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DOCTORAL SCHOOL IN PHILOSOPHY**

***A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH OF  
SPACE TO GIOTTO'S PAINTING***

**PHD THESIS  
SUMMARY**

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**Key-words:**

phenomenology, Giotto, narrativity, temporality, intentional structure, pictorial space – existential space, diegetic levels, narrative levels, *astanza – flagranza*.

**The Subject, the Goal and the Methods of the Thesis**

The present paper analyzes the cycle of frescoes from *Cappella degli Scrovegni* from Padua painted by Giotto di Bondone, in the year 1305. Through the analysis of the narrative structures on the one hand, and the analysis of the narrator's position on the other hand, the relation between the space and time becomes more poignant and so, new dimensions of these paintings are revealed. The central question is what does the onlooker see? And nevertheless, what types of fine elements contribute to the scene dynamics and of the whole cycle overall? How can be understood this dynamic process? How can we understand Giotto's genius in painting? How can we understand Giotto's painting from a phenomenological perspective?

The dynamics of the action is here analysed starting from the narrative and through the intentional structure of narrative in the process of raising the consciousness of the images. Therefore, the description of the frescoes bases on a phenomenological perspective. If from the outset, we understand that this approach assumes intentionality of the painter, this description does not only mean a description of the themes and images but it emphasizes the very rhetoric of different levels of understanding the images.

I chose the phenomenological method because the phenomenological intentionality also refers to the pictorial language. The vision of the painter is the vision of something, and the painting, as action, assumes a phenomenological reduction. The pictorial language is unrepeatable, it is an intentional act, singular, and so it evades any schematization. Any pictorial element becomes essential in itself. Therefore, one may say the phenomenological method has the closest ties with fine arts.

The innovative aspects of the historical and medieval character and implicitly of the narrativity of Giotto's fresco stays in the fact that annals kind of historiography of the Medieval Age reaches a new dimension through the telling, and so it reveals the painter's originality and constitutive conscience that creates a unity, or in other words it reveals the very subjectivity of the painter.

Either one consider the historical character of life or the historical character of a narration, the time paradigm is implied, because the time and the story are inseparable. The paper reflects mainly on the space in these paintings; however the issue of time has its place in the analysis. I emphasized those aspects of narrativity where one may read both the individual situations and motivations of the painter and of his characters' at the same time.

### **The Structure of the Thesis**

The doctoral thesis „A Phenomenological Approach of Space to Giotto's Painting” is structured in five chapters followed by conclusions and annexes of the reproductions after the Giotto's painting from *Cappella degli Scrovegni*.

The *first chapter* analyzes the constitutive character of the painting process and of the painter's vision, from a phenomenological point of view. The vision of the painter is seeing of something and his intentionality is to orient the onlooker to the object of the original sense. Intentionality is oriented with the goal of making sense.

The *second chapter* consists of the description of the historical and social milieu at the time of Giotto. Based on this socio-cultural frame, I grasped the artist and painter condition, painter-iconographer and painter-artist or creator, and so I analyzed the expectations and the reciprocal relations between the painter and the society at the time. In this context, I emphasized Giotto's geniality, his performance as an artist and the novelty which he gave. In order to analyze the painting techniques used in Middle Age and Renaissance, I considered as sources the painting treaties (*Tractatus*) published during the thirteenth century. The main reason in doing so is that the treaties reflect the process of painting in the European history where one can read the passing from the medieval time to modernism. Secondly, the above mentioned treaties contain a detailed description of the painting techniques, which uncover medieval and Renaissance style in painting, and clear references about how the painter was perceived by society. Understanding the painter's techniques is crucial for understanding his painting creation.

The *third part* of the present paper is focused on *Cappella degli Scrovegni*, a chapel, which, from its very construction, has been considered a European masterpiece. In this context I analyze the innovation brought in by Giotto from the point of view of the plastic elements and nevertheless, its expression. Two examples are telling here: the overcoming of the inversed perspective used in the Byzantine and medieval painting and the

introduction of the emotional and sentimental elements in representing the characters, which for the first time appear to be expressive. Giotto gave up the inertial style of reproducing space as symbolical, so specific to the Byzantine painting and created a space for the living experiences, impressions, which are full of directions, moving and dynamism. This space becomes existential for the subject.

A change was produced in representing the human face as a portrait, contrary to the tradition of the symbolical model of Byzantine painting. Giotto emphasized the sentiments and so his narrations got a psychological dimension. The events are not any longer represented factual, but from the point of view of the emotional evolution. All that contributed to new possibilities in representation. In a three-dimensional system, the bodies gain volume and weight, and the representation of the face expression becomes possible. Following that the composition also changed. In the new created space the moving of the characters becomes realistic, which changes the structure of time. Representing space and time give the possibility of representing characters which look lively, moving.

Starting from this approach of the frescoes, I followed the intentional character of the pictural expressivity and of the way the painter sees. In understanding the history of visuality, we can more clearly understand both what the painter see and what the onlooker see.

In the *fourth chapter* I presented the narrativity in painting, analyzing different perspectives and narrativity in medieval and Renaissance picture. Basic narrative elements from the cycle of frescoes from *Cappella degli Scrovegni* became more evident from this perspective. I reached the conclusion that the pictural narrativity of the medieval type, respectively Renaissance, comes out from the historiography conceptualization of the epoch. Therefore there is the possibility to note Giotto's geniality and his capacity for overcoming the conventions of the society at the time, a society which was between the medieval period and Renaissance.

The time perception and the historical perception make the difference between seeing linearity and causality in the historical development of the events, respectively making the link between the events. In this context, the events of the narrative circle reach another direction compared to the eschatological one, and where the man may find the beauty of his human nature.

The analysis of "centres of force" and of directions in the frescoes is important because these elements are among the main elements of narrativity. Therefore, we see both

the sequential narrativity and the linear one and so the frescoes constitute a network of signification.

I considered the temporality of the fable and of the discourse, the time of telling and time of the perception. I analysed the issue of focus and framing and to what extent can the interior, exterior and intermediary spaces be considered elements of the narrative.

In order to build the space, Giotto associates different plastical elements, spatial illusions, and creates different perspectives, enlarging the horizons of what is to be seen and perceived.

The iterative structures used by Giotto give to the paintings a dynamic, and the events which are to be found in a scene are reproduced in a sequential manner. The analysis of the temporality makes reference to the linear time, its frequency, secular and religious times. These analyses argue for different modes and manners of time and space reproduction. Giotto developed and enlarged the possibilities of the visuality which were unknown by the Byzantine picture, while the Renaissance which followed explored only part of these possibilities.

An important aspect of the analysis is made by crossing the borders between the diegetic levels, which made possible to overcome a linear and continuous time and to find therefore an excess of the time and space reproduced.

The textual referentiality of the frescoes is an important criteria in understanding the paintings, because the texts constitutes the very base for narrativity in the Franciscan mentality at the time, and nevertheless, gave the possibility to express the characters' feelings and emotions. Along the four gospels, the bases references are the apocryphal texts and those written by Pseudo-Bonaventura: „*Meditations Vitae Christi*” and Jacobus de Voragine: „*Legenda Aurea*”, both published in the 13th century.

The different pictorial perspectives appear simultaneously: along the elements of the linear perspective are also present the elements of the inversed and semantic perspective. Giotto used them consciously and explored the new possibilities for simultaneous visuality.

*The fifth chapter*, the largest one, is a phenomenological description of the images, and analyzes the ways in which these images enlarge the visual horizon through new possibilities of vision. From this point of view plastical and narrative elements facilitate the changing of perspective.

## The Theoretical Framework

I refer to the concepts of *narrative levels* and *narrator position* defined by Gérard Genette, and also to the theories of *horizontal and vertical stratification* of Edward Branigan. I found them relevant in the analysis of the cycle of frescoes which shall be understood as a structural unity, a complex form made of different levels. The artistic value and the dynamic of the cycle is given by the organic connection between these levels (the significance, narrativity, style) which offer a perfect frame for a phenomenological analysis. Giotto, the painter, the artist, the genius, *homo pictor* is the one who explore new ways of what can be seen, going against the dogmatic conceptualization of his epoch.

The basic bibliography for the second chapter is given by the medieval and Renaissance treaties (*Tractatus*), written by Lorenzo Ghiberti, Cennino Cennini, Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo Da Vinci.

The phenomenological basis of the paper is given by Heideggerian terminology, linked to the temporality of the work, and the conceptual instruments of Merleau-Ponty, given the spatiality. I closely followed the Italian tradition of phenomenology, especially the conception of Cesar Brandi, who developed his theory on art work starting from Heidegger, being one of the most known specialists in research related to Giotto's work.

An important concept developed by Brandi is „*astanza*”, which was created to emphasize that art work cannot be reduced to any content that is not its presence „now and here” (*hic et nunc*). The art work cannot lose its vitality along time. An important concept for Brandi is *presenzialità*, meant to give historical conscience to the present time.

I analyzed the narrativity of the cycle of frescoes based on the theory of vision and the postmodern interpretation of history conceptualized by Konrad Fiedler. The description of the historical social context lets one know the time conventions, which were overcome by Giotto's genius. The process of painting is a phenomenological phenomenon. In this way we can understand the process of the history of painting, the succession of generations, and the painter's evolution.

Everything here is a process as the painting is an expression of a living experience though not a mundane activity. The onlooker sees the picture as being finite. The work process is part and parcel from the structural aspects of painting. Understanding that reveals the sense of the painting as a lively act.

## The Research Results

In contrast to the vast and diverse literature which analyzed Giotto's painting, the present paper set the scene for a phenomenological analysis of space in the painting from *Cappella degli Scrovegni*. To make possible this analysis on Giotto's paintings, I considered inevitable to include the time phenomenon in the analysis. I consider important to highlight few new views that make a contribution to the research to date on the work of Giotto, and that can reveal new understandings of Giotto's paintings.

Analyzing the possibilities of the narrative picture, I assessed the connection between the narrative and diegetic levels and the relation between them, and I reached the conclusion that one of the plastic elements which realize the communication between these levels is the *witness*, the implication of the medieval onlooker, which emphasized at the same time the changing of the perspective. In almost every scene one may notice the presence of one or two onlookers in the painting itself – which are dressed up according to the social conventions of the time – and that signals the fact that the scene which are told here, be out of Eschatology, give new understandings from the perspectives of different characters or different epochs.

Given the physical characteristics of the fresco, it enables such a narrative that cannot be told in other pictorial styles. Even the name, cycle of frescoes, means large dimensions of the paintings and implies the fact that some paintings follow others. From a phenomenological point of view we understand that as an influence in relation of the onlooker to the paintings, because the dimension and the succession presume the changing of the position, here, the surrounding space around the chapel. This surrounding enlarge the possibilities of what may be seen, but also imply moving – to put it differently, Giotto make the onlooker to look and to see both as activity. The moving gives continuity to the act and therefore makes a connection between the process of the looking and the continuation of activity. So is the onlooker invited into the choreography of the scenes.

All these support the argument that Giotto consciously transferred to the onlooker the referential point. The point of origin is actually the body of the onlooker, one who can move, see and make sense. The fact that the onlooker might move also change the perception of distance and so the onlooker is encouraged to want the move, to change his position consciously, to orient. The perception of the onlooker becomes meditative, and the movement can be activated not in space per se, but through the movement of conscience.

Therefore, the dimensions of space and time in the perception of such images are different from those encountered in case of easel picture.

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