through Picasso, who, inspired by these concepts, spearheaded the Cubist movement, fundamentally altering traditional illusionist paintings by redefining the spatial dimensions (Francina, 1982, p. 124).

In "Modern Art and Modernism" (1982), Francina asserted that by the end of 1911, Cubism had revolutionized traditional illusionist paintings, reducing fictive depths to a level nearly indistinguishable from the actual paint surface (Francina, 1982, p. 124). Additionally, in "Glossary of Art Architecture & Design: Since 1945," Walker (1977) discussed David Hockney's exploration of human vision. Hockney employed a Polaroid camera to capture the same scene from different angles and times, creating a composite image that offered a dynamic view of the same plane (Walker, 1977, p. 250). While these formalist critics approached spatial evolution subjectively and observationally, this study aims to delve into spatial construction in pictorial art from a more formalized perspective, including emotional form, narrational methods, and material usage – dimensions influenced by formalist critique.

To contextualize this analysis, it is essential to briefly summarize the historical evolution of formalism (Dziemidok, B., 1993). Formalist critics have traditionally examined spatial evolution in paintings from subjective, observational viewpoints (Ekman, R., 1970). However, this study diverges by adopting a more formalized approach, considering emotional form, narrational methods, and material usage in the analysis of spatial construction. Influenced by formalist critique, these aspects provide a nuanced understanding of how artists manipulate space within the pictorial realm (Pinotti, A., 2012).

There is no unified definition of space. Space is defined in different ways depending on the discipline. For example, in astronomy, space is the area beyond the Earth's atmosphere. In physics, space refers to the three-dimensional area in which

all matter exists. In philosophy, space is the concept of the void or emptiness. Each definition of space is valid in its own context and helps us understand the world around us in different ways. In the field of painting, analyzing artworks reveals that different times and cultural backgrounds produce different understandings of painting space (Parsons, G., 2004).

For instance, Dunning, in *Changing Images of Pictorial Space: A History of Spatial Illusion in Painting* (1991), tells us that Cimabue (1240–1302) was the first painter in a thousand years to largely unify the spatial composition of his paintings and create an illusion of some volume (Dunning, 1991, p. 12). He made the first crucial move in reweaving and depicting the depth of the illusion's components. This demonstrates that medieval painters used pictorial space to create and construct visual illusions on two-dimensional planes. This method, which creates a visual illusion by manipulating sensory perception, continued for hundreds of years. By the modernist period, painters were no longer preoccupied with constructing and defining pictorial space by creating illusions. For example, Barnett Newman (1905–1970) stated, "A painter is a choreographer of space" (Michael, 2013, p. 373).

Indeed, the final presentation of space in an artwork depends on the artist's unique arrangement of elements, expression of emotions, and use of various tools and materials. In other words, painting space, in contrast to the real environment, is a space that is meticulously laid out through various marks on the canvas made by the artist's hand (Curtin, D. W., 1982). In the painting, the artist's intention, scene structure, and aesthetic judgment are expressed through a visual mechanism in an orderly manner. Thus, spatial construction in paintings was no longer limited by illusion; instead, it became highly subjective, variable, and multifarious, especially with the advent of French Impressionism. The construction of the painting space has undergone the historical process of representing the objective by creating the illu-

sion of depth to represent the subjective through the rearrangement of different visual mechanisms. In short, the definition of painting space is not a fixed concept; it will change with the artists' times and ideas (Thomson-Jones, K., 2005).

METHOD

It is necessary to briefly review the history of formalism because this study is based on formalist aesthetics and examines paintings from the perspective of space construction. More specifically, Immanuel Kant's work *Critique of Judgment*, often called his "third critique," is typically cited as an important historical foundation for the contemporary debate over aesthetic formalism. In *Kant's Aesthetic Theory* (1974), philosopher Donald W. Crawford summarized Kant's position, stating, "Thus, for Kant, the form consists of the spatial... organization of elements: figure, shape, or delineation... In the parts of the Critique of Judgment in which form is emphasized as the essential aspect of beauty" (Crawford, 1974, p. 100). Zangwill, in *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (2001), defined formalism in art as referring to those properties "that are determined solely by sensory or physical properties—so long as the physical properties in question are not relations to other things and other times" (p. 56). Indeed, these philosophers and scholars argue that formal aesthetics is based on the senses and physical properties; therefore, I apply a similar approach to my formal analysis of space construction. In this study, my analysis of the spatial organization of a painting focuses on three concepts: overlap, juxtaposition, and combination. That is, spatial organization is created from an overlap of emotional form, a juxtaposition of narrative approaches, and a combination of different materials.

Furthermore, in this study, I emphasize the construction of space in contemporary paintings, and my primary targets of analysis are painters born after the Second World War. Moreover, the study

aims to analyze how various spaces are constructed on a two-dimensional plane rather than explain the spatial contents and meaning in these works because, within formalism, form is the content. Moreover, I seek to emphasize that the construction of these pictorial spaces differs in visual form from traditional illusionism; rather, these spaces function as a kind of spatial construction form within the paintings. Before demonstrating my approach, I will first define the concept of "painting space."

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The overlap of the abstract and the figurative

To understand this issue, I believe we must first answer the question, "What is the urge to abstraction?" This is the first layer of logic in my examination of the selected paintings. Worringer (1881–1965) was a famous German art historian. In his theory, he abandoned Hegel's idealistic aesthetics, and he was influenced by Alois Riegl's (1858–1905) concept of "art will" and Theodore Lipps' (1851–1914) theory of empathy. He published his ideas in a book titled *Abstraction and Sympathy: Essay in the Psychology of Style* (1907). In this book, he mentions an important concept: the urge toward abstraction.

This urge is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world; in religious respect, it corresponds to a strongly transcendental tinge to all notions. This state might be an immense spiritual dread of space (Worringer, 1997, p. 5).

This description, in a sense, reveals the creative process of some figurative artists in the West. According to my research, to maintain uncertainties and possibilities in a painting, or some randomness, namely, a sense of ignorance, of strangeness, of not wanting to set the final effect at the beginning of the painting, many artists often begin from an unknown state or emotional release at the beginning of the creation process; this state or emotion often reflects the artist's anxiety and uneasiness about the

world (Worringer, 1997, p. 5). This influenced artists to generate a kind of opposition to the objective world during the creation process, and this opposition manifested itself in the suppression of three-dimensional spatial expression—that is, it resulted in planarity. According to my analysis, this planarization is not meant to reduce the dimensions of the three-dimensional world; rather, it is intended to establish a planar relationship between points, lines, planes, and color blocks in order to constitute the first space—that is, unknown abstract space. Next, I will present several examples to prove this point.

First, I will temporarily put aside the content and concept of the paintings. The process of creating a work is a very private matter. Most artists generally do not want to share this process with others; however, through extensive research, such as viewing online video interviews and surveying studio photos, I discovered evidence to prove that when some artists construct painting space, they begin with a layer of abstract space. For example, in this photograph (Figure 1) of English painter Justin Mortimer, we can see that Mortimer is engaged in the painting process. It is a constructive process of two-dimensional image space, and we can see that the first image is a completely abstract work. Viewers would have difficulty finding any figurative objects that match their visual experiences. Several blocks of color, traces of brush strokes, lines, and more from the first layer of the painting, and this layer, which the brain cannot recognize, is built by the abstract impulse and element I mentioned above. This urge is a kind of opposition to the objective world; that is, it is a kind of fear of the external world. The elegiac Roman poet Albius Tibull (c. 55 BC–19 BC) stated: “Primum in Mundo Fecit deus Timor, this same sensation of fear may also be assumed as the root of artistic creation” (in Worringer, 1997, p.5). Indeed, when artists face a blank two-dimensional plane, such as a blank canvas, they overcome unconscious deadlock by relying on intuition and the impulse to confront the outside

world. Next, they constantly establish and consummate their system of painting.

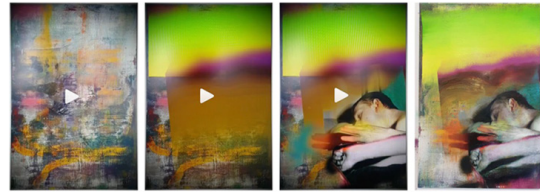


Figure 1. Justin Mortimer, *Untitled*, oil on panel, 76 cm × 51 cm, 2020–2021.

German new abstract expressionist artist Daniel Richter (born 1962) also used a creative approach similar to Mortimer's. By analyzing his paintings, we can identify many abstract elements (Figure 2), and the emotional expressions in the paintings form the underlying foundation. Here, I would like to emphasize again that I will temporarily put aside the artists' ideas and concepts and only analyze spatial structures from the perspective of painting ontology in two dimensions. After an artist completes the construction of the first layer of space, they begin with the second layer of space, image space. The formation and choice of image space depend on what the artists wish to express or are interested in, which relates to their cultural context and life experience.

To some extent, this is rational thinking after the emotional impulse, and the formation of an entire two-dimensional space is a process that involves a perceptual and rational game. In this process, the reasons for the urge to abstract are anti-objectivity and the release of fear, and the aim of suppressing the urge is to deliver the artist's thoughts accurately. From the manner of the construction of the painting space, this relationship between the rational and the emotional and between the abstract and the figurative is a method of spatial construction—it is a method of overlapping the abstract and the figurative.

Consequently, the drive toward abstraction is a kind of primordial energy that has always been hidden in the human body and subconscious. This energy

is enormous and can create an unexpected visual space when it explodes. This is caused by an order and logic that can sublimate and visualize this impulse and create an image space. As a methodology, this overlapping of sensibility and rationality may hold the key to unlocking more possibilities for artists in the creative process.



Figure 2. Daniel Richter, *Besuch der Wirklichkeit*, oil on canvas, 200 cm × 300 cm, 2010.

Parallel Narratives Existing in Multiple Space

Narratives occur in a space and unfold in time. In “narrative art,” the creator chooses how to depict the plot and the environment. Thus, “narrative art” is a type of visual art that tells stories. This description is highly figurative because the traditional visual arts do not have the temporal dimension necessary for actual storytelling. According to my research, this form of artistic expression emerged very early, in about the 15th century, with genre paintings depicting scenes and narratives of everyday life. Victorian narrative painting is frequently considered its own category because it became extremely popular during this period. Before the 20th century, most Western artists lived narratively, depicting stories from religion, myths, legends, history, and literature (Small, 1999). Formalist ideas have resulted in a distaste for narrative form in modern art. However, coded references to political or social issues or events in the artist’s life are still commonplace. Such works are effectively

modern allegories and generally require the artist’s information to be fully understood. The most famous example of this is Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*.

However, I will not analyze traditional narrative art; I will introduce a new narrative method to support my argument. This method is the “parallel narrative” of multiple spaces. The concept of parallel narratives is an invented term from film and literature studies. Parallel narratives are also referred to as “parallel stories” or “parallel plots,” and all of these terms denote a story structure in which the writer includes two or more separate narratives linked by a common character, event, or theme while describing a process that generates new narratives through symbolic parallels and associations. Infinite parallels can emerge from this creative process. Because this is a metaphorical or dream language, there is not always a direct translation. Many artists use this creative method to frame their spatial structure in a two-dimensional plane in paintings.

One example of an artist who uses this method is Neo Rauch (born 1960), a German artist whose paintings mine the intersection of his personal history with the politics of industrial alienation. His work reflects the influence of socialist realism. His paintings reveal a great number of image characteristics that come from the mythology of Northern Europe and surrealist scenes; however, this paper aims to study spatial structure and construction rather than the relationship between images. Thus, in his artworks, we can observe that the parallel narratives of multiple spaces permeate his works. For example, when first observing the painting in Figure 3, the whole space appears randomly organized, with different scenes grouped like a collage. However, according to my research, this random combination has logic and is premeditated. Comic strips were an extremely important inspiration for him. In East Germany, there was only one comic strip: *The Digidags*. It was a major source of inspiration for Rauch. He used various narrative threads that combined different

spaces in anachronistic ways, making the paintings appear enigmatic and hermetically self-contained. The underlying logic in the structure of space is the parallel narrative of multiple spaces because it completely accords with the definition of parallel narrative.



Figure 3. Neo Rauch, *Heilstätten (Sanatoriums)*, oil on canvas, 98.5 in × 118.25 in, 2011.

Dream-like and dramatic scenes can also be expressed in parallel narratives. For example, Lars Elling's work is based on traditional pictorial techniques. In his artwork, which reflects his life experiences, everything has a meaning that is always changing in accordance with the components and colors of his compositions. His painting (Figure. 4) readily reveals that this piece is separated into three parts. There is a man in the lower left corner with his hands spread out while holding a bird. In the lower right corner, a pair of lovers appear to be whispering to one another. There is also a sparrow sitting on the man's right hand. The bird appears to be landing in the hands of a young man in the middle position. Three unrelated scenes are juxtaposed in the same space. These three scenes seem to have no relationship; the different narrative scenes in his works are fractured and not on the same timeline. However, the three stories are connected through a special element: the bird. This narrative method is very similar to the parallel narrative of multiple spaces, which juxtaposes different stories existing within

the same space. These dream-like and dramatic scenes produce a new kind of meaning: They go beyond a single narrative method to create a new narrative method and visual explosion.

Therefore, this method of creating parallel narratives within multiple spaces breaks with traditional narrative and provides a new perspective for critics to explain artworks in two-dimensional space. The nonlinearity is the main feature of the parallel narrative method, leading to pictorial fragmentation. This patchwork of images creates a kind of dramatic, dream-like effect; it also provides a framework for the expression of the flow of consciousness for artists.

The juxtaposition of different dimension materials (mixed mediums)

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, Juxtaposition refers to the act of positioning two or more things side by side or close together. In the visual arts, juxtaposition entails making the ordinary look extraordinary. It is commonly used in the visual arts to emphasize a concept, form unique compositions, or add intrigue to paintings, drawings, sculptures, and other types of artworks. In this study, however, I will explore several paintings and analyze the juxtaposed spatial relationships between two-dimensional image spaces and the three-dimensional object space within the paintings.

Anselm Kiefer's monumental body of work represents a microcosm of collective memory, and visually encapsulates a broad range of cultural, literary, and philosophical allusions—including the Old and New Testaments, Kabbalah mysticism, Norse mythology, and Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, and the poetry of Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan. His works are all-encompassing, and from the perspective of spatial structure, can be seen as a combination of two-dimensional image spaces and three-dimensional ready-mades (sculptures or installation art). His works are formed from the juxtaposition of different dimensions of material. As we can

somewhat see from Figure 5, artwork can be divided into two parts to analyze which are the underlying pictorial spaces and the battleship made of iron above. That is, the battleship, which is made from iron, hangs on the two-dimensional painting. This spatial framework breaks the limitations of two-dimensional space and extends into three-dimensional space, making the painting more than just a simple two-dimensional work. Rather, it becomes an installation painting. This is a brand-new form and method for the establishment of space. The form of this spatial construction did not exist before Kiefer.



Figure 4. Lars Elling, *The Bribe*, painting with egg tempera and pigments, 200 cm × 250 cm, 2016.



Figure 5. Anselm Kiefer, *Odi Navali*, upper left, oil, emulsion, acrylic, and lead boat on canvas, 189.9 cm × 330.2 cm, 1997.

Coincidentally, several artists similar to Kiefer have appeared in the subsequent development of painting. They also use the method of combining two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms to express their concepts. An example of this is the work of American artist Jeff

Koons. Although his works strongly reflect his attitudes and the period he was working in, his works are still classified as a combination of two-dimensional and three-dimensional spaces. Indeed, his artwork in Figure 6 consists of two layers of space: a two-dimensional painting (i.e., Manet's painting) and a three-dimensional installation (i.e., a blue aluminum ball). If we study the two-dimensional paintings and three-dimensional installations in his works in isolation, they do not possess any unique features. However, if we combine them, they reveal a new significance. This spatial frame creates extraordinary visual tension. It is both two-dimensional yet three-dimensional, rough yet smooth, traditional yet popular, past yet present, and mechanical yet manual. All of these contrasting elements construct a new way of thinking and offer a new perspective while also transcending the boundaries of painting.



Figure 6. Jeff Koons, *Gazing Ball (Manet Luncheon on the Grass)*, oil on canvas, glass, and aluminum 160 cm × 206 cm, 2014–2015

CONCLUSION

Paintings are an important research object within the field of visual art. It means that the construction of image space is rich and includes multiple layers of meaning. The overlapping of abstract space (sensitivity) and figurative space (rationality), as well as the coexistence of this contradictory system, enables artists to discover more possibilities when creating works and ef-

fectively enrich visual effects and textures in their paintings. The parallel narrative of multilayer space and the methods for constructing this narrative space are completely different from traditional modes of expression. They break through the limitations of the timeline; in other words, the narrative scenes in the work are not coherent, and the development of events is not linear but rather pieced together in a fragmented manner to create a dramatic, dream-like effect while presenting additional possibilities for the establishment of two-dimensional space. The juxtaposition of different media breaks through traditional painting and the visual experience while also creating a sense of depth and dimensionality. However, this dimensionality is different from traditional illusionism: It is real existence. This formal spatial construction undoubtedly is a breakthrough in formal structure and traditional aesthetic expression. This formal method breaks down the boundary between two-dimensional and three-dimensional space, forming a bridge between different material dimensions so that painting is no longer monotonous.

This study also has certain limitations, and my research object was limited to two-dimensional works of visual art. In the future, I will continue to extend my research. I believe that this research will significantly impact the field of painting and provide a new mode of interpretation and description for pictorial spatial construction. I also believe it will contribute to advancing knowledge in this area.

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