



Deposited via The University of Leeds.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/3243/>

---

**Article:**

Le Poidevin, R. (1997) Time, and the static image. *Philosophy*, 72 (280). pp. 175-188.  
ISSN: 0031 - 8191

<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0031819100056837>

---

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

*promoting access to White Rose research papers*



**Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York**  
**<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>**

---

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/3243/>

---

**Published paper**

Le Poidevin, R. (1997) *Time, and the static image*, *Philosophy*, Volume 72 (280), 175 - 188.

---

# Time and the Static Image

ROBIN LE POIDEVIN

## I. Introduction

Photographs, paintings, rigid sculptures: all these provide examples of static images. It is true that they change—photographs fade, paintings darken and sculptures crumble—but what change they undergo (unless very damaging) is irrelevant to their representational content. A *static* image is one that represents by virtue of properties which remain largely unchanged throughout its existence. Because of this defining feature, according to a long tradition in aesthetics, a static image can only represent an instantaneous moment, or to be more exact the state of affairs obtaining at that moment<sup>1</sup>. It cannot represent movement and the passage of time. This traditional view mirrors a much older one in metaphysics: that change is to be conceived of as a series of instantaneous states and hence that an interval of time is composed of extensionless moments. The metaphysical view has been involved in more controversy than its aesthetic counterpart. Aristotle identified it as one of the premises of Zeno's arrow paradox<sup>2</sup> and Augustine employed it in his proof of the unreality of time<sup>3</sup>. The aesthetic view, for its part, was subjected to a blistering attack in Ernst Gombrich's brilliant essay 'Moment and Movement in Art'<sup>4</sup>, which persuasively argues, not only against the doctrine that the changeless cannot represent change, but also against the very idea of an instant of time.

Still, Gombrich overstates his case. Is the idea of an instant simply a philosophers' fiction? And if we allow such an idea into our conception of the world, are we thereby committed to a mistaken view of pictorial representation? Implicit in Gombrich's argument is a link between depiction and perception. But what is this link, and what role does it play in the argument? I propose in this essay to take another look at the question of what time-span is represent-

<sup>1</sup> I shall use 'instant' sometimes as shorthand for 'instantaneous state of affairs', and sometimes in the sense of an extensionless moment of time. The context should make it clear which sense is intended.

<sup>2</sup> *Physics*, Book VI, 239b5–9.

<sup>3</sup> *Confessions*, Book XI, 15 and 27.

<sup>4</sup> *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* **XXVII** (1964), pp. 293–306.

## Robin Le Poidevin

ed by the static image, and consider whether answering this question presupposes a view of time and change. I shall begin with a brief résumé of Gombrich's discussion.

### II. Gombrich versus the *punctum temporis*

The traditional treatment of static images is well expressed in two eighteenth century texts cited by Gombrich. The first is James Harris' *Discourse on Music, Painting and Poetry*, in which Harris writes that each picture is 'of necessity a *punctum temporis* or instant.'<sup>5</sup> The second is G. E. Lessing's *Laocoon*, which distinguishes between the arts of time and the arts of space. Painting is an art of space because it 'can only represent a single moment of an action.'<sup>6</sup> This view, comments Gombrich, 'remained unquestioned in aesthetics.' (p. 295) But, he argues, we must give it up if we are to understand how the passage of time can be conveyed in paintings.

If change is properly thought of as a series of instants, it is certainly true that we do not experience it as such. We see a moving horse: we do not see the horse occupying different places at different moments, even if that is all that it is doing. How, then, can we be sure that we have really captured one of these moments on canvass, rather than present a pure invention? Photography, at least when it had developed to the point where only the briefest exposure was necessary, appeared to provide the answer to this question. The famous example of this is Eadweard Muybridge's demonstration, through taking a number of successive photographs of galloping horses, that the position of the legs during the gallop had been systematically misrepresented by painters. This posed a dilemma: should realistic painting aim to imitate photography, or is art best served by avoiding photographic realism? Gombrich's comments on this take us to the heart of his argument:

Do we not beg the most important question when we ask what 'really happens' at any point of time? We therewith assume that what Harris called a *punctum temporis* really exists, or, more radically, that what we really perceive is the infinite sequence of such static points in time. Once this is conceded the rest follows, at least with the demand for mimesis. Static signs, the argument runs, can only represent static moments, never movements

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Gombrich, op. cit., p. 294.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## Time and the Static Image

which happen in time. Philosophers are familiar with this problem under the name of Zeno's paradox, the demonstration that Achilles could never catch up with a tortoise and no arrow could ever move. As soon as we assume that there is a fraction of time in which there is no movement, movement as such becomes inexplicable.

Logically the idea that there is a 'moment' which has no movement and can be seized and fixed in this static form by the artist, or for that matter, by the camera, certainly leads to Zeno's paradox. Even an instantaneous photograph records the traces of movement, a sequence of events, however brief. But the idea of the *punctum temporis* is not only an absurdity logically, it is a worse absurdity psychologically. For we are not cameras but rather slow registering instruments which cannot take in much at a time. Twenty-four successive stills in a second are sufficient to give us the illusion of movement in the cinema. We can see them only in motion, not as stills. Somewhere along this order of magnitude, a fifteenth or a tenth of a second, lies what we experience as a moment, something we can just seize in its flight. (p. 297)

The debate between Muybridge and the painters need not, in fact, make any reference to the idea of an instant, for we can still ask about the relative positions of the horse's legs during a race without narrowing our inquiry down to a single moment. But our present concern is with three theses which Gombrich wants to reject:

- (1) There exist instants, i.e. moments of time in which no change, but only a state of affairs, can obtain.
- (2) We do not perceive change as such, but a sequence of instantaneous states of affairs.
- (3) A static image represents an instantaneous state of affairs.

What precisely is the connection between these theses? Gombrich seems to think that (2) is a natural extension of (1). But it is not. (1) is completely independent of (2), and (2) is in fact just wrong, as Gombrich's discussion of watching a television programme decisively demonstrates:

When we watch the programme we are, in fact, watching a tiny spot of light traversing the screen from side to side. ... At each moment of time, therefore, what we really see (if that expression had any meaning) would only be one luminous dot. ... Actually if we want to pursue this thought to its logical conclusion the *punctum temporis* could not even show us a meaningless dot, for light has a frequency. (p. 297)

## Robin Le Poidevin

Even breaking down our perception of what is happening on the screen into the smallest units, what we see is a picture, and this is an event which takes time. So (2) must be rejected. It does not follow, however, that perception does not actually consist of a series of instantaneous states of our perceptual systems. In fact, if we accept (1), then, since perception is a form of change, we must analyse perception in this way. So perhaps (2) appears to be a natural extension of (1) simply because we misconstrue it as a thesis about what perception is, as opposed to a thesis about what we perceive.

What of the connection between (1) and (3)? (3) appears to presuppose (1), so any attack on (1) is *ipso facto* an attack on (3). This, at least in part, is Gombrich's argument: instants are a fiction, so nothing could count as representing them. But we have to be careful how we state this. Paintings (though arguably not photographs) may represent all kinds of fictions. Gombrich's point, however, is that instants are not just contingently non-existent: the idea of them is absurd. Well, can pictures represent the absurd? Hogarth's *False Perspective* represents a logically impossible state of affairs, but we can interpret it because each component of the picture represents something quite coherent. It is only when we put the components together that we realize that the states of affairs they represent could not obtain simultaneously. In contrast, if the instant is an absurdity, we cannot explain the intelligibility of representations of it in such terms. There are constraints on what it is possible to represent, at least in pictorial terms. If the idea of an instant really does involve absurdity, this is a good reason for thinking that no image represents an instant.

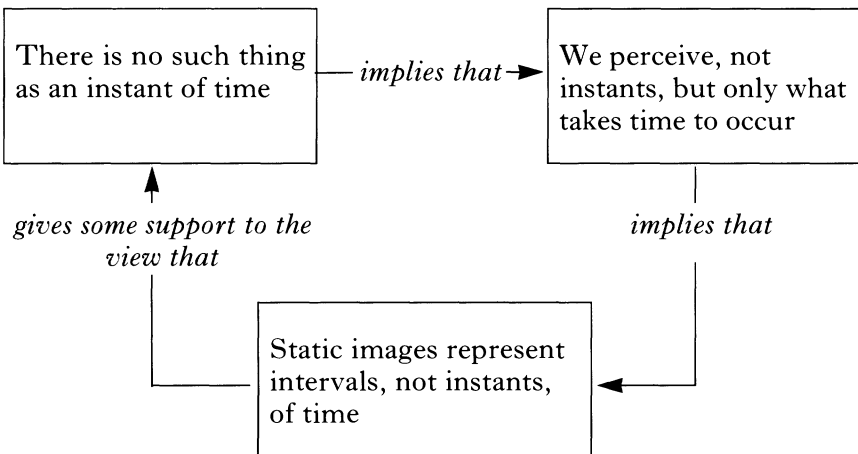
It is possible to discern in Gombrich's remarks an argument which runs in the reverse direction: from the rejection of (3) to the rejection of (1). If nothing could count as a pictorial representation of an instant, then our grasp on the notion of an instant is weakened. Is this so? If nothing counted as *any* kind of representation of an instant, then we could not even frame the thought that there were instants, since thought is a form of representation. But we can represent linguistically what we cannot represent pictorially, so it would seem that resolving the aesthetic debate over (3) will not take us very much closer to a resolution of the metaphysical debate over (1). Perhaps, however, the debates are not that far apart. We can attempt to form a description of an instant, but there may be hidden contradictions in that description (for example, those unearthed by Zeno). But if we could produce a simple representation of an instant in pictorial terms, a peculiarly transparent form of representation, then our grasp on the idea of an

## Time and the Static Image

instant would be much more secure. That is, we could appeal to static images in articulating the very notion of an instant. 'We all know what an instant is: just look at this photograph of a bird in flight.' But, according to Gombrich, such an appeal is futile, for the apparently instantaneous photograph is not really instantaneous, it 'records the traces of movement, a sequence of events, however brief.' Implied here is a causal account of representation: the photograph represents whatever external event was the immediate cause of the photograph's appearance. But if this will do for photographs (which is doubtful), it will certainly not do for paintings, and we need something which approaches an adequate account if we are to understand what time-span a painting represents.

This takes us to the connection between (2) and (3). Any plausible account of how paintings (and sculptures) represent will make some use of the notion of resemblance: a picture of a sheep will often look *something* like a sheep. Now resemblance is a perceptual concept, so there will be some connection between what pictures represent and the kinds of thing that we perceive, and Gombrich is certainly exploiting this connection in his argument against the *punctum temporis*. He does not, however, make it explicit what the connection is. Once we make it explicit, we may be able to see why the rejection of (2) leads naturally to the rejection of (3).

Our reconstruction of Gombrich's argument may be summarized as follows:



In the next section, I shall examine some reasons for thinking that there are logical difficulties with the notion of an instant. Then, in section IV, I shall discuss an account of pictorial representation as

## Robin Le Poidevin

a way of casting light on the connection between what we perceive and what pictures represent.

### III. Two conceptions of the instant

Even if the idea is ultimately to be rejected, we must have some characterization of an instant in order to assess whether or not it entails any absurdities. What characterization should we give? Gombrich does not provide a formal definition, but one remark is suggestive:

... the instant of which the theoreticians speak, the moment when time stands still, is an illicit extrapolation, despite the specious plausibility which the snapshot has given to this old idea. (p. 303)

The instant, then, is an extrapolation. But an extrapolation from what? On one account, we derive the notion of an instant from a process of dividing an interval into smaller and smaller parts. Clearly, if time is (as we assume) continuous, this process has no end, just as the series  $1, \frac{1}{2}, \frac{1}{4} \dots$  has no last member. So if we define an instant as the smallest part of an interval, where a part is itself defined in terms of dividing that interval, we are talking of something that does not exist. The continuity of time entails that there is no smallest part of an interval. If, then, an instant is thus extrapolated, it is indeed an illicit extrapolation.

A quite different conception of an instant does not regard it as a part of an interval at all, but as an extensionless boundary between two parts of an interval. The present moment, for example, may be thought of as a boundary between past and future. This seems to have been Aristotle's view: 'The now is a link of time....for it links together past and future, since it is a beginning of one and an end of another.'<sup>7</sup> This is why, presumably, he says that 'Time is not composed of indivisible nows.'<sup>8</sup> That remark is made in response to one of Zeno's paradoxes, and since, as Gombrich notes, these put pressure on the notion of an instant, some remarks about them are in order.

Gombrich refers to two of Zeno's paradoxes, the Achilles and the Arrow. Lumping them together as he does obscures some important differences between them. They illustrate, in fact, the difference between the two conceptions of instants presented above. Consider the Achilles paradox. Achilles never overtakes his

<sup>7</sup> *Physics*, Book IV, 222a10.

<sup>8</sup> *Physics*, Book VI, 239b9.

## Time and the Static Image

slower competitor, who has a head start, because by the time Achilles has run the initial distance between them, the tortoise has moved a little further on. When Achilles has covered this further distance, the tortoise will have moved again, by a smaller amount, and so on *ad infinitum*. We can thus represent the race as a series of smaller and smaller steps, each taking a smaller and smaller interval of time. Now if we assume that, for Achilles to overtake the tortoise, this series of decreasing intervals must have an end, a last instant before the overtaking, then we are in trouble. For, if time is continuous, there is no such last moment. Between any given moment and the putative moment of overtaking, there is always a third. One way of representing the argument is this: built into our notion of movement (and change in general) is an assumption that time is discrete—i.e. composed of indivisible parts. But since time is continuous, there cannot be change as we ordinarily conceive it. Putting it this way, of course, makes it easier to see what strategies one could adopt against the paradox. One is to give up the idea that time is continuous. Another, more plausible, line would be to revise the concept of change so that it did not include the assumption of discreteness.

In the Arrow paradox, it is the second conception of an instant which is operating<sup>9</sup>. The arrow, says Zeno, is at rest at each moment of its flight, and so is at rest throughout the period of its flight. Now if 'moment' here meant even an infinitesimal interval of continuous time, then there would be no justification for denying that the arrow moved during that interval. So the moment in question must be genuinely extensionless. But now Aristotle's observation that time is not composed of such moments undermines Zeno's inference from 'The arrow is at rest at each moment of its flight' to 'The arrow is at rest throughout the period of its flight', for such an inference requires moments to be parts of the interval. But that is not the end of the matter, for there is a strong intuition which suggests that a moving object is in motion *at any given time* during its movement. Now if there are instants of time in our second sense, and we concede to Zeno that nothing could move in an instant, then this intuition is under threat. So we have to distinguish between moving *in* an instant—which is impossible—and moving *at* an instant. We then say that an object is in motion *at* a

<sup>9</sup> We could, alternatively, interpret the paradox as based on the assumption that time is discrete, so that there are in reality instants in the first sense of smallest parts of an interval. Since the idea of discrete time is one way of undermining the Achilles, it could be suggested that the function of the Arrow is to block this particular move in the dialectic.

## Robin Le Poidevin

given instant if the object is in a different position at any instant before or after that instant.

These brief remarks hardly do justice to arguments whose force and ingenuity have kept debate alive over centuries, but my purpose here was simply to bring out the important differences between two conceptions of the instant apparently conflated by Gombrich.

Here, then, we have the two objections which Gombrich raises against the instant. One is that it is an 'illicit extrapolation', the other is that it makes movement unintelligible. We can avoid the first objection by adopting a conception of instants as extensionless rather than as the smallest parts of intervals. We run foul of the second objection, however, if it turns out that this conception of instants is threatened by Zeno's Arrow paradox. Now although giving up the notion of an instant would certainly undermine that paradox—for then one could not say that the arrow is at rest at every *instant* of its flight—this is not the only strategy open to us. In fact, we might turn Gombrich's objection on its head and say that motion is unintelligible *unless* we introduce the notion of instants. For we most naturally characterize motion as the occupancy of different positions at different times, where times are understood as instants. This is a reductionist treatment, in that it defines motion in terms of something else. If we reject the notion of instants, then we have to view motion as something irreducible. How is this supposed to make it intelligible? I would not want to push this last point too far, but I do want to insist that instants cast more light on motion than they obscure it. They enable us to define motion, and in a way which explains both the sense in which an arrow is at rest *in* (though not *at*) every instant of its flight, and why Zeno's inference from this proposition is fallacious.

Having arrived at an apparently legitimate conception of an instant, let us return to the question of what static images represent.

### IV. Time and depiction

As we observed in section II, some account of representation is necessary if we are to assess the position articulated by Harris and Lessing. I want to begin by drawing our attention to an often-made distinction between *representation* and *depiction*. Depiction is just one form of representation. Essentially, depiction is representation by means of resemblance. A picture of a sheep depicts a

## Time and the Static Image

sheep by resembling it (in certain respects). But pictures represent more than they depict. In particular, they may represent aspects of time that they are unable to depict. Consider the strip cartoon. A sequence of relevantly similar (but also relevantly different) pictures in a linear sequence may represent the passage of time by virtue of the convention that pictures on the right represent events which are later than those represented by pictures on the left. Thus temporal order is non-depictively represented by spatial order. Film, in contrast, typically depicts temporal order: the temporal order of the images resembles the temporal order of events represented.<sup>10</sup>

Now if Gombrich's target is the thesis that static images represent (by whatever means one cares to mention) only an instantaneous state of affairs, then it is a relatively easy one to hit. We have just mentioned the counterexample of the cartoon strip. Or, if the thesis is restricted to pictures within a single frame, we could cite those futurist paintings where representations of non-simultaneous states are superimposed on each other: Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, Balla's *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash*, or Malevich's *The Knife-Grinder*. A familiar technique in photography is the long exposure photograph, where moving objects appear blurred against a clear and therefore static background. All these are static representations of motion, and hence of intervals of time.

But even with more standard means of pictorial representation, what is represented may have a much greater time-span than what is caught on the canvass. For in interpreting the picture, we may fill in moments preceding and succeeding the depicted moment. At one level, then, the picture represents by putting us in mind of a whole event.

To be worth fighting over, the thesis in contention must surely be that static images only *depict* instants. Since they are static, they cannot resemble changes in the world. Futurist paintings tend to confirm, rather than disconfirm, this idea. *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* represents movement precisely by depicting a series of instantaneous states. To assess this idea properly we need to examine the nature of depiction.

A plausible account is provided by Gregory Currie<sup>11</sup>. A satisfac-

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 3 of Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), for a lucid discussion of the ways in which time is represented in pictures and film.

<sup>11</sup> Currie, *op. cit.*, pp. 79–90. Currie acknowledges a debt to Flint Schier's *Deeper into Pictures: An Essay on Pictorial Representation* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), which introduces the notions of triggering recognition capacities and natural generativity.

## Robin Le Poidevin

tory theory of depiction, Currie points out, must explain the sense in which pictures are like their objects, when in fact they share so few properties with those objects. And, ideally, it should also explain the fact that our understanding of pictures is 'naturally generative': that is, it should explain why the ability to recognize an *x* entails the ability to recognize a depiction of an *x*. Both of these conditions are satisfied by the following account: an image depicts an *x* by virtue of the fact that it triggers an *x*-recognition capacity in the observer. Thus, if I am able to recognize a sheep, then I will generally be able to recognize a depiction of a sheep, since both the sheep and its depiction trigger the same capacity. And, although the sheep and depiction may share very few properties, the ones they do share will be precisely those which have that effect on me. The account needs to be tightened up a little, since pictures of sheep may fail to trigger a Martian's sheep-recognition capacity (for example). Whether a picture is like its object will obviously be relative to the kind of observer one is, but we do not want to make depiction similarly relative. The natural adjustment to make is to build into the account the idea of a 'normal' observer, where 'normal' means having the same perceptual capacities as the creator of the depiction. So, an image depicts an *x* by virtue of the fact that it triggers an *x*-recognition capacity in observers who have the same perceptual capacities as the creator of the depiction.

This account brings into the open what plays such an important role in Gombrich's argument, namely the connection between depiction and perception. The central insight of Currie's account is the idea that we cannot understand depiction just by comparing objects and pictures: they are related to each other by virtue of their relation to a perceiver. Perceiving objects and perceiving depictions of them have something in common, and this something is what explains how depictions depict. (I am not suggesting that this is a complete account of depictive representation. Such an account might well involve the intentions of the artists, our recognition of those intentions, and so on. But it is reasonable to regard Currie's as a more or less complete account of the depictive aspect of pictorial representation.)

Some accounts of depiction tend to focus on the depiction of objects, and cannot easily be generalized to account for the depiction of, for example, properties, relations or states of affairs<sup>12</sup>. An advantage of Currie's account is that it can be generalized in this

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the account given by Christopher Peacocke, in 'Depiction', *Philosophical Review* **XCVI** (1987), pp. 383–410, in which depiction is explained in terms of the spatial properties which the representation has in the visual field.

## Time and the Static Image

way, for we may appropriately talk in terms of a recognition-capacity for properties, relations, states of affairs and indeed changes in any of these things.

Now that we have a plausible theory of depiction, we should be able to answer the question of what static images depict. But this turns out to be not at all a straightforward matter. We seem, in fact, to be faced with a dilemma. Suppose we say that static images can depict movement. This brings us into conflict with Currie's account, for static images surely cannot trigger our capacity to recognize movement. If that were so, we would see the image as itself moving. With a few interesting exceptions (discussed below) we obviously do not see a static image as moving. Suppose, then, that we say that static images only depict instants. This too creates problems, for it suggests that we have a recognitional capacity for instants, and this seems highly dubious. This horn of the dilemma, incidentally, allows us to make sense of Gombrich's argument from the indisputable fact that we do not perceive instants to the proposition that static images do not represent instants. To put it in the terms we have introduced: if static images depict instants, then they trigger the same recognitional capacities as are triggered by instants. But instants do not, by themselves, trigger recognitional capacities, for if they did, we would be able to perceive them, and we clearly do not. So static images do not depict instants.

Some static images, such as Bridget Riley's *Cataract 3*, or *Fall* create the illusion of movement. Can we therefore say that they depict movement? That what is being triggered in these cases is exactly the same kind of process as goes on when we really do perceive movement is not an uncontroversial matter. According to one hypothesis, such images stimulate the retinal movement-detector cells as a result of tiny and involuntary movements of the eye-ball. But this is not the only view. In the absence of any firm intuitions as to whether *Fall* and similar pictures do in fact depict, as opposed to merely represent, movement, we may have to wait on the outcome of empirical studies. Such cases are all the more complex since, paradoxically, the images appear to move and stay still at the same time.<sup>13</sup> But we do not, for the purposes of this essay, need to get involved in these issues, since it is quite clear that most static images, at least, do not depict movement.

But if static images depict neither movements nor instants, what do they depict? A third possibility is that they depict unchanging

<sup>13</sup> For an accessible discussion of illusory perceptions of movement see R. L. Gregory, *Eye and Brain* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966), pp. 99–109, and 133–136.

## Robin Le Poidevin

states of affairs, since we certainly do have a recognitional capacity for such. We can be aware of absence of movement as well as movement. A landscape picture or still life is plausibly regarded as depicting such absence of movement. But take a particularly dynamic painting such Butler's *Charge of the Scots Greys*. The elements represented are clearly in motion. But if we are to say that the picture nevertheless depicts an unchanging state of affairs (by triggering our recognitional capacity for such) then we have to say that the picture represents the horses both as moving and as not moving. This is not a satisfactory result.

At this point, we need to introduce a third notion of an instant. Consider again the idea that we arrive at the notion of an instant by extrapolating from a process of dividing an interval of time into smaller and smaller parts. The mistake made by our first conception of an instant was to suppose that there was in reality a smallest part of an interval. There is no objection, however, to defining an instant as an arbitrarily small part of an interval. Or, to make it less arbitrary, we could define an instant as the smallest *perceivable* part of an interval. This we may call the 'specious instant'. Since the specious instant is defined by reference to what we perceive, it does not presuppose a particular position vis-à-vis the metaphysical debate over instants. That is, contrary to what Hume supposed<sup>14</sup>, we may allow a minimum duration in experience without allowing such a thing in the world. Now we clearly have a recognitional capacity for specious instants. In the experience of any change we may identify a particularly salient point, such as the moment a long-distance runner crosses the finishing line. We might represent this as a time-slice of the action, but in fact (since we perceived it) it has a non-zero duration. This, then, is what static images are capable of depicting: specious instants which are parts of a larger movement represented by the image. Images can thus represent a movement by depicting perceptually minimum parts of it.

The conclusion of this section, then, is that static images do not depict an instant in the sense of an extensionless moment, but the possibility remains that they may represent it non-depictively, and it is this possibility that I shall explore in the final section.

## V. The *punctum temporis* vindicated?

Here is an argument for the existence of instants. Consider two objects moving away from each other at a constant velocity. The

<sup>14</sup> *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd edition, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), Book I, Part II, sections I and II.

## Time and the Static Image

distance between them increases continuously, so that however small an interval of time we consider, the distance is greater in the second part of that interval than in the first. Now, intuitively, there is a time at which the distance between them has a single, determinate value. But if this is so then the time in question can only be an extensionless instant, for in any extended duration (however small) the distance between the objects will not have a single value but rather a range of values.

We can readily adapt this argument to show that static images are capable of non-depictively representing an instant, as follows. An image of an array of objects depicts certain more or less determinate spatial relations between objects. Now, if the depicted objects are interpreted as being in continuous motion, then for how long do those objects remain in the spatial relations they are depicted as being in? The answer must be that they remain in those relations just for an extensionless instant. So static images can represent instants.

When I say that the image depicts 'certain more or less determinate spatial relations', I do not, of course, mean to suggest that we can read off from the image the precise distances between objects, nor that the artist was attempting to represent specific values. Such things are irredeemably vague. The important point is that the relations are not depicted as *changing*, and if they are (by other means) represented as changing, then the relations depicted must be those which obtain at an instant, and not over a period.

There is a hidden assumption in the argument for instants which, when exposed, makes the argument seem less compelling. 'The distance between two objects' is an ambiguous notion until we specify which parts of the objects we are comparing. In fact, the distance will remain vague unless we take it that the distance in question is between two spatial points. This is the weak point, for anyone who doubts the existence of instants is unlikely to embrace an argument which assumes the existence of points. But *if* we are willing to accept the existence of instants, then there is a perfectly straightforward sense in which static images represent instants: they do so by depicting particular spatial relations between objects.

It is time to draw the threads of this discussion together. I hope it is now evident that there is no one answer to the question 'What time-span does a static image represent?' But that is not to say that the answers are not at all objective. The temporal extent of what is represented may vary with the representational mechanism. Once we make it clear with respect to what level of representation the question is being posed, it should be possible to give a reasonably objective answer. Static images depict what I have called the 'spe-

## Robin Le Poidevin

cious instant': the smallest perceivable part of an interval. But because many such images make reference to actions and events, we naturally take them as representing a much larger time-span. Finally, insofar as they depict particular spatial relations amongst objects which are interpreted to be in motion, they represent genuinely extensionless instants. There is no incompatibility between these answers. An image may represent both an interval and smaller constituents of that interval, precisely because it can represent its objects in different ways.

I hope it is also evident in what ways Gombrich overstates his case. The notion of an instant, when properly characterized, does not obviously involve us in logical absurdities, nor does it entail dubious theses about perception or depiction. And, having rejected the idea that static images *only* represent instants, we do not need to accept its contrary, that static images *cannot* represent instants. Whether or not static images really do represent instants, however, is something we cannot answer until we have settled issues about time and change. And this is one illustration of the relevance of metaphysics to aesthetics.

*University of Leeds*