

Time Envisioned



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Visual representations in medieval poetry, drama, and iconography used art to portray things that are invisible – such as time

When looking at poetry's role in cognition, we first have to acknowledge that rhetoric – the art of speech and persuasion – has always guaranteed artistic representations an important place in the pursuit and transmission of truth and knowledge. Among the art devices taught and interpreted in medieval rhetoric courses, and applied in practices of medieval poetry and iconography, allegory and personification have proven to be most prolific and characteristic.

In examining rhetoric's overall contribution to our understanding of time-related issues and existence, greater attention has recently been paid to the 5th canon of rhetoric – performance. This is linked to philosophy through the rhetorical management of time, thanks to the use of certain rules in constructing texts or rhetorical figures. Some rhetorical figures are in their effectiveness dependent on their performance, and unleashing their performative impact (i.e. influencing the audience) is one of the tasks most expected of a rhetorician.

Existence as performance

Rhetorical figures that are performance-dependent are related to time more closely than other language forms. These include various stylistic tropes (forms of figurative language) that imply or introduce speaking persons or personifications, to which actions and speech are ascribed. The time-relatedness stems from the activation of existential content for the apperception of direct speech, time being the most important factor for the understanding of behavior. Oral performance – which was regular in the Middle Ages – only makes the existential impact of such figures stronger. Works performed are to some extent automatically performative (the audience is influenced by performance). That is why we have to admit to

those works of art a specific ontological status: they have an extreme pragmatic power of being „more than mere words,” albeit only when performed live – produced in space and time.

Processual ontology

It is one of the functions of art devices like personifications not only to make abstract entities (such as Philosophy or Justice) visual, but to show the processual character of being (the real world consists not of things, but of processes). Merely adding a time dimension to the object ontology is not enough to get an ontology accounting for the metaphysical difference of a processual ontology. The distance in objective time between two compared entities does not adequately express their identity, just as much as an age difference does not say much about the identities of two people of different age. Time is not another (fourth) analytical dimension of the space containing objects, but a constitutive property of each „object,” changing it into a process or a part of one; only in this distributive way can time be brought into the realm of ontology.

Analogy and time

Rhetorical figures based on analogy (e.g. comparison or metaphor) are also a form of time management – by connecting objects or persons across time, as in the typological relation between a prefiguration and its fulfillment. Prefiguration is understood here as a presaging of events or personal characteristics that will appear later. Prefigurative bonds link persons and events of the Old Testament together with their counterparts in the New Testament, as described not only by the exegetics but also by the gospels. Another example of this technique is the well known *Biblia pauperum*, which contains typological combinations of images from the Old and New Testaments. The typological structure of the book is evident even in its layout: each illustration portrays a single scene from the story of the New Testament, next to a depiction of a symbolically related scene from the Old Testament (its „type”).

The time factor enables an ontological explanation of the difference between allegory and typology. Old Testament pre-figurations exist to a lesser degree than their New Testament fulfillments or than we today do, but they do nevertheless exist. Each of them has a time of its own. Their existence is being sustained in cultural



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Image from the Church of the Trinity and Most Holy Virgin Mary in Strzelno, depicting the administering of last rites. The personification of death on the right is familiar from medieval iconography, especially the „danse macabre” tradition, as well as from literary works such as the medieval Polish *Conversation of a Master With Death*

memory, in the religious sphere ruled by the liturgical time of anamnesis covering big events (like Salvation) from their Beginning until the End.

Allegory and time

The time-relatedness of personifications (allegories), and especially their actual interaction as characters of a drama or narrative, contributed strongly to the stereotypical image of medieval art as realm of allegory. The preference for this rhetorical figure was superficially interpreted as taking the easy, visual route of communication, but it is actually a mechanism of cognition, teaching about the form of existence of reality as necessarily embedded in time.

Drama or narrative with introduced persons, including personified entities involved in human interaction, facilitate the impact of the works on their audience. A writer tries by means of “enargetic speech” to present an event as an eye-witness, and wants his audience to experience this description as if they too were witnesses.

We can close by citing an example of the use of the rhetorical method of evidence in a work whose topic is related to the well-known medieval iconography of Death, especially „death dance” descriptions. *The Conversation of a Master With Death*, the most prominent work of secular medieval poetry in Polish, opens with a short phrase describing Death, who has appeared to the hero (Master Polycarpus) at the latter’s injunction:

He saw a naked being
Of the female gender [...]
Skinny, pale, with a yellow face [...]
The tip of her nose had fallen off;
Bloody ooze flowed from her eyes;

This personification creates a being called Death, expressing the phenomenon of inevitable mortality of all life. After we have “met” a death figure speaking to people, engaging them in a death dance, our perception of the dying process and its circumstances is different. We have all a phantasm of death in our minds, without having gained experience of it in the normal sensory way. Typological constructions bring us closer to pre-figurations that are inaccessible to sensory perception. We owe this “weak truth” attained via rhetorical devices to their performative impact on the audience. Abstract and mental qualities and processes are made visible and their performed representations can be experienced as real, coexisting with past and present events. ■

Further reading:

Dąbrowka A. (2011). [Ed.]. *Pogranicza teatralności. Poezja, poetyka, praktyka*. [Borders of Theatricality: Poetry, Poetics, Practice] Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL.

The Conversation of a Master With Death, anonymous 15th century text, trans. Michael Mikoś, http://staropolska.pl/ang/middleages/sec_poetry/conversation.php3