

## ФИЛМ И КЊИЖЕВНОСТ 2.0

# ИНСТИТУТ ЗА КЊИЖЕВНОСТ И УМЕТНОСТ

СЕРИЈА Ц: ТЕОРИЈСКА ИСТРАЖИВАЊА

Књига 21

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# ФИЛМ И КЊИЖЕВНОСТ 2.0

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ИНСТИТУТ ЗА КЊИЖЕВНОСТ И УМЕТНОСТ  
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## **FILM AND SOME PHILOSOPHY CONCEPTS OF THE EUROPEAN ANTIQUITY**

### **Dramatic culmination of sequential narrative and the visual arts of the European antiquity**

*Abstract:* This paper examines representations of the dramatic culmination of sequential action in selected artworks from European antiquity. In doing so, it includes an analysis of the relevant passages by art historiographers of the European antiquity: Vitruvius (1st century BC), Pliny the Elder (1st century AD), Philostratus the Elder (2nd century), Philostratus the Younger (3rd century) and Callistratus (probably 4th century). Drawing on Aristotle's definition of tragedy and dramatic action, the paper demonstrates that the dramatic culmination of sequential narrative, a quality that has remained central throughout the entire history of stage and film production, must be taken into consideration in an analysis of certain visual artworks of the European antiquity. A short comparative study of Aristotle's definition of tragedy and the definitions of the visual arts provided by several art historiographers of the European antiquity raises an important question. According to an interpretation of Aristotle, the result (and thus the aim) of tragedy/drama is catharsis. What then, according to art historiographers of the European antiquity, is the result/ aim of a visual artwork?

*Keywords:* sequential narrative, dramatic culmination, visual arts of the European antiquity, Aristotle, art historiographers of the European antiquity, mimesis, catharsis, pleasure

The constructs of cinematic art representing a moment in time (Mroz 2013) and that of depicting time in the visual arts of the European antiquity have already been previously introduced (Bojić 2020). This paper examines one of the constructs stemming from the latter study. It is concerned with representations of the dramatic culmination of sequential action in the visual arts of the European antiquity. The artworks relevant to this topic are here used as examples, and their purely art-historical significance is disregarded. Several such crucial visual artworks from European antiquity, executed in a variety of media, depict a sequential action and its dramatic culmination. Some such artworks, such as the Hellenistic *Laocoon Group* represent a single dramatic moment, which the viewer recognises as a dramatic consequence

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of preceding action omitted in the artwork itself. Others, such as the *Parthenon frieze* in Athens (c. 443 and 437), and the procession frieze of the *Ara Pacis Augustae* in Rome (consecrated in 9 BC), display a developing sequential action, which culminates in a single dramatic celebratory moment. Others still, such as the *Gigantomachy frieze* from the Altar of Pergamon or certain Roman mosaics of the hunting scenes, depict dramatic moments that happen simultaneously.

### *A brief study of the relevant art material*

The infamous *Laocoon Group* (**Reproduction 1**), Hellenistic in style and, most likely, original provenance, represents a single dramatic moment, which the viewer recognises as a dramatic consequence of preceding action, omitted in the artwork itself. The marble sculpture shows the Trojan priest Laocoon and his two young sons attacked by serpents. Greek myth, as well as Greek and Roman literature provide different accounts as reasons for Laocoon's suffering. Here we will follow Virgil's account of the events as outlined in his *Aeneid* (ii, 109 *et seq.*) — Laocoon was punished for having warned the Trojans against accepting the wooden horse left by the Greeks. Virgil's account would have been very well known at the time when Pliny the Elder in XXXVI, 5 especially mentioned this artwork as one of the most excellent sculptures from a private imperial collection and named its artists as Agesander, Athenodoros and Polydorus of Rhodes. Since its excavation and subsequent public display in Rome in the early 16 c., the work provided an inspiration for the scholars and artists alike (Bieber). Here we will disregard



**Reproduction 1** Agesander, Athenodoros and Polydorus of Rhodes, *Laocoon Group*, marble, 208 cm × 163 cm × 112 cm, Vatican Museums

the (tempting) Winkelmann-Lessing debate (Lessing), and will focus solely on one quality of the *Laocoon Group*: namely, that it represents a single dramatic moment as a culmination of a preceding action. The preceding action is omitted, yet it is understood as inherent.

Some other artworks of the European antiquity such as the *Parthenon frieze* in Athens (c. 443 and 437) and the procession frieze of the *Ara Pacis Augustae* in Rome (consecrated in 9 BC), display developing sequential actions that culminate in a single celebratory moment. A reconstruction of the *Parthenon frieze* provided by the Acropolis Museum on its website (Acropolis Museum), which includes visual material of all the frieze blocks preserved in the museum and overseas, shows the relief frieze, 160 meters in length and one meter in height from the upper register of the temple's naos. The relief, possibly executed by Phidias' workshop, narrates in two parallel files sequential episodes from the Panathenaian procession and includes figures of horsemen, charioteers and chariots, men and women, sacrificial cattle and offerings to the goddess Athena, the protectress of the city. The key offering to the goddess and the culmination of the procession is the offering of a newly woven and embroidered robe for the goddess (the event after which the animals sacrifice was offered). As the two files of the procession converge, the twelve seated Olympic gods avert their gaze as the priest, another figure and three smaller figures marvel at the robe. The dramatic culminating moment of the procession depicted is self-explanatory.

**Reproduction 2** Phidias' workshop, the *Peplos scene from the Parthenon frieze*, East V, 31–35, ca. 447–433 BC, the British Museum, London



As an example of an artwork rendering the dramatic moment of culmination in a symbolic manner we shall now briefly examine the panels at the ends of the procession frieze in the upper register of the exterior walls of the Altar of Peace, *Ara Pacis Augustae* in Rome (**Reproduction 3**), consecrated in 9 BC (Capo). The frieze features a quasi-documentary sequential procession of Augustus and his contemporaries — his family and political and other allies. Used as an altar where sacrificing took place, *Ara Pacis* received offerings that

were by default associated with invoking peace, and, over time, came to recall the golden age of Augustus. In addition, in the upper register, at the ends of the procession frieze, there are four relief panels flanking the entryways to the altar. Symbolical in their meaning, one of the panels features an idyllic representation of Rome through the imagery of a central female figure (the so-called Tellus panel), another that of the Roman Peace itself (usually referred to as the Roma panel). One of the remaining two matching panels at the other ends of the frieze represents a sacrifice offered by historical or mythological figures (usually referred to as Numa/Aeneas panel), whilst the fourth panel, although sometimes assumed to depict the discovery of the twins, is too damaged to be reconstructed or understood. The readable imagery of the three partly preserved panels points to the manner in which the artists created the overall composition of the frieze. The dramatic culmination of the sequentially rendered procession, that is, the conclusion of the procession as a single celebratory moment, is embodied in the panels with the symbolic meanings of Rome's prosperity, peace and piety.



**Reproduction 3 a-c** Artists unknown, *Ara Pacis Augustae*, consecrated 9 BC, today in the Museum of Ara Pacis, Rome: *The Tellus panel*, *the Roma (Roman Peace) panel* (hypothetically reconstructed) and *the Numa/Aeneas panel*

Some imagery from European antiquity relevant to our topic, such as *Gigantomachy frieze* from the Altar of Pergamon (Bilsel), depicts simultaneous dramatic moments. Depiction of action with multiple dramatic culmination moments or, in terms of visual arts, a composition with several dramatic foci (which often also include the central one), can also be seen in certain mosaic representations of a popular theme of hunts in Roman (imperial) art (Halili), such as those from the so-called *Small game hunt* and the *Big hunt*, Villa Romana del Casale, Piazza Armerina (Dragotta), Italy, 4c AD (**Reproduction 4 a-b**). In this sense, they can be compared to the corresponding literary description of a multi-focal hunting scene painting by Philostratus the Elder in 1. 28 Hunters (Philostratus the Elder).



**Reproduction 4 a-b** Artists unknown, Villa Romana del Casale, Piazza Armerina, Italy, 4c AD, in situ: *Small game hunt* (detail), and the *Big hunt* (detail)

Such mosaics, featuring multiple foci in hunting scenes were sometimes executed in a more ordered manner, as separate parts of a larger mosaic with the borders in mosaic used as demarcation lines. One such example is the *Mosaic with hunting scenes*, often referred to by the name of *Four Seasons*, from the Villa of Constantine, Antioch,<sup>1</sup> mid-fourth century AD (Kolarik), now in Musée du Louvre, Paris (**Reproduction 5**).

**Reproduction 5** Artists unknown, *Mosaic with hunting scenes*, also referred to as *Four Seasons*, Villa of Constantine, Antioch, mid-fourth century AD, now in Musée du Louvre, Paris



<sup>1</sup> For the hunting scenes in mosaics of Antioch see Lavin 1963.

Such depictions of multifocal moments of culmination of an action can also incorporate representations of the preceding sequential narratives. This is in line with similar single-focus mythological hunting representations of the Calydonian boar hunt, Hippolytus' hunt or the scene of Death of Adonis, often executed as reliefs on sarcophagi in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD.<sup>2</sup>

The same principle of multi-focal representation is evident in the depiction of apparently synchronous events on the *Gigantomachy frieze* from the Altar of Pergamon (c. 180–160 BC), today in Berlin (**reproduction 6a-b**). The old Greek myth of the battle between the gods and the giants was a well-explored theme in Greek art, and such representations, among others, include the north frieze of the Siphnian Treasury in Delphi from the 6 c. BC. The *Gigantomachy frieze* from the Altar of Pergamon runs along sides of the altar as a 113 meters long single composition in high relief representing continual flow of dramatic moments frozen in time.



**Reproduction 6a-b** Artists unknown, *Gigantomachy frieze* from the Altar of Pergamon (c. 180–160 BC), today in Berlin: Hecate fights against Clytius (left); Artemis against Otos (right); Athena and Nike fight Alkyoneus (left), Gaia rises up from the ground (right)

The contoured movements of the figures represented contribute to the fluidity of the narrative. Often referred to as an artwork representative of the 'Pergamene baroque', its style can be disregarded here in favour of observing of a series of dramatic moments rendered. This is in line with the rendering of the same theme as a group of physically separate although simultaneous dramatic events on metopes of various temples, such as those from the east side of the Parthenon (ca. 442 BC). The same principle can also be applied in observing the theme of other mythological battles in Greek art, such as Amazonomachy (Athenian treasury at Delphi from 490 BC, Hephaestium at

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the Roman mythological sarcophagi, see Zanker and Ewald 2012.

Athens 450 BC, the temple of Zeus in Olympia 460 BC, the west metopes of the Parthenon and many others) or Centauromachy (the south metopes of the Parthenon and elsewhere). It is important to note that this manner of representing battle scenes in the art of the European antiquity was not universal: for example, scenes of historical battles rendered in Roman art may or may not adhere to this principle. It is also important to note that the very monument of the Altar of Pergamon also features a partly preserved and in this sense contrasting composition of sequential narrative embodied in the *Telephus frieze*, (Dreyfus, Schraudolph) executed on a smaller scale and in honour of the mythological founder of the city of Pergamon. Although not deprived of depicting certain dramatic moments, the *Telephus frieze* mainly tells a sequential story of the hero's life in the narrative's continuum.

### *Aristotle's definition of tragedy/drama and art historiographers of the European antiquity*

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC) provided the definition of Greek drama in his treatise *Poetics*, VI, 1449b. An analysis of the writings of the five art historiographers of the European antiquity: Vitruvius (1st century BC), Pliny the Elder (1st century AD), Philostratus the Elder (2nd century AD), Philostratus the Younger (3rd century AD) and Callistratus (3rd or 4th century AD), reveals the application of some of Aristotle's and other philosophers' ideas to the analysis of the visual arts (Bojić, 2017). The five authors whose relevant texts define them as art historiographers of the European antiquity are the only figures whose substantial texts dedicated to the visual arts have been preserved (in Greek: the two Philostrati and Callistratus; in Latin: Vitruvius and Pliny the Elder). Vitruvius wrote on architecture (*De Architectura*), Pliny the Elder on all forms of fine arts and applied arts practices, the two Philostrati on painting (both titled *Eikones*) and Callistratus on sculpture (*Descriptiones*).<sup>3</sup> Collectively, their writings addressed all aspects of visual arts in the long period spanning almost one thousand years of Greek and Roman art practice. Each of these writers in their own manner (including their specific

3 The texts by the art historiographers of antiquity used here are: Vitruvii de Architectura libri decem, ed. F. Krohn, Lipsiae, in aedibus B. G. Teubneri, MCMXII; Gaius Plinius Secundus, *Naturalis Historia*, ed. Karl Friedrich Theodor Mayhoff, Teubner, 1897; Flavii Philostrati Opera, Vol 2. Philostratus the Lemnian (Philostratus Major). Carl Ludwig Kayser. in aedibus B. G. Teubneri. Lipsiae. 1871; Flavii Philostrati Opera, Vol 2. Philostratus Minor. Carl Ludwig Kayser. in aedibus B. G. Teubneri. Lipsiae. 1871; Flavii Philostrati Opera, Vol 2. Callistratus, *Descriptiones Statuarum* Carl Ludwig Kayser. in aedibus B. G. Teubneri. Lipsiae. 1871

linguistic and stylistic idiosyncrasies) traced the origins of the traditions of art practices since Homeric times. Some of them outlined a sequential line of artists and of their works thereby establishing a historical continuum linking these diverse texts and enabling a perspective of examining them as part of a particular literary category.<sup>4</sup>

Although the writings of these authors have usually been examined separately and as per their allocated respective genres, such as by Harris–McCoy, Clark, Anderson, Shaffer, Webb, Newby, Bowie and Elsner, their texts also attest to a different kind of value. This is evident in the ways artists and their patrons drew upon some of these writings as sources of inspiration for their own work (Bojic, 2018). Observed collectively, this body of writing appears to be the earliest known European literary source on the visual arts, and as such forms part of a long and important tradition of the later disciplines of art historiography, art theory and art analysis.

A visual arts image can literally depict a drama performed on the theatre stage and such imagery includes, among other, a number of Greek vases as well as some Pompeian wall paintings. In the words of Aristotle:

Tragedy is an imitation of a serious and finished action of a certain dimension, with speech that is elegant and special for each type in certain parts, with characters who act and do not narrate, and by causing pity and fear such affects are purified.

The two key constructs of this definition, imitation (mimesis) and purification (catharsis), are the constructs we shall examine in relation to the visual arts.

### Mimesis

Mimetic quality of the visual arts appears to be self-evident. In the words of Vitruvius VII, v, 1 and 4:

A picture is, in fact, a representation of an object that actually exists or may exist, for example a man, a house, a ship, or anything else from whose definite and actual form a likeness can be created.  
[...] The fact is that paintings that do not resemble reality should not be praised, and even when they are technically excellent there is no reason to declare them good if they do not imitate objects without violating the laws of reality.

<sup>4</sup> The writers themselves pointed to the existence of such a literary genre, mentioning some other, little-known or unknown authors in the field of art historiography of antiquity.

This compares to a description of a particular painting offered by Philostratus the Elder in 1.12 Bosphorus:

[...] the picture shows the things that exist, the things that happen, and in some cases the way they happen, not insulting the truth with the reason for such a large number of things represented, but showing the true nature of things just as if the painter represented only a single thing.

Philostratus the Elder offered a definition of the art of painting in the Introduction to his *Imagines*:

For the one who needs a theory of mind, the invention of painting belongs to the gods — and the evidence for this on earth are all the patterns with which the seasons colour the landscape, and the phenomena we see in the sky — but for the one who searches for the very origin of art, the oldest invention and the most similar to nature is imitation, and that was invented by the sages, who called it either painting or sculpture.

That imitation<sup>5</sup> is at the core of visual arts practice was recognised by Pliny the Elder who in XXXV, 3 wrote that the art of painting was created by drawing a line around the shadow of the human body. In XXXV, 12 he says that the same principle of imitating the shape of human body applies to the creation of sculpture.

Philostratus the Elder also wrote (in his Introduction) that the same process of imitation applies to sculpture and painting alike:

There are many forms of sculpture — sculpture itself and imitation in bronze, and the work of those who carve Lygdian or Parian marble, then ivory carving, and, by Zeus, the art of gem carving is also a part of sculpture — while painting is imitation through the use of colours...

Philostratus the Elder, again in his Introduction, compares painting to the truth and points out the wisdom given to the poets and painters alike:

Whoever despises painting is unjust to the truth, and is also unjust to all the wisdom given to the poets — for the poet and the painter contribute equally to our knowledge of the deeds and figures of heroes —and does not praise the proportion, the quality which unites art and mind.

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5 Among the notable authors especially concerned with the question of mimesis in the arts and literature of the European antiquity are: Warry, J, G; Verdenius, W, J; Auerbach, E; Else, G, F; Onians, J; Moravcsik, J, Temko, P; Lodge, R, C; Gebauer, G, Wulf, C; Murdoch, I; Pieper, J.

## Catharsis

There is no notion of catharsis by that name in the writings of art historiographers of the European antiquity. Nonetheless, some lines by Philostratus the Younger specify the relationship between the art of painting and the dramatic arts. In the Introduction to his *Imagines* Philostratus the Younger wrote:

If you think about it, you will see that the art of painting is related to poetry and that both have in common an apparition,<sup>6</sup> a stage that seems to be real, and also all the accessories that denote dignity and greatness and power, and that serve to enchant the mind, and likewise, in the art of painting figures, what poets describe in words is shown with lines.

This definition by Philostratus the Younger allows us to attempt to apply Aristotle's definition of tragedy. As per the two authors, all other elements are shared between stage drama and the art of painting, with a notable exception of the affects of pity and fear and their catharsis. Callistratus in his writing on the statue of Medea singles out the sculptor's ability to bring forth the character's soul and its state. In this instance, however, it is a representation of a character familiar from a stage production.<sup>7</sup> In Callistratus' other descriptions of statuary, much attention is paid to the affects and feelings of the subjects and some of those may indeed be described as pity and fear, although many would not. Similarly, some descriptions by Philostrati of certain paintings, most poignantly in their portraits of women, may also carry the same constructs, although many would not. This raises the question of what happened to catharsis in the visual arts of the European antiquity.

An answer may have been provided by Philostratus the Younger in his Introduction:

And the deception contained in his [painter's] work is pleasant and does not deserve reproach, because is it not so that coming across the things that do not exist but appear to exist, and falling under their influence, since it is harmless, a proper and appropriate manner of entertainment?

If, in theatre drama, and by extension in all literature, the result of a stage or written work is the elusive catharsis, what then is the result of a visual artwork? In previously quoted lines by Philostratus the Younger on the nature of poetry (i.e. drama) and the visual arts, he observes that the el-

<sup>6</sup> The word apparition here denotes a person, a character on stage.

<sup>7</sup> Callistratus, 13 Medea: '...the sculptor imitated Euripides' drama.'

ements of both *serve to enchant the mind* (of the observer). If, as the same passage suggests, painting renders in lines what poets convey in words, then the effect of visual artwork would be expected to equal that of a stage or literary work. Instead, his construct of experiencing a visual artwork being *a harmless, proper and appropriate way of entertainment* evokes Plato's construct of useful pleasure. According to the overall body of texts of the *Imagines* by both Philostrati, and in light of this definition, the result, if not the purpose of observing artworks would therefore be intellectual entertainment coupled with emotional pleasure. Consequently, for these authors, the notion of catharsis in viewing a work of art becomes obsolete.

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## List of Reproductions

- Reproduction 1** Agesander, Athenodoros and Polydorus of Rhodes, *Laocoon Group*, marble, 208 cm × 163 cm × 112 cm, Vatican Museums
- Reproduction 2** Phidias' workshop, the *Peplos scene from the Parthenon frieze*, East V, 31–35, ca. 447–433 BC, the British Museum, London
- Reproduction 3 a-c** Artists unknown, *Ara Pacis Augustae*, consecrated 9 BC, today in the Museum of Ara Pacis, Rome: *The Tellus panel*; *the Roma (Roman Peace) panel* (hypothetically reconstructed); *the Numa/Aeneas panel*
- Reproduction 4 a-b** Artists unknown, Villa Romana del Casale, Piazza Armerina, Italy, 4c AD, in situ: *Small game hunt* (detail); *the Big hunt* (detail)
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- Reproduction 6a-b** Artists unknown, *Gygantomachy frieze* from the Altar of Pergamon (c. 180-160 BC), today in Berlin: Hecate fights against Clytius (left); Artemis against Otos (right); Athena and Nike fight Alkyoneus (left), Gaia rises up from the ground (right)

## Зоја Бојић

### ФИЛМ И НЕКИ ФИЛОЗОФСКИ КОНЦЕПТИ ЕВРОПСКЕ АНТИКЕ

Драмска кулминација секвентног наратива  
и ликовне уметности европске антике

### Резиме

Овај рад испитује приказивање драмске кулминације секвентне радње на примерима одабраних уметничких дела европске антике. При томе укључује анализу релевантних одломака историографа уметности европске антике: Витрувија (1. век старе ере), Плинија Старијег (1. век наше ере), Филострата Старијег (2. век), Филострата Млађег (3. век) и Калистрата (вероватно 4. век). Враћајући се Аристотеловој дефиницији трагедије и драмске радње, рад показује да драмски врхунац секвенцијалног наратива, квалитет који се континуирано показује кроз читаву историју сценске и филмске продукције, мора да се узме у обзир приликом анализе неких ликовних дела уметности европске антике. Кратка компаративна студија Аристотелове дефиниције трагедије и дефиниција ликовних уметности из пера неколико историографа уметности европске антике поставља важно питање. Према тумачењима Аристотела, резултат (а самим тим и циљ) трагедије/драме је катарза. Шта је, према историографима уметности европске антике, резултат/циљ ликовног уметничког дела?