

Space and Narrativity in Giambattista Tiepolo's 'The Sacrifice of Iphigenia'*

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Among Giambattista Tiepolo's most celebrated works are undoubtedly his frescoes in the hall of the Villa Valmarana near Vicenza. Painted in 1757, they represent the story of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia, who was miraculously saved from being sacrificed to the goddess Diana. A large painting on the east wall represents the sacrifice scene and Diana's hind, descending on a cloud, which is ready to take Iphigenia's place on the altar (Fig. 1). The goddess is depicted in the fresco on the ceiling, while on the wall facing the sacrifice scene there are two smaller frescoes showing ships and soldiers in the port of Aulis. As on several other occasions, Tiepolo collaborated with the painter Gerolamo Mengozzi Colonna, a specialist in fictitious architecture and perspective illusions, who created open porticoes where Tiepolo's characters appear like actors in a theatre.¹

More than half a century ago, Michael Levey published a penetrating article on the Valmarana frescoes in which he argued that the artist had slowly evolved out of the tradition of serious history painting and had invented a new style for expressing his improvisations on classical themes; a style in which drama was replaced by decorative qualities, and the aim was first and foremost to create space and air on the wall.² In the pages that follow, I will try to propose a different view on Tiepolo's treatment of both pictorial space and subject matter. The 'space and air' on the ceiling and the walls – the spatial illusions and their relations to real space – were not created for their own sake, but have a specific narrative function, as is possible only in the art of painting.

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¹ R. Pallucchini, *Gli affreschi di Giambattista e Giandomenico Tiepolo alla villa Valmarana di Vicenza*, Bergamo, Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1945; M. Levey, 'Tiepolo's Treatment of Classical Story at Villa Valmarana', in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 20 (1957), pp. 298-317, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/750784>; L. Puppi, 'I Tiepolo a Vicenza e le statue dei "nani" a Villa Valmarana a San Sebastiano', in: *Atti dell'Istituto Veneto di Scienze Lettere ed Arti, 1967-1968*, pp. 211-250; A. Mariuz, 'Villa Valmarana ai nani', in: F. Flores d'Arcais, F. Zava Boccazzi & G. Pavanello (eds.), *Gli affreschi nelle ville venete: Dal Seicento all'Ottocento*, Venezia, Alfieri, 1978, vol. 1, pp. 259-263; U. Andersson, *Giovanni Battista Tiepolo in der Villa Valmarana ai Nani*, diss., Univ. München, 1983; B. Hannegan, 'Giambattista Tiepolo and the "Sacrifice of Iphigeneia"', in: *Arte Veneta*, 39 (1985), pp. 125-131; M.E. Avagnina, 'Villa Valmarana ai Nani a San Sebastiano di Vicenza', in: M.E. Avagnin, F. Rigon & R. Sciavo, *Tiepolo: Le ville vicentine*, Milano, Electa, 1990, pp. 59-92; G. Barbieri, 'Tre storie vicentine di Giambattista Tiepolo 1734-1757', in: G.A. Cibotto, G. Barbieri, F. Martignago & G. Capnist, *Tiepolo e la vita in villa: Arte e cultura nel Settecento veneto*, Vicenza, Pozza, 1996; A. Mariuz, *Tiepolo* (ed. G. Pavanello), Verona, Cierre Edizioni, 2008, pp. 139-155.

² Levey, 'Tiepolo's treatment', cit., p. 310.



Fig. 1 G.B. Tiepolo, *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, 1757, fresco, Villa Valmarana, Vicenza. © 2016 Photo Scala, Florence.

Real and fictive space

An interesting feature of Tiepolo's representation of the Iphigenia narrative is the fact that it cannot be seen at a single glance. The hall of the villa is rather narrow; it is almost impossible to see the large fresco on the east wall and the one on the ceiling at the same time. It is also barely possible to look at the wall fresco from sufficient distance to view it in its entirety, or to perceive the depth suggested by perspective. As a consequence, the visitor will first perceive some isolated details within a limited range of view. The eye will soon be attracted by the strong perspective of a large white sarcophagus, represented near the altar with the figures of Calchas and Iphigenia.³ The sarcophagus is depicted with its long side perpendicular to the picture plane. Moreover, the large object seems to be situated entirely behind the place occupied by the altar, still remaining within the limits of Mengozzi's portico, which is evidently in contradiction with the logics of space. Within the shallow space of the portico there seems to be a second space, much narrower but with greater depth.⁴

There is another contradiction: looking up at the ceiling of the hall, we see, on both sides of the feigned opening, some smaller openings and coffer-like recessed fields enclosed between fictitious mouldings. A similarly structured ceiling is visible in the portico represented on the wall. The geometric patterns on both ceilings, the real

³ Similar sarcophagi are represented in Tiepolo's earlier versions of the subject (M. Gemin & F. Pedrocchi, *Giambattista Tiepolo*, Venezia, Arsenale, 1993, cat. 96 and 402) and in a print by Gerard de Lairese (Hannegan, 'Giambattista Tiepolo', cit.).

⁴ For the collaboration between Tiepolo and Mengozzi Colonna, see K. Christiansen (ed.), *Giambattista Tiepolo*, Milano/New York, Skira, 1996, p. 281, p. 290 n. 27, p. 291 n. 47 and n. 48.

and the depicted, seem to be intended as an extension of each other, but their directions do not correspond – that is, as long as we look at them from a viewpoint somewhere in the middle of the hall (Fig. 2). They will only appear as an extension of each other to a viewer who, coming from a corridor leading through the heart of the villa, is about to enter the hall. Only if observed from the threshold of this corridor do the frescoes on the ceiling and the wall appear as a single image in an uninterrupted space. And only looking from this position will the viewer perceive Diana's gesture as reaching in the direction of the place where the altar is.⁵



Fig. 2 Vicenza, Villa Valmarana, hall with the large frescoes on the ceiling and the east wall. From: Cevese (n. 6).

As will be demonstrated, the corridor is of crucial importance for a good understanding of the paintings. In the hall, its entrance is emphasized by classical architectural ornaments (Fig. 3). From there, the passage leads back to an external staircase, constituting a separate building body crowned by a little cupola, which is unique to the local architecture (Fig. 4). By ascending the stairs, one can reach the two floors of the villa; what is more, the staircase and corridor together constitute the only connection between the upstairs rooms and the hall.⁶

The successive movements of the viewer, as determined by the architecture of the villa, produce various changes in perception that are exploited scenographically. Coming from the stairs, the first thing one views on entering the corridor is a small part of the largest fresco (Fig. 5). The dark corridor extends like a rectangular tube

⁵ Cf. Levey, 'Tiepolo's treatment', cit., p. 308: 'The drama is expressed neither in the wall fresco nor on the ceiling, but in taut relationship between the two'.

⁶ R. Cevese, *Ville della provincia di Vicenza*, Milano, SISAR, 1971 (ed. 1980), pp. 185, 197.

directing the gaze to a sharply framed and clearly illuminated fragment of the composition. The fragment appears as a self-contained scene with the figures of Calchas and Iphigenia and a group of frightened Greeks. Just above these figures the fragment is cut off, leaving the feigned portico out of sight. However, the strongly foreshortened sarcophagus is visible, giving the scene a convincing perspective and suggesting a space that corresponds exactly to the narrow depth described above as a separate fiction within the broader perspective of the portico. Moreover, the converging orthogonals of the sarcophagus appear as a perfect extension of the corridor itself: the composition seems indeed to be contrived as to accommodate the gaze of a viewer approaching from this part of the villa.



Fig. 3 Vicenza, Villa Valmarana, hall with the entrance to the corridor and the smaller frescoes on the west wall. From: Cevese (n. 6).

Then, moving through the corridor towards the hall, we suddenly perceive a great, illusionistically rendered *deus ex machina*. The intensely upward looking eyes of the figures around the altar induce us to turn our gaze in the same direction, where we see a large cloud bearing the hind. The cloud seems to be suspended between the ceiling and the wall, somewhere in the continuous space suggested by both frescoes. With a pointing gesture the goddess Diana, having appeared in heaven, sends down the victim that will take Iphigenia's place. For a moment, the attention of the viewer remains captivated by the amazing illusionistic effect of the depicted scene.

After that, the viewer's gaze is directed towards the other side of the wall fresco, where, isolated between large columns and hiding his face, the figure of Agamemnon is recognizable. In the ceiling fresco, where Diana is represented, there are two more figures, which, seen from here, are upside down. Only after turning round in the hall and looking at the ceiling from the opposite side does the viewer recognize the two figures as allegories of winds. On the wall facing the sacrifice scene, the port of Aulis is visible with some vessels ready for departure.

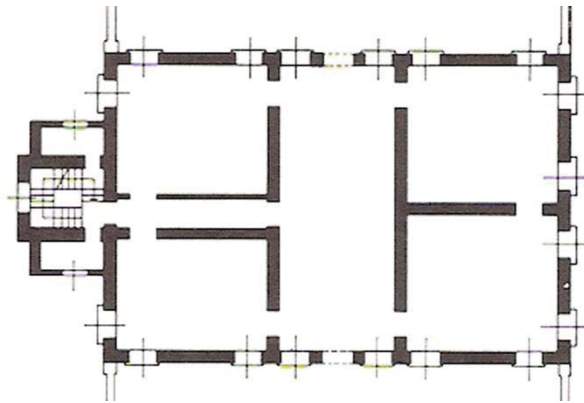


Fig. 4 Vicenza, Villa Valmarana, ground floor plan. From: Cevese (n. 6).

Obviously, the above-mentioned corridor does not constitute the only entrance to the hall: access is also possible through six other doors. Two of these, the largest, lead to external terraces at the north and south sides of the villa. On entering the villa, the visitor first sees the frescoes from one of these two main doorways. Close to the corners of the hall, there are four smaller doors leading to the adjacent rooms. None of the doorways, however, are situated as centrally as that leading from the corridor. Only when seen from the threshold of this door is the perspective of the largest fresco recognizable as a virtual depth, and only seen from this position do the images on the wall and the ceiling appear as a coherent unity. When the owner of the villa and his guests descended from the upper floor, they first observed the fright of the Greeks, then the goddess Diana and the hind, subsequently the figure of Agamemnon and finally two winds blowing vigorously over the port of Aulis.

Narrative moments

The depicted scenes represent some fragments from the final part of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and the frescoes are indeed reminiscent of theatrical staging. Nonetheless, a similar stupendous spectacle could not be staged in the theatres of the eighteenth century. Particularly problematic was the scene with Diana's miraculous intervention, since the theatrical representation of a *deus ex machina* was considered absurd and lacking verisimilitude. Attempts to stage the sacrifice scene were unhappy for another reason as well: it required many characters, which tended to cause a visual and sonorous chaos. Accordingly, most dramaturges preferred having the story recited by a narrator instead of showing it in dramatic action. At the end of Euripides' tragedy, in fact, the sacrifice scene is *narrated* by a messenger as an event that takes place just outside the spectator's view. By visualizing this verbal narrative in a very theatrical way, Tiepolo demonstrated the superiority of the art of painting.⁷

⁷ The French theorist Du Bos thought the subject was more suitable for painting than for the stage: Abbé Du Bos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, Paris 1719 (ed. Paris, École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1993), p. 34. See also: E. Hénin, *Ut pictura theatrum. Théâtre et peinture de la Renaissance italienne au classicisme français*, Genève, Droz, 2003, p. 391. For the historical reception of theatrical Iphigenia-representations, see H.R. Jauss, *Pour une esthétique de la réception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978, pp. 210-262.



Fig. 5 G.B. Tiepolo, *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, 1757, fresco (partial view as seen from the corridor), Villa Valmarana, Vicenza.

Tiepolo's treatment of the subject is different from that of other painters. In the tragedy, the messenger introduces his account with the following words: 'Suddenly a miracle happened'. The event itself is evoked by a description of the frightened reactions of Calchas and the other Greeks: 'The priest cried out, and all the army echoed his cry'.⁸ This is precisely what Tiepolo's fresco shows: the Greek soldiers and Calchas are depicted with open mouths, their eyes looking upward.⁹ Visually, the cry of the Greek army is, indeed, a plural 'echo' of Calchas' frightened cry. Specific emphasis on this particular moment of the narrative is a feature missing from other representations of the subject. In 1750, Giambattista Piazzetta painted a large canvas showing Iphigenia in an action not mentioned in the tragedy, and in 1732 Giambattista Crosato depicted a *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* in which neither Diana nor the hind seems to be noticed by any of the other characters. The figures painted by Federico Bencovich, who represented the scene in 1715, also seem to each gaze in a different direction. Charles de la Fosse showed the goddess engaged in a dialogue with Calchas, and Sebastien Bourdon depicted a Diana lifting up Iphigenia and carrying her to heaven.¹⁰ In contrast to representations of the subject by other artists, Tiepolo followed the tragedy text very closely, emphasizing the exact moment of divine intervention and giving the episode a prominent place in comparison with the other components of the narrative.

This unusual emphasis on the moment at which the miracle took place had consequences for the representation of Agamemnon. At first sight, the king appears to be depicted in a fully conventional manner: hiding his face in his coat, he seems to ignore the miracle. This gesture is mentioned by Cicero, who wrote that the Greek painter Timanthes concealed Agamemnon's face because the greatest sadness could not be represented. Plinius added that Timanthes had been the only painter capable of making the viewer imagine more than was actually depicted. Much later these words were paraphrased by Alberti and other authors.¹¹ By the middle of the seventeenth century, however, this old ideal of artistic restraint had become the object of fierce criticism. In 1670, about two years after LeBrun's lecture on the expression of the passions, Grégoire Huret wrote that Timanthes did not finish his work properly because of his own incapacity. Some years earlier, LeBrun painted a (now lost) version of the story with an ingenious variation on the traditional gesture of Agamemnon: though hiding his face from the characters around the altar, he did not hide his face from the viewer, to whom the king's expression was fully exposed.

⁸ R. Rutherford (ed.), *Euripides: The Bacchae and Other Plays*, London, Penguin, 2005, p. 222.

⁹ In a preparatory drawing, now in Berlin, Iphigenia and the Greek soldiers appear with downcast eyes. H.Th. Schulze Altcapenberg, *Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770) und sein Atelier. Zeichnungen & Radierungen im Berliner Kupferstichkabinett*, Berlin, Mann, 1996, pp. 31-32, cat. no. 8.

¹⁰ G. Knox, *Giambattista Piazzetta 1682-1754*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 149 and pp. 205-208; G. Fiocco, *Giambattista Crosato*, Padova, Le Tre Venezie, 1944, pp. 39-40 and tav. 1-4; P.O. Krückmann, *Federico Bencovich 1677-1753*, Hildesheim, Olms, 1988; A. Binion, *The Piazzetta Paradox*, in J. Martineau & A. Robison (eds.), *The glory of Venice: Art in the Eighteenth Century*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 1994, pp. 150-151 (see also entry no. 71, p. 431); G. Nepi Sciré & G. Romanelli (eds.), *Splendori del Settecento veneziano*, Milano, Electa, 1995, pp. 202-203; C. Gustin-Gomez, *Charles de la Fosse 1636-1716. Le maître des modernes*, Dijon, Éd. Faton, 2006, vol. 2, pp. 37 e 48; J. Thuiller, *Sébastien Bourdon 1616-1671*, Paris, Montpellier/Strasbourg, Réunion des Musées nationaux, 2000, pp. 242-243, no. 98. The way Bourdon depicted the scene had a parallel in the art of antiquity, as shows a statue group from the 2nd century B.C., now in Copenhagen, representing Artemis lifting up Iphigenia from the altar. F. Studniczka, 'Artemis und Iphigenie. Marmorgruppe der Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek', in: *Abhandlungen der philologisch-historischen Klasse der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 37, Leipzig, Hirzel, 1926.

¹¹ Cicero, *Orator*, Leipzig, Teubner, 1980, XXII, 74; Plinius, *Naturalis Historiae*, Pisa, Giardini, 1977-1979, xxxv, 1, 73; L.B. Alberti, *On painting and on sculpture*, London, Phaidon, 1972, p. 82.

The dispute concerning Timanthes still continued during Tiepolo's lifetime. In 1757, the year Tiepolo was working on *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, the French artist Carle Van Loo painted a canvas with the same subject. It had been commissioned by the court of Frederick the Great and the painter was explicitly asked to show Agamemnon's face, so that his expression of grief would be visible. In France, Van Loo's painting provoked a vehement controversy, which began even before the canvas was exhibited in the Salon.¹²

Even if Tiepolo was entirely unaware of the French controversy, he was probably familiar with representations of the subject in which Agamemnon did not hide his face, or indeed was entirely absent. Piazzetta, for example, represented Agamemnon accompanying his daughter to the place of sacrifice. Tiepolo could also have seen engravings after Bourdon's famous painting of the subject, which shows the consternation of the frightened Greeks but not Agamemnon hiding his face. Or perhaps he knew Giulio Carpioni's *Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, in which neither Diana nor Agamemnon is represented. What is certain is that in one of his previous paintings of the subject (dated ca. 1730) Tiepolo himself did not show the king with his face veiled.¹³

At the time Tiepolo was working on the frescoes in the Villa Valmarana, the motif of the hidden face certainly did not constitute the only possible way of depicting Agamemnon in the sacrifice scene. On the contrary, representing the figure in this manner was a matter of choice. For Giambattista and his patron, the reasons for this choice probably related not so much to the old story about Timanthes as to the text of Euripides' tragedy, in which Agamemnon's gesture was mentioned for the first time, albeit not exactly as part of the scene Tiepolo depicted in his fresco. The Greek text is indeed very explicit about Agamemnon's attitude at the moment of Diana's intervention. First, it says, the king was gazing at the ground. The next moment, when the deer arrived with a sudden blow and Iphigenia disappeared, all Greeks cried out - including Agamemnon.¹⁴

Tiepolo, in fact, did not represent Agamemnon in the direct proximity of the altar, but on the other side of a visual barrier composed of the chained motifs of sarcophagus and large double columns. By so doing, he set the figure apart from the sacrifice scene and assigned it to a separate place in the fictitious space of Mengozzi's portico. For a viewer standing in the real space of the hall, it is virtually impossible to see both parts of the large composition at the same time. This spatial division corresponds with a discrepancy in time. As a matter of fact, the gesture of Agamemnon belongs to an earlier moment in the narrative, referred to by the messenger at the beginning of his account. It concerns the arrival of Iphigenia at the site of sacrifice: 'When King Agamemnon saw the girl entering the grove for sacrifice, he heaved a sigh and, turning his head away, he shed tears, holding his robe in front of his eyes'.¹⁵ This specific event is depicted on a wall painting from Pompeii showing Agamemnon hiding

¹² For the representation of the Sacrifice of Iphigenia in French painting, and the dispute concerning Timanthes, see: F.H. Dowley, 'French baroque representations of the "Sacrifice of Iphigenia"', in: A. Kosegarten & P. Tigler (eds.), *Festschrift Ulrich Middeldorf*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1968, pp. 466-475; H. Fullenwider, 'The Sacrifice of Iphigenia' in French and German Art Criticism, 1755 - 1757", in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 52 (1989), pp. 539-549; J. Montagu, 'Interpretations of Timanthes' Sacrifice of Iphigenia', in: J. Onians (ed.), *Sight & Insight: Essays on Art and Culture in Honour of E.H. Gombrich at 85*, London, Phaidon Press, 1994; T. Crow, *The Intelligence of Art*, Chapel Hill/London, University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

¹³ C. Donzelli & G.M. Pilo, *I pittori del Seicento veneto*, Firenze, Sandron, 1967, p. 111, fig. 120; Gemin & Pedrocchi, 'Giambattista Tiepolo', cit., cat. 96.

¹⁴ Rutherford, 'Euripides', cit., p. 221.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

his face, while Iphigenia is conducted to the spot where the sacrifice will subsequently take place.¹⁶

It appears, then, that two interrelated peculiarities are to be noticed in Tiepolo's rendering of the story. Firstly, the painted image cannot be seen in its entirety, but reveals itself gradually to a spectator who is looking from a number of successive viewpoints. Secondly, the principal subject of the frescoes corresponds to one single moment in the narrative of the Euripidean tragedy, and does so with an unprecedented accuracy. Accordingly, secondary episodes (such as Agamemnon hiding his face) refer to previous or following moments in time. To the moving viewer, the story as narrated in the classical text seems to unfold step by step.

On entering the corridor, the viewer initially perceives no more than a fragment of the large wall fresco. Only the cry of the Greeks is visible, but not yet the cause of their consternation. Neither was this immediately clear to the Greeks themselves: they *heard* the sound of the blow but could not yet *see* what was happening. Having said that the Greeks heard the sound of the blow and Iphigenia disappeared, the messenger continues his account by narrating that Calchas, and all the others after him, shouted out when they saw the unexpected portent 'sent by some god.'¹⁷ It is this event that becomes visible when the viewer proceeds through the little corridor and arrives at the threshold to the hall. This is the moment of *meraviglia*, the wonder provoked by the divine intervention, by the sudden reversal in the narrative and by the astonishing pictorial *macchina*.

Then, after a while, the gaze of the viewer strays towards the margin of the composition where the desperate Agamemnon is represented. His attitude and gesture are part of the episode preceding the miracle, as told at the beginning of the narrative. Here we see not only the moment of despair preceding the divine intervention, but also the following moment of happiness. This is announced in the large wall fresco, where, above the altar, a banner is depicted moving in the wind. The moving banner evokes the conclusion of the story, by suggesting what is still to come.¹⁸

When we finally enter the hall and turn around, casting our eye in the opposite direction, we will clearly recognize the two strongly blowing allegoric figures representing the return of the wind, which takes place at the end of the story. When Iphigenia has disappeared and the hind has been sacrificed, Calchas at last announces the departure of the ships. A glimpse of the Greek army fleet can now be seen on the walls at both sides of the corridor. In the foreground, various figures are represented, only two of whom are looking back in the direction of the viewer and the sacrifice scene. The other characters are represented with their faces turned away or bending down in the direction of the ships: they seem busy with preparations for the journey. Like Agamemnon's gesture, their actions are subordinate to the central subject, enriching it with an added narrative moment.

Pictorial narration and the unity of time

Tiepolo was obviously not the first artist to accommodate a large composition to the changing viewpoint of the spectator, nor was an achievement of this kind without precedent in his own artistic practice. Some years prior to the frescoes in the Villa Valmarana, he painted the great staircase ceiling in the Würzburg Residence, tailoring the composition, as Peter Krückmann observed, to 'the continual changing of viewing angle as the visitor ascended the stairs, so that the painting can – and indeed must –

¹⁶ A. De Franciscis, *Il Museo Nazionale di Napoli*, Napoli, Di Mauro, 1963, tav. 35; J. Hodske, *Mythologische Bildthemen in den Häusern Pompejis*, Ruppolding/Mainz, Rutzen, 2007, pp. 257-258, Taf. 175, 1.2, cat. 229.

¹⁷ Rutherford, 'Euripides', cit, p. 222.

¹⁸ Mariuz, 'Villa Valmarana', cit., p. 259.

be seen as a sequence of discrete images, instead of as a single picture'.¹⁹ Something similar could be said of the Iphigenia frescoes, which, in this respect, are no more than a continuation of precedent practice. What is quite unusual, however, is the *narrative* quality of their spatial and temporal organization. For an instance of pictorial narrativity that is to a certain extent comparable we have to look back to Correggio's frescoed dome in the cathedral of Parma, where, as Carolyn Smyth has observed, a visitor approaching the altar perceives a temporal sequence of events: 'The viewer progresses forward in space and forward in the Virgin's posthumous history, moving from her death to her Assumption and to an allusion to her imminent Coronation'.²⁰

Tiepolo's sophisticated way of storytelling can be interpreted as an ingenious response to the contradictions of contemporary views on pictorial narration. History painters were expected to represent human actions and yet observe the principle of temporal unity – two requirements that were hard to reconcile. Inevitably, various forms of compromise had been introduced to both the practice and the theory of the art of painting.²¹ The influential seventeenth-century dramatist d'Aubignac, for instance, argued that a pictorial representation of the Sacrifice of Iphigenia should consist of a 'principal action' composed of various 'incidents' or *actions dépendantes*. The terms he used derive from sixteenth-century Italian literary criticism concerning the difference between epos and tragedy. They were first applied to the art of painting by Pietro da Cortona, who, during a dispute with Andrea Sacchi at the Roman *Accademia di S. Luca*, argued in favour of *grandi dipinti*, large paintings with an epic structure, containing many figures and various episodes, all related to a single *principale argomento*.²²

What Da Cortona does not seem to have explicitly addressed is the process of time embodied in the secondary episodes. The question of time had been discussed in relation to epic poetry by Castelvetro, who wrote that Achilles' wrath is the principal subject of the Iliad, but that Homer also narrates preceding and subsequent events without which the main action could not have taken place.²³ This particular function of secondary figures and their actions, their pointing forward and back in time, was not mentioned with reference to a painting until the second half of the seventeenth century, when Le Brun argued that Poussin, in his famous *Gathering of the Manna*, had depicted a temporal succession of 'episodes', and Félibien described the arrangement of these episodes as a poetic plot.²⁴

¹⁹ P.O. Krückmann, *Heaven on Earth: Tiepolo, Masterpieces of the Würzburg Years*, München/New York, Prestel, 1996, p. 53; Idem (ed.), *Der Himmel auf Erden. Tiepolo in Würzburg*, München, Prestel, 1996, vol. 1, pp. 29-43. See also: S. Alpers & M. Baxandall, *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 1994, pp. 115-118.

²⁰ C. Smyth, *Correggio's Frescoes in Parma Cathedral*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 66.

²¹ For the conventions of representing time in narrative painting, see L. Andrews, *Story and Space in Renaissance Art: The Rebirth of Continuous Narrative*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995; on the problem of time and pictorial narrativity, see W. Wolf, 'Narrative and Narrativity: A Narratological Reconceptualization and its Applicability to the Visual Arts', in: *Word & image*, 19 (2003), pp. 180-197, and K. Speidel, 'Can a Single Still Picture Tell a Story? Definitions of Narrative and the Alleged Problem of Time with Single Still Pictures', in: *Diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de*, www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/view/128/ (2 September 2015).

²² F.H. Abbé d'Aubignac, *La pratique du théâtre*, Amsterdam, 1715 (ed. München, Fink Verlag, 1971), pp. 76-77. For the controversy between Cortona and Sacchi, see D. Mahon, *Studies in Seicento Art and Theory*, London, The Warburg Institute, 1947, p. 42, n. 50 and p. 184, n. 65; Hénin, 'Ut pictura theatrum', cit., pp. 411-414; C. Allen, Y. Haskell & F. Muecke (ed. and commentary), A. Dufresnoy, *De Arte Graphica* (Paris, 1668), Geneva, Droz, 2005, pp. 43-46 and pp. 278-281.

²³ L. Castelvetro, *Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata, et sposta*, Vienna, 1570 (ed. München, Fink, 1968), p. 89.

²⁴ A. Félibien, *Conférences de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture pendant l'année 1667*, Paris, Frederic Leonard, 1669, p. 206; J. Thuillier, 'Temps et tableau: La théorie des 'péripiéties' dans la peinture française du XVIIe siècle', in: *Stil und Überlieferung in der Kunst des Abendlandes. Akten des*

Various alternative methods were used for rendering diachrony in painting. Some were recommended by Bellori, who, in his *Life of Annibale Carracci*, discussed the employment of ‘anachronisms’: motifs referring *per contrasegno*, as signs, to past and future moments, thus making the image readable like poetry. And in a posthumously published description of Maratta’s *Apollo Chasing Daphne*, he drew attention to the convention of representing a number of actions, occurring at different moments, at various levels of depth in a unified space. A third solution advocated by Bellori was that of visualizing the subsequent phases of a single action.²⁵ This strategy had earlier been adopted by Domenichino, who, in *Diana’s Hunt*, concentrated various moments of the archer’s action in a unified composition.²⁶

By the eighteenth century, history painters had a variety of conventional methods at their disposal for the pictorial representation of the passage of time. Some contemporary authors, however, raised serious objections against the depiction of two or more episodes in the same composition. Shaftesbury, Richardson and Lessing argued that a picture should show just one single moment.²⁷ A corresponding attitude is documented in Venice, where Pietro Ercole Gherardi, who was a friend of Muratori, attached great importance to a precise and unambiguous choice of the narrative moment in history painting.²⁸ And in his *Saggio sopra la pittura*, Francesco Algarotti wrote that, unlike the poet, the painter must limit himself to a moment of time.²⁹

Tiepolo, who had a long relationship with Algarotti, may have been well aware of the critical demand for temporal unity.³⁰ His concern for choosing a single ‘point of time’ is evident in his interpretation of the *Banquet of Cleopatra*, a subject that occupied him for several years in the decade preceding his work in the Villa Valmarana. By comparing the various versions (drawings, *modelli*, oil paintings, and the large fresco in Palazzo Labia), Andrea Gottdang demonstrated how the artist, through subtle variations of Cleopatra’s gesture, sought to determine the most dramaturgically

21. *Internationalen Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte in Bonn 1964*, Berlin, Mann, 1967, vol. 3, pp. 191-206; Hénin, ‘Ut pictura theatrum’, cit., pp. 356-362; J. Unglaub, *Poussin and the Poetics of Painting: Pictorial Narrative and the Legacy of Tasso*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 157-197.

25 G.P. Bellori, *Le Vite de’ pittori, scultori et architetti moderni*, Roma, Mascardi, 1672 (ed. Roma, Calzone, 1931), p. 42 and p. 52; see also: F.H. Dowley, *French Baroque Representations*, cit., pp. 320-321; Hénin, ‘Ut pictura theatrum’, cit., pp. 364-370, and H. Keazor, *Il vero modo: Die Malereireform der Carracci*, Berlin, Mann, 2007, pp. 24-30.

26 Julian Kliemann characterized Domenichino’s composition as a purposeful reflection on pictorial narration and a demonstration of how to suggest past, present and future events in the art of painting. J. Kliemann, ‘Kunst als Bogenschiessen: Domenichino’s “Jagd der Diana” in der Galleria Borghese’, in: *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana*, 31 (1996) pp. 273-312.

27 A.A. Cooper, ‘Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgement of Hercules’, in: E.G. Holt (ed.), *A Documentary History of Art*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982, vol. 2, pp. 242-259; J. Richardson, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting*, London, Bettesworth, 1725, pp. 56-57; G.E. Lessing, ‘Laokoon’, in: *Werke*, vol. 4, München, Hanser, 1974, pp. 102-103.

28 A. Gottdang, *Venedigs antike Helden. Die Darstellung der antiken Geschichte in der venezianischen Malerei von 1680 bis 1760*, München, Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1999, pp. 125-134.

29 ‘Una sola sia l’azione, uno il luogo, uno il tempo; troppo essendo da condannarsi l’abuso di coloro, che [...] rappresentano in un quadro varie azioni’. Francesco Algarotti, ‘Saggio sopra la pittura’, in: E. Bonora (ed.), *Illuministi Italiani*, vol. 2, *Opere di Francesco Algarotti e di Saverio Bettinelli*, Milano/Napoli, Ricciardi, 1969, p. 381-384.

30 It is conceivable that Tiepolo became acquainted with contemporaneous art theory through contacts with erudite compatriots, who had access to the numerous foreign publications in the private and semi-public libraries of Venetian nobles; see D. Raines, ‘La biblioteca-museo patrizia e il suo “capitale sociale”: Modelli illuministici veneziani e l’imitazione dei nuovi aggregati’, in: C. Furlan & G. Pavanello (eds.), *Arte, storia, cultura e musica in Friuli nell’età di Tiepolo. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Udine 19-20 dicembre 1996*, Udine, Forum, 1998; see also: B. Mazza, ‘Algarotti e lo spirito cosmopolita di Tiepolo’, in: L. Puppi (ed.), *Giambattista Tiepolo nel terzo centenario della nascita. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, 1996*, Venezia, Il Poligrafo, 1998, vol. 1, pp. 411-419.

effective moment of action.³¹ A moment chosen with similar care can be observed in *The Family of Darius before Alexander*, one of the frescoes commissioned by Carlo Cordellina for his villa in Montecchio Maggiore.³² It was with reference to these frescoes (painted in 1744) that Keith Christiansen remarked: 'It would not be surprising to learn that Algarotti, who knew Cordellina, had something to do with the shift in the direction Tiepolo's art began to take at this time, one that eschewed Rococo vibrancy in favour of narrative clarity'.³³

In *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, Tiepolo again carefully chose one particular moment of the narrative. The Euripidean subject, however, was intricate and demanded a pictorial representation that embraced more than the single moment of Diana's intervention.³⁴ Using the spatial conditions within the villa, Tiepolo resolved the dilemma in an extraordinary way. The image he painted shows the elements of a poetic plot: a beginning (a state of despair), a middle (the moment of dramatic reversal or *peripeteia*, source of *meraviglia*) and an end (a state of happiness). But the artist did not force these temporally distinct events into the closed space of a narrative *tableau*, nor did he divide them into a series of separate compositions. He created a complex but continuous space and, in a surprisingly novel manner, preserved the unity of time by revealing the components of the narrative not all at once, but in succession.

Keywords

Giambattista Tiepolo, Villa Valmarana, The sacrifice of Iphigenia, pictorial space, unity of time

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³¹ Gottdang, 'Venedigs antike Helden', cit., pp. 227-232.

³² *Ivi*, pp. 128-129; H. Krellig, 'Inszenierte Verwechslung. Giambattista Tiepolos Fesco Die Familie des Darius vor Alexander in der Villa Cordellina in Montecchio Maggiore', in: M. Gaier, B. Nicolai & T. Weddigen (eds.), *Der unbestechliche Blick. Festschrift zu Ehren von Wolfgang Wolters*, Trier, Porta-Alba-Verlag, 2005, p. 409.

³³ K. Christiansen, *Algarotti's Tiepolos and his Fake Veronese*, in: Puppi, *Giambattista Tiepolo*, cit., pp. 405-406.

³⁴ Around 1750, Tiepolo painted a fresco of the same subject for the Cornaro family in Merengo. In contrast to his use of the spatial conditions in the Villa Valmarana, in Merengo he followed the convention of representing various elements of the narrative in a single unified composition. Gemin & Pedrocco, *Giambattista Tiepolo*, cit., cat. 402.

RIASSUNTO

Spazio e narrativa nel *Sacrificio di Ifigenia* di Giambattista Tiepolo

Nel 1757 Giambattista Tiepolo decorò l'atrio di Villa Valmarana, nei pressi di Vicenza, con affreschi che rappresentano *Il sacrificio di Ifigenia*. Diversamente dagli altri artisti che si cimentarono in questo soggetto, egli seguì scrupolosamente il testo della tragedia di Euripide: nella scena centrale raffigurò l'attimo preciso dell'intervento divino, mentre nelle scene secondarie rappresentò episodi precedenti o successivi a quel momento. Tiepolo utilizzò le limitate dimensioni dell'atrio, la presenza di un corridoio e i movimenti susseguenti dello spettatore come strumenti per una resa diacronica della narrazione. Nel secolo precedente, Bellori aveva descritto vari metodi per rappresentare nella pittura azioni che si svolgono in momenti successivi o anteriori alla scena principale, ma nel diciottesimo secolo alcuni importanti autori condannarono la trasgressione dell'unità di tempo. Shaftesbury, Lessing e Algarotti – il quale intrattenne un lungo rapporto di amicizia con Tiepolo – sostennero che un dipinto avrebbe dovuto rappresentare un unico momento nel tempo. Tiepolo riuscì a conciliare queste esigenze discordanti adoperando magistralmente gli spazi all'interno della villa per rivelare gli elementi della narrazione non simultaneamente, ma in una sequenza temporale.