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# Motion and the Futurists: capturing the dynamic sensation

Robin Le Poidevin

**Abstract:** The Italian Futurist painters who were active in the early years of the 20th Century sought to capture in a single image the experience of motion. Could such a project succeed? It might be thought that, insofar as the aim is to depict motion, it is doomed to fail, for (with the possible exception of optical illusions) no static image evokes the experience of movement. But we can discern a number of possible aesthetic projects here, and their chances of success will, in some cases, depend on our favoured account of motion and motion experience. Does Futurism simply reduce the experience of motion to a series of psychological ‘snapshots’, for example? Futurist paintings also provide an intriguing and revelatory case study in which we can examine the nature of depiction, and its connection to artistic realism. We need to supplement accounts of conventional depiction if we are to reconcile the evident non-realist nature of Futurist imagery with the thought that Futurism is somehow true to temporal experience.

## The goal of Futurist painting

We affirm that the world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath—a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace. (Apollonio (1973), p. 21)

With this controversial aesthetic announcement, together with other more alarming ones glorifying war and violence and calling for the destruction of libraries and museums (as repositories of defunct past values), the Italian Futurist movement was officially inaugurated, in the Manifesto of Futurism by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944). It first appeared in the Italian periodical, *Gazzetta dell'Emilia*, on 5<sup>th</sup> February, 1909, and then later that month, in *Le Figaro*. This inflammatory and intemperate piece was followed a year later by a somewhat more considered aesthetic programme, in *Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto*, by the core members of the movement: Giacomo Balla (1871-1958), Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916), Carlo Carrà (1881-1966), Luigi Russolo (1885-1947), and Gino Severini (1883-1966). This set out an ambitious aim, with an accompanying vision of reality:

The gesture which we would reproduce on canvas shall no longer be a fixed moment in universal dynamism. It shall simply be the dynamic sensation itself.

Indeed, all things move, all things run, all things are rapidly changing. A profile is never motionless before our eyes, but it constantly appears and disappears. On account of the persistency of an image upon the retina, moving objects constantly multiply themselves; their form changes like rapid vibrations, in their mad career. Thus a running horse has not four legs, but twenty, and their movements are triangular...

To paint a human figure you must not paint it; you must render the whole of its surrounding atmosphere.

Space no longer exists: the street pavement, soaked by rain beneath the glare of electric lamps, becomes immensely deep and gapes to the very centre of the earth. Thousands of miles divide us from the sun; yet the house in front of us fits into the solar disk...

The sixteen people around you in a rolling motor bus are in turn and at the same time one, ten, four, three; they are motionless and they change places; they come and go, bound into the street, are suddenly swallowed up by the sunshine, then come back and sit before you, like persistent symbols of universal vibration...

The motor bus rushes into the houses which it passes, and in their turn the houses throw themselves upon the motor bus and are blended with it. (Apollonio (1973), pp. 27-8)

The key idea is that of motion and its representation. What the Futurists objected to was the static nature of conventional painting and sculpture. What in contrast informs the new programme is, apparently, a vision of reality as Heraclitean, as being in constant flux, and it is this—or at least, the Heraclitean nature of perceptual experience—which is to be represented on canvas. The words of the Manifesto do not make a careful distinction between reality and appearance, but it will be convenient for the purposes of this discussion to distinguish between two aims: to represent motion (as it is), and to represent the experience of motion. There is more to Futurism than these two, but they are ambitious enough, and the central question of this paper is whether the Futurists did or could succeed in meeting them. Within each of these aims, however, we can discern further aesthetic projects. Although I shall have something to say about what the Futurists may have intended, I am largely concerned with a conceptual inquiry: in what senses is the attempt to depict motion by static, non-changing images a feasible one? To answer this, we will need to begin by considering the structure of motion and of the experience of motion.

## Motion and the instant

To get a sense of the range of positions on the nature of motion, it will be helpful to consider these questions concerning the structure of time and its relation to motion:

- (1) Is there such a thing as an instant—that is, a temporal location that cannot be divided into shorter parts?
- (2) If so, is the difference between motion and rest intrinsic to the instant?
- (3) If intrinsic, how?

To answer yes to the first question is not necessarily to view time as a series of discrete, indivisible but extended temporal intervals. Nor is it necessarily to think of the relation between instants and intervals as one of parts to whole. In Aristotle's conception, for example, the 'now' is the dimensionless boundary between past and future, but time is not composed of nows (Physics VI.9). To deny the existence of instants in the fairly minimal sense defined by (1) would be to deny that time has any structure at all.

Supposing, then, that there are instants, we can intelligibly talk of what is intrinsic to an instant, that is, of those states of affairs obtaining at that instant which do not logically

depend on what obtains at any other time. Now consider two objects, A and B, during a certain non-zero period of time. A moves continuously during that period, while B is at rest for the entire period. Apart from that, the objects are indistinguishable. Now consider some instant  $i$  during that period. With respect only to states intrinsic to  $i$ , is there anything to distinguish A from B, which reveals A, but not B, to be in motion? Can one, that is, talk of A's motion as intrinsic to  $i$ ? Suppose that the answer to that question is no: nothing at  $i$  distinguishes A from B. Then the difference between an object in motion and one at rest emerges only over time. At any given instant, any object, whether in motion or not, simply occupies a position. To be in motion is to occupy different positions at other moments. As this is mirrored by cinema, where a series of stills are presented in quick succession, giving rise to the impression of movement, we can call it the cinematic account of motion.<sup>1</sup>

The cinematic account of motion:  $x$  moves during an interval if and only if  $x$  occupies different positions at different instants during that interval.

Motion, on this account, is simply displacement. We can continue to talk of motion 'at' an instant as long as this is understood in a purely derivative sense:  $x$  moves at instant  $i$  if and only if  $x$  is in different positions immediately before or after  $i$ . Motion is not intrinsic to the instant. This was Russell's account of motion, and he proposed that not only was this an adequate answer to Zeno's Arrow paradox (the arrow does not move during a period, since it cannot move at any instant of that period), but that it also involved an important concession to Zeno: that insofar as we suppose motion to be intrinsic to the instant, we are mistaken (Russell (1937), pp. 347-8, 350, 469-73).

One worry one might have about the cinematic account is that if we combine it with a certain form of presentism, the view that only what is present is real, it seems to follow that motion is, after all, unreal, for motion as the cinematic account conceives of it is never intrinsic to the present (assuming the present to be instantaneous). The form of presentism in question is one which both concedes the need for truth-makers for past-tense statements, and locates these truth-makers in the present (thus guaranteeing their reality).<sup>2</sup> Presentists of this stripe thus have some motivation to think of motion as being intrinsic to an instant—the view that Russell supposes is the intuitive one. This kind of presentist will be reluctant to allow that there is motion in an instant only in a purely derivative sense, for this alludes to other, unreal, times, and this would conflict with the proposal that what is true of other times can

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<sup>1</sup> Since this defines motion in terms of being at different positions at different times, it has also been called the 'at-at' account of motion. And since being at a position is a state, rather than an event, another name for it is the 'static' account. As this is a paper on art, however, it seems appropriate to name it after an artistic analogy.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Bigelow (1996) and Ludlow (1999). Not all presentists concede the need for presently-existing truth-makers, however. Bourne (2006), for example, develops an 'ersatz presentism', based on abstract objects (he also surveys a variety of presentist positions). And Tallant and Ingram (2015) recommend a 'nefarious' presentism, according to which there were truth-makers for propositions about the past, in virtue of which those propositions are presently true.

only have present truth-makers. From these reflections emerges a very different conception of motion, one which we might dub the instant-intrinsic account. On the instant-intrinsic account, there is such a thing as instantaneous motion, where this is understood as motion which is intrinsic to an instant, and not something merely derivative. (The cinematic theorist will allow instantaneous motion in the purely derivative sense of an instantaneous state that is part of a temporal extended displacement.) Motion, on such an account, is not to be identified with displacement, but is perhaps what explains displacement. (See, e.g., Bigelow and Pargetter (1989)).

A variant on this theme—though a rather controversial one—is to identify instantaneous motion with displacement in the instant. The result, of course, is that the moving object is, at any given instant of its motion, both at, and not at, a given position. This, in fact, is the basis of another of Zeno's paradoxes of motion. We could accept, as Zeno perhaps intended, that such a view of motion leads to self-contradiction. Or, like Hegel, we could embrace the contradiction, and take this to be precisely what distinguishes, at any given instant, the moving object from the one at rest. This Hegelian view of motion has in modern times received support from Graham Priest (1987), who defends a dialetheist view both of truth—that is, one which allows true contradictions—and of reality: incompatible states of affairs may co-exist.

There are, then, a range of metaphysical theories concerning the nature of motion. They are concerned with motion as it is in itself. But what of motion as it is experienced?

### The experience of motion

Corresponding to the questions we asked above about the structure of time and motion are questions about the temporal structure of experience:

- (1) Is there such a thing as a psychological instant—that is, an experience which cannot be decomposed into shorter items which themselves count as experiences?
- (2) If so, is the experience of motion contained in that instant?
- (3) If so, how?

To answer yes to the first question is to adopt an atomistic account of temporal experience. It is as if we take perceptual snap shots, and build up extended experience from these experiential atoms. Granting for a moment that this is indeed the structure of our experience, how, to tackle the second question, might this accommodate the experience of motion? One account is the experiential analogue of the cinematic account of motion:

The cinematic account of motion experience: we perceive the motion of  $x$  by virtue of having a sequence of experiences of  $x$  at different positions, which are presented in different psychological instants.<sup>3</sup>

The cinematic answer to question 2, then, is no: the content of each psychological instant does not convey motion, but merely position. It might seem that, if this were the true account of motion experience, we would experience motion as a sequence of discrete jumps. This is (normally) not how we experience it. But then one might wonder how much phenomenological introspection can reveal of the structure of experience. Indeed, the cinematic analogy suggests that it does not. For at the cinema, we are presented with a series of stills, in rapid succession. The simplest account of how this translates into experience is in terms of a series of experiences of those stills. Yet the motion we seem to perceive on the screen is smooth and continuous. That experience has a certain structure need not imply that we can discern that structure.

A closer link between structure and phenomenology would be provided by what we could call (again exploiting analogies with the analysis of motion) the instant-intrinsic account of motion experience, according to which each psychological instant could be an experience of (or as-of) motion. Can this be identified with displacement? That would imply that motion experience would consist of perceptions of an object as being both in, and displaced from, a given position. When motion is sufficiently rapid, and consisting of an oscillation between two positions this is arguably exactly what we perceive. Hold a pencil in the middle between thumb and forefinger and wiggle it back and forth. The pencil is a blur, but the two positions between which it oscillates are discernible. The pencil thus seems to occupy different positions simultaneously. If we hesitate to ascribe self-contradictoriness to reality, no such scruples need apply to experience. The perception of the oscillating pencil is, as we might put it, 'Hegelian' (again, by analogy with the corresponding account of motion). But this will plainly not be true of motion experience in general. To see a bus moving down the street is not to see it as occupying different positions simultaneously. The instant-intrinsic account of motion experience would therefore have to make room for the thought that it is possible to experience motion in the psychological instant without an accompanying sense of displacement. The sense of displacement has to be built up from successive instants.

Returning to a point made above, that the phenomenology of motion experience does not imply a particular structure, we might nevertheless be suspicious of a model which posited experiential 'atoms' which we could not discern. What sense can be made of the idea of something which cannot be discerned as an individual experience amid the experiential

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<sup>3</sup> In calling this the 'cinematic' account of motion experience (Phillips (2011), in similar vein, calls it the 'zoëtropé conception', applying to change generally), I mean only to draw attention to the structural similarity between the accounts of motion and of motion experience. I do not mean to imply that the cinematic account of motion is committed to this particular account of motion experience, or vice versa. And a 'psychological instant' is not an instant in the sense of lacking temporal parts: it's just that any temporal parts it does have will not themselves be experiences.

flow, but which is nevertheless an experience in its own right, and one of the building blocks of which extended experience is composed?

Consider, as a test case, the phi phenomenon (Wertheimer (1912)) the illusory sense of movement produced by two alternating dots or lights (as at a railway crossing). Despite the unmistakable sense of movement, it is hard to isolate an experience as-of the dot/light being at an intermediate position. Yet this is suggested by the experience of motion as a whole. So perhaps we have a series of psychological states which do not quite count as experiences in their own right, but which contribute to the overall experience. The structure of experience itself may be indeterminate, in that we struggle to decompose it into parts which are themselves isolatable experiences. A negative answer to (1) above may be rather more tempting than a negative answer to the corresponding question about motion itself.

Perhaps, however, the reason we struggle to determine the character and content of psychological instants is that we are trying to isolate them from their experiential surroundings. The cinematic account builds extended experiences from their components: the content of the extended experience is determined by the content of its parts. But suppose we reverse this conception, as Phillips (2011) suggests, and conceive of the content of the parts as derived from the content of the whole? That would allow us to say, of the experience of constant (not jerky) motion, that (i) there was no moment at which the object appeared not to be moving, while conceding that (ii) there are temporal limits to our powers of discrimination, and that our experience will contain sub-intervals during which the movement of the object is too small to be detected. If the experience of motion over an interval were built up from temporal minimal experience, Phillips argues, (i) and (ii) would be in conflict. Phillips does not offer a name for this account, but we might call it the holistic account.

With these various accounts of motion and motion experience in mind, let us return to the Futurist aim to ‘capture the dynamic sensation’, and how the Futurists went about realizing that aim.

## Futurist techniques

The Futurist painters’ Technical Manifesto offered not just an aim but a suggestion as to how it was to be accomplished:

On account of the persistency of an image upon the retina, moving objects constantly multiply themselves; their form changes like rapid vibrations, in their mad career. Thus a running horse has not four legs, but twenty, and their movements are triangular. (Apollonio (1973), p. 28)

The suggestion, then, is to present successive positions of a moving object on the canvas, partially superimposed on each other. And that precisely captures two of the best-known of the early Futurist paintings: Balla’s *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash*, and *Little Girl Running on a Balcony*, both from 1912. The first of these is almost photographic in character, especially the rendering of the leash, as it sways back and forth. The connection with the multiple-exposure ‘chronophotographs’ of E.J. Marey, which predate the Futurist paintings

by almost 20 years, is unmistakable. *Little Girl Running on a Balcony* is more impressionistic, but here too, the successive positions of the subject are individually represented. The same technique is evident in Balla's *The Violinist's Hands*, also from 1912, and *Swifts: Paths of Movement and Dynamic Sequences* from 1913. The second of these is an explicit reference to Marey's photographic studies of birds in flight.<sup>4</sup>

To what extent do these images succeed in representing motion? Let us put this in the context of the metaphysical theories of motion outlined above. The cinematic account treats motion as displacement over time: the successive occupancy of different positions. And if Balla had intended his paintings as an analysis of motion in this sense, then they clearly succeed. (It might be suggested, indeed, that the chronophotographs which inspired Balla's paintings establish the truth of the cinematic account, for do they not precisely show what is happening at each instant of the movement? Unfortunately not. The photographic exposure cannot be confined to an instant in the technical sense of an indivisible moment, but must take up a minimal amount of time. The photograph is the causal result of what is happening over that interval, and so there is no instant such that the photograph represents precisely what is happening at that instant, but not what is happening at any other instant.) If, in contrast, the instant-intrinsic account is correct, then the paintings represent motion less directly, by depicting the effects of motion. These two approaches presuppose that the painting is intended as representing motion over time. If, instead, we (less plausibly) take it as presenting a snapshot, then the incompatible positions of the objects represented entail a Hegelian account.

But that this was not the intention, at least of some of Futurist practitioners, to present an artistic analysis of motion is evident in Anton Giulio Bragaglia's *Futurist Photodynamism* of 1911:

We are certainly not concerned with the aims and characteristics of cinematography and chronophotography. We are not interested in the precise reconstruction of movement, which has already been broken up and analysed. We are involved only in the area of movement which produces sensation, the memory of which still palpitates in our awareness. (Apollonio (1973), p. 38)

There is even the suggestion that cinematography, and by extension, chronophotography, misrepresents motion, at least as it is experienced:

Cinematography does not trace the shape of movement. It subdivides it, without rules, with mechanical arbitrariness, disintegrating and shattering it without any kind of aesthetic concern for rhythm. (Ibid., p. 39)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Selections of Futurist works can be found in Carrieri (1961), Apollonio (1973), Lista (2001) and Greene (2014).

<sup>5</sup> Ironically, Boccioni urged Futurist painters to distance themselves from experiments such as Bragaglia's: 'We have always rejected with disgust and scorn even a distant relationship with



Could Bragaglia's criticism be applied to Balla's paintings mentioned above? Dynamism of a Dog is perhaps the most cinematic, but the others are certainly not mere mechanical representations of different stages of motion. Although to some extent individual positions can be discerned, the images are fused in such a way that at points the moving object seems almost to dissolve.

Bragaglia's 1912 photograph of Balla has him standing with *Dynamism of a Dog*, evidently having recently completed it. The picture is blurred, as if either Balla or (more likely) Bragaglia shifted during the exposure. The painting too is blurred, thus perhaps transforming it into something more like Bragaglia's conception of what the depiction of movement should be. The precise representation of individual positions is gone, to be replaced by an indeterminacy of location. Closer to *The Violinist's Hands* is Bragaglia's *The Guitarist* of 1912, in which the right hand is caught several times in mid-flight.

The depiction of moving objects as almost dissolving in the motion is perhaps more evident in Boccioni's studies, such as *Dynamism of a Cyclist*, (1913) *Dynamism of a Human Body* (1913), and *Charge of the Lancers* (1915) where the objects become a series of abstract shapes. This abstraction is taken to a further level in Balla's *Abstract Speed – the Car has Passed* (1913), *Speeding Car* (1913), and *Dynamic Expansion + Speed* (1913). In Boccioni's *States of Mind* studies, the boundaries between different objects are dissolved, and even what is presumably empty space takes on a texture, also fused with the occupying bodies.

A further technique exploits the effects of juxtaposing small strokes of vividly contrasting colours. Balla's *Street Light* (1911) has a sphere of light composed of tiny white, yellow, red and green chevrons, forming concentric circles around the central lamp, creating, almost an illusion of movement similar to those achieved in Bridget Riley's paintings in the 1960s. Boccioni's *The City Rises* (1910-11), while not creating quite the same illusion, nevertheless exploits colours contrasts, with its central figure of a straining horse seemingly composed of flame.<sup>6</sup>

These images are certainly aesthetically successful: they are visually exhilarating pieces, they offer novel methods of representation, and in the case of *States of Mind*, they clearly convey distinctive moods. But to relate them back to the Futurists' professed aim of reproducing 'the dynamic sensation', can they succeed in this respect? The notion of reproducing a sensation on canvas is not an immediately transparent one, and we need to interpret it further before answering that question.

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photography, because it is outside art'; 'These purely photographic researches have absolutely nothing to do with the plastic dynamism invented by us...' (Translated and quoted in Braun (2014), p. 97.)

<sup>6</sup> See Fraquelli (2014) for a discussion of the use of colour in Futurist paintings.

## Interpreting '*reproducing the dynamic sensation*'

By 'the dynamic sensation' we can, I think, safely assume that what is referred to is an experience as-of motion or change in general. What would it be to reproduce this experience?

It will be helpful, first, to distinguish between depictive and non-depictive representation. We might non-depictively represent the passage of time, for example, in a series of cartoon pictures. Of course the experience of such a sequence, laid out before our eyes simultaneously, is not like the experience of the passage of time, but the sequence nevertheless conveys temporal content. In contrast, a film, unfolding on screen, manages to depict the passage of time by inducing in us the same kind of experience as we would have were we to witness the events represented in reality. So, at a first attempt, we might characterise depiction as a form of visual representation that represents by evoking the same kind of experience as would the object represented. A suitably realistic painting of a horse induces an experience that is relevantly like the visual experience of an actual horse, and it is the capacity of the painting to do this which is part of the representational mechanism.

So, do, or can, Futurist paintings depict motion? As noted above, if the cinematic account of motion is correct, then the chronophotograph-inspired paintings of Balla succeed in representing motion, by depicting the successive positions of a moving object. But this does not give rise to the experience as-of-motion. The painting, that is, is not experienced as itself moving! (Balla's *Street Light*, mentioned above, is perhaps the closest case where something like a sensation of movement is induced, but optical illusion is not generally a characteristic of Futurist painting, and illusions do not in general represent what they evoke.) So, at best, the paintings could be described as non-depictive representations of motion.

This uncompromising conclusion should be qualified. In the case of very rapid, oscillatory movement, the object is experienced in part as a blur, with perhaps the terminal positions picked out in experience. And this plausibly is captured by, e.g., the representation of the leash (and perhaps also the dog's legs) in *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash*. So it is, arguably, possible to depict this kind of movement. But then, it might be said, we don't in these cases experience the motion itself, precisely because the different positions of the oscillating object are presented all at once. A truly dynamic sensation is not captured like this.

Before we conclude that Futurist images cannot depict motion, however, we need to refine the rather rough characterisation of depiction offered above. A picture of a horse, it might be said, evokes an experience that is significantly unlike the experience of an actual horse, since we are never fooled by the picture into thinking that there is a horse here, as opposed to merely a picture of a horse. This is accommodated by Flint Schier's (1986) account of depiction: a picture depicts an F by triggering our F-recognition capacities. In order for the picture to do this, admittedly, we will need already to have grasped certain conventions of artistic representation. Once we have, however, we can go on more or less immediately to recognise novel images as visual representations of their objects. This is the sense in which the experience of the picture is relevantly like the experience of the actual object: both trigger our visual recognition capacities. Some pictures will do this more readily than others. Currie (1995) proposes that there are two mechanisms that may be called into

play in object recognition. One is more primitive, direct and instinctive, requiring little, if anything, in the way of reasoning and reflection. The second does require such reasoning and reflection. A depiction of a horse triggers the first mechanism; but the second mechanism prevents us from being fooled into thinking that we really are seeing horse rather than a picture of a horse (Currie (1995), p. 85). Currie also argues that there is a connection between depiction (thus understood) on the one hand, and artistic realism on the other (pp. 90-1). Thus, a painting represents a feature realistically to the extent that it triggers our more primitive recognition capacities. But Futurist paintings are not realist paintings, and do not set out to be. Our recognising the representation of motion in them is less immediate, and more the result of reflection.

If depiction of motion is off the table (for the time being), there is another way of interpreting the idea of reproducing the dynamic sensation, and that is to represent an analysis of that experience. On this interpretation, what Futurists paintings do is to represent the different components of the experience of motion. What are these components? On one account, it is the successive perceptions of an object at its different locations. This is the controversial cinematic account of motion experience, which takes that experience simply to be a series of different perceptual snapshots of an object's position. Even granting that an experience built up in such a way might give one the sensation of continuous motion, rather than motion as a series of jumps, such a perceptual mechanism would arguably make huge demands on the visual processing system. The position of the object would have to be registered (even if at some sub-conscious level), and then somehow retained, thus colouring the next perceptual snapshot. How many of these would be required to build up the experience of even a short burst of motion? Quite apart from these difficulties, we may wonder how much the Futurists would have wanted to commit themselves to any particular theory of motion experience. Still, the idea is not completely implausible: the remark quoted above from the Technical Manifesto concerning 'the persistency of an image upon the retina' does suggest that they were prepared to speculate about precisely this issue. And Bragaglia's mention of memory 'palpitating' in our sensory awareness is similarly suggestive of a view on the mechanism of motion experience.

If we are inclined to read into Futurist paintings, or the Futurist's own comments, views about the psychological mechanism behind motion perception, the cinematic account is not the only one we might suppose is represented. If the two remarks just mentioned suggest any of the models of motion experience we have canvassed, they perhaps fits better with the instant-intrinsic account than with the cinematic. The persistence of the image colours the psychological instant so as to provide an instantaneous experience of motion. Or consider the Hegelian account, on which the moving object is represented, at one and same time, as being both in a certain position and as not being in that position. Is that not also conveyed by some of those images? Different Futurist techniques, indeed, appear to correspond to different models of perception. Boccioni's States of Mind series is less suggestive of either the cinematic or Hegelian accounts, as of the indeterminacy of motion of perception, where we struggle to pinpoint the position, or boundaries, of the moving object. And what of the holistic account? In presenting different positions of an object as simultaneous aspects of an

image, apprehended in an instant, the message could be that the content of a psychological instant is derived from experience over a period.

I want to conclude this brief discussion by pursuing a different approach, one which re-opens the question of whether static images can depict motion. Perhaps we need a different account of depiction for Futurist paintings.

## Depiction and non-realism

The Futurists clearly felt that their artistic efforts were truer to experience than the static productions of the past—or at least, that it was an achievable aim to be true to that experience. This is, however, somewhat at odds with the conventional wisdom concerning depiction and its relation to pictorial realism. We may set out the propositions which are in tension with each other, as follows:

1. The degree of realism in a picture is determined by the extent to which the features it represents are represented depictively rather than non-depictively.
2. Futurist pictures are, to a large extent, non-realist representations.
3. If a picture depicts Fs, then the experience of the picture is closer to visual experience of actual Fs than are non-depictive representations of Fs.
4. Futurist pictures are closer to experience than conventional (realist) representational pictures.

1 and 2 imply that Futurist pictures are non-depictive representations. 3 and 4 imply that they are depictive representations. They cannot be both! So what should go here?

The simplest move at this point would be to give up on the Futurist dream and reject 4, leaving the theoretical framework intact. But there is a more interesting response, and that is to offer an alternative view of depiction, one suitable for non-realist representation. This need not be in tension with the feature-recognition-triggering account, which can remain in place as a way of distinguishing realist from non-realist pictures. But we also want a sense of depiction that allows a non-realist painting to be a depiction of its object in a way in which a linguistic description of that object plainly is not.

The Futurists were by no means the first to aim at a truer representation of experience than that provided by traditional realist artworks. The Impressionists also aimed at this. Take, for example, Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. With its enormous yellow moon, stars represented as concentric circles of light, and the great swirling mass at the centre of the painting, this is, in terms of its effect upon the retina, less like a photograph of the night sky than, say, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch painter Aers van der Neer's *River Scene with a Bonfire, Moonlight*. Yet we might feel that Van Gogh's painting conveys the experience of a night sky more intensely than the van der Neer (beautiful and atmospheric though the realist painting is).

So here is a proposal: non-realist paintings depict, in part, by taking an aspect of our ordinary visual experience and making it the object of a visual experience. In Van Gogh's case, it is the salience of the heavenly objects in the night sky, despite the smallness of the

corresponding retinal images, which is made the object of experience when we look at the painting. It offers us a visual representation of that salience. In the case of the Futurists, the aspect is the way in which the perception of a shifting scene is influenced by past perceptions, which are present in the picture. The picture thus confronts us with a temporally extended vision of the scene. This is not a depiction of motion in the recognition-capacity-triggering sense, since the picture does not, at least directly, trigger our visual recognition capacities for motion. But what makes it appropriate to talk of depiction here is that the experience nevertheless has something in common with the visual experience of motion, namely awareness of the multiple or indeterminate locations of the depicted object. We need this second kind of depiction to accommodate the depiction of features of our own experience, as opposed to depiction of external objects.

1 and 3 connect closeness to experience with realism. But insofar as Futurism is a non-realist technique which nevertheless delivers something that is closer to experience, we need to break this link: or at least, allow that there is more than one way of being true to experience. Not all depiction is realist. It is a specific kind of depiction, namely that defined by Schier and Curry, in terms of which realism can be understood. It is a rather different kind of depiction according to which Futurist pictures capture an aspect of experience. Once we recognise these two kinds of depiction, the contradiction disappears.

Now we are back with an earlier worry: does the depictive status of Futurist paintings depend on a particular model of motion experience, viz. the cinematic account? If so, then it faces the objections that might be raised against that account. No, I think our account of depiction can be neutral on that point. True, it presupposes that part of the experience of motion is awareness of multiple location, but it is not further presupposed that we experience motion by perceiving multiple occupancy, as the cinematic account suggests: the direction of causation could run the other way.

What this discussion has attempted to do is to tease out different aesthetic projects concerning the pictorial representation of motion, using the Futurists as a case study. Some of these projects look more promising than others, and some leave hostages to theoretical fortune, insofar as they depend on controversial theories of motion and motion experience. But we can, I think, begin to see that the Futurist aim of reproducing on canvas the ‘dynamic sensation’ characteristic of temporal experience was not necessarily a vain one.<sup>7</sup>

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