

Diderot: Space and Movement

Introduction

Valentina Sperotto
sperotto.valentina@hsr.it

Space and movement are not central concepts in discussing Diderot's physical and philosophical thought, however they become quite interesting when the discussion shifts to aesthetics. Because of that, the question of space and movement in Diderot's works is the main focus of this issue of *Itinera*. An analysis is carried out of the rhetorical and literary use of space and movement by Diderot to spatialise his materialist written expression and "put thinking in motion". Special attention is devoted to the philosopher's aesthetic considerations, of which space and movement are an important theoretical piece. Some of Diderot's main works - among which the *Lettre sur le aveugles*, the *Salons*, *Jacques le fataliste* - are investigated under different perspectives in order to show the relevance of space and movement.

Keywords: Diderot, Space, Movement, Aesthetics, Philosophy.

Diderot: Space and Movement

Introduction

Valentina Sperotto

sperotto.valentina@hsr.it

This issue of *Itinera* focuses on space and movement in Diderot's work. If on the one hand critics have not considered these two concepts pivotal in Diderot's philosophy, on the other hand several interesting elements emerge when considering them on an aesthetic level. Authors explore Diderot's use of space and movement as rhetorical and literary devices used to spatialise his materialist written expression and "put thinking in motion" i.e. systematically stimulate critical thinking. Additionally, space and movement are considered in the context of Diderot's aesthetic mindset of which they are important theoretical elements. Many questions connected to Diderot's Salons arise: how does the philosopher view space in paintings? What is the relationship between space and movement in visual arts? How is the rhetorical device *ekphrasis* used by Diderot? Diderot's writing on theatre and his literary production offer critical insight on the views he holds on space and movement, i.e. the *mise-en-scène* as a sequence of paintings, and movement as gesture and pantomime.

Space and movement are, first and foremost, scientific concepts whose philosophical importance becomes crucial after the Scientific Revolution. Newton, after the crucial contributions of Copernicus and Galileo, completely changes the concepts of space and motion, especially by breaking with the identification of space (extension) and matter established by the Cartesian paradigm. The concept of space as an entity that exists irrespective of its measurement or relative perception is tightly related to that of motion because true motion, in Newtonian thought, is the displacement of a body in absolute space¹. Although the intense debate that takes place throughout the 17th century on the concept of space is mainly scientific, it also has philosophical implications for it is not

¹ See E. Franzini, *La rappresentazione dello spazio*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2011, p. 20.

just the mathematical and physical notion of space being questioned, but also its metaphysical and theological foundation. The additional pages of *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, called *Scholium*, show that for Newton the concept of space is strictly related to the theological concepts of eternity and infinity, thus highlighting its philosophical-theological importance². This is the main reason why Newton's notion of space is controversial in the 18th century and some Enlightenment philosophers distance themselves from it, despite embracing Newtonianism.

In France, references to that matter can be found in the *Encyclopédie*, one example being the article «Espace (Métaphysique)»³ by d'Alembert, published in 1755 in the fifth volume. The French physician and philosopher offers an extensive analysis of Leibniz's anti-Newtonian idea of space, in particular by referencing the Leibniz-Clarke correspondence and by ending with a quotation from Musschenbroek that points out the futility of that debate. The article «Mouvement (Mécanique)»⁴ written by J. H. S. Formey in collaboration with D'Alembert offers a different approach to the matter, which is more nuanced and leaves more space to Newton and Émilie du Châtelet, his populariser in France. In order to fully appreciate the article it is worth remembering that du Châtelet, besides divulging Newton's ideas in France, also knew Leibniz's work well and, on the matter of space, had sided with the latter in the *Institutions de physique* (1740) showing the absurd consequences of Newton's concept of space on a theological level⁵. Towards the end of the century an alternative to Newton's and Leibniz's perspectives on space arises; in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* Kant defines space as the pure form of intuition of the external sense. An additional alternative to the physical, metaphysical and theological paradigms of both the Cartesian and Newtonian traditions is elaborated by Diderot in his materialist philosophy.

² A. Janiak, *Space and motion in nature and Scripture: Galileo, Descartes, Newton* in "Studies in History and Philosophy of Science", LI, 2015, pp. 89-99. On this topic, see also G. Mormino, *Spazio, corpo e moto nella filosofia naturale del Seicento*, Mimesis, Milano 2012.

³ J. Le Rond d'Alembert, art. «Espace» in D. Diderot, J. Le Rond d'Alembert (ed by), *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers (1751-1780)*, Le Breton-Briasson-David-Durand, vol. V, 1755, pp. 953b–956a.

⁴ J. H. S. de Formey, J. Le Rond d'Alembert, art. «Mouvement» in *ibidem*, vol. X, 1765, pp. 830b–840b.

⁵ S. Hutton, *Between Newton and Leibniz: Émilie du Châtelet and Samuel Clarke* in R. Hagenruber (ed. by), *Emilie du Châtelet between Leibniz and Newton*, Springer, Dordrecht 2012, pp. 87-89.

In one of the few critical studies on this subject, François Pépin⁶ shows that the physical and philosophical question of space and movement does not seem to have been explicitly addressed by Diderot, despite him not rejecting the Newtonian idea of these two concepts. Nevertheless his work configures space, movement and their relationship in a different way mainly unrelated to the debate that has been outlined. In his analysis of the ontological and representational elaboration of these concepts in Diderot's thought, Pépin points out that only few pages on classical mechanics can be found in Diderot's early work (mainly the fifth conjecture in the 1753-1754 *Pensée sur l'interprétation de la nature*). Diderot's conclusion shows indeed his distance: «Si l'on te propose ces difficultés, je te conseille d'en aller chercher la réponse chez quelque Newtonien; car je t'avoue que j'ignore comment on les résout»⁷. The end of the *Pensée sur l'interprétation de la nature* is not the only instance where Diderot shows a metaphysical consciousness – unlike other contemporary materialists such as La Mettrie – despite his inability to find a satisfactory answer to issues being faced such as G. Berkeley's claim that it is impossible to prove that anything exists outside the subject (also a spatial problem in some way). Diderot conceives his materialist philosophy as a conjecture and these are some distinctive elements of his sceptical boundaries. According to Diderot, space is not a neutral physical dimension, but rather something dynamic, concrete and plural, closer to Leibniz's view of space as something that depends on our organisation, as it is an effect of the phenomenal order. Despite several elements of affinity, including the one just mentioned, the difference between Leibniz and Diderot is clear: the former embraces a metaphysical and monadic philosophical system, while the latter endorses a vitalistic, eclectic and anti-systematic materialism.⁸

The reticence or avoidance of the geometrical and abstract concepts of space and movement lead the philosopher to introduce another approach to the matter: space is the result of perceptions and movements. Intellectual and scientific practices become part of the spatialisation process in relation to two things: the idea of the soul held by the

⁶ See F. Pépin, *L'espace chez Diderot*, in T. Paquot, C. Younès (ed. by), *Espace et lieu dans la pensée occidentale de Platon à Nietzsche*, cit., pp. 185-202.

⁷ D. Diderot, *Pensée sur l'interprétation de la nature* in *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, critical edition, H. Dieckmann, J. Proust, J. Varloot (ed. by), Hermann, Paris 1975- , 33 volumes planned, henceforth abbreviated DPV, vol. IX, p. 99.

⁸ On the relationship between Diderot and Leibniz see C. Leduc, F. Pépin, A.-L. Rey, M. Rioux-Beaulne (ed. by), *Leibniz et Diderot. Rencontres et transformations*, Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal-Vrin, Montréal 2015; C. Fauvergue, *Diderot, lecteur et interprète de Leibniz*, Honoré Champion, Paris 2006.

materialists - heirs of Descartes⁹ - as something with a physical dimension, and the search for its location, which has been present since the *Bijoux Indiscrets*. Even more relevant is the presence of a spatialisation of philosophy in Diderot's writings¹⁰ through the choice of metaphors and themes aimed at translating local, domestic, open and fatalistic thought into images.

The first example of this stylistic translation of the category of space and movement is the *Promenade du sceptique* (1747). In the *Discours préliminaire* of the text, as J. Fabre highlights in her article *Une «philosophie locale»? Jardin et scepticisme dans «La Promenade du sceptique» de Diderot (From Space to Movement: the Walk as Intellectual Dynamic in Diderot's La Promenade du sceptique)*, several superimposed layers of meaning of space can be found. The very first is a spatial metaphor that shapes the entire text, namely the star from which the three alleys – which stand for the possible life paths that man can choose – stem. Diderot shows, with his description of Cléobule's garden, that space is something relative and strictly related to movement. In contrast with the static nature of a philosophical system, according to Fabre, movement is the real crucial concept in the *Promenade du sceptique* because it is the main characters' stride that activates and stages the dynamism and the constant indecision of the sceptical philosopher. Movement is also an empirical way of testing different philosophies: as the characters of the Alley of the Chestnut Trees move forward, they face different situations and obstacles, which they try to overcome according to their principles. This is a way to ridicule, for example, the absurd consequences of egotism – embodied by Zénoclès, a character who nearly drowns after jumping into a river without knowing how to swim because he thinks space is a chimera. Luckily, he is saved by the Spinozist Oribaze – bearer of another idea of space and matter. Not only is this scene a way of comparing different philosophical perspectives, but it is also a way for Diderot to create a narrative space and an ironic dynamic that trigger a heuristic, fictional activity. Moreover, Cléobule's garden is also a space of memory, as M. Marcheschi explains in *L'espace des ragoûts. Diderot, la robe de chambre et Pénélope dans une taverne à bière (The Space of "Ragoûts". Diderot, the Dressing Gown and Penelope in a Beer Hall)*. Thanks to his description of Cléobule's retreat, Diderot

⁹ See F. Pépin, *L'espace chez Diderot*, op. cit., p. 193.

¹⁰ Ivi, pp. 193-195.

renews the tradition of the *ars memoriae* envisioning memory as inventive and the *loci* as similar to overlapping dynamic layers.

Empiricism gives experience a major role, and Diderot applies its consequences by constantly putting his ideas to the test, especially through the fiction in his work, as the philosophers of the *Promenade du sceptique* show. The importance of movement in connection with Diderot's empiricism also emerges in the article by M. Maione, *Diderot, Reid e l'esperienza percettiva. Compensazioni sinestetiche, linguistiche ed estetiche* (*Diderot, Reid and Perceptual Experience. Synesthetic, Linguistic and Aesthetic Compensations*, where Molyneux's problem is discussed in the *Lettre sur les aveugles*). The character of the blind man proves that the body movement and the sense of touch are the origin of the notions of "direction", "straight line" and "curved line"; all of them reinforced by "repeated tactile experiences". For Diderot, movement is coextensive with the body, and this is why touch allows the blind man to perceive an entire statue and, at the same time, to recognize all the elements that can guarantee its wholeness. The construction of a shape is the result of a judgement prompted by perceptible qualities, fed by linguistic practices and experiences pertaining to certain perceptual-cognitive contexts. The aesthetic judgement of the blind man emerges from this process as the arrangement of the elements and of the emotions that sparked it in relation to the perceptible attributes of the object; synesthetic compensation becomes aesthetic compensation. Aesthetic judgement, however, cannot be downsized to this compensation for it is also linked to linguistic activity and contextual elements. Maione identifies an interesting convergence between Diderot and Thomas Reid on the subject of aesthetic judgement: they both connect it to linguistic practices and they are both interested in the aesthetic translation of perceptible qualities. In all likelihood no other deeper affinities exist between these two authors - who did not seem to have been in contact with each other - especially on the importance of corporeal and qualitative elements, which are central for Diderot and, on the contrary, not so much for Reid. One important aspect of Diderot's idea of artistic experience is the claim that the physiology of human body works the same way before nature and artworks; when he conceives the "tableau mouvant" of our soul, he is referring to the synesthetic activation of the imagination, which happens equally in both instances. M. Marcheschi clarifies that this reconstructive process, carried out by the imagination, involves a spatialisation of time,

i.e. different or rather successive times are condensed simultaneously in the image produced by the imagination. Although transposing the culinary concept of “ragoût” into the field of visual art may seem peculiar, the metaphor is indeed useful to understand how the observation of paintings could sharpen our sensory intelligence. “Ragoût” is a culinary preparation in which several ingredients are boiled together, creating a unique and complex texture that is intensely stimulating both in terms of taste and smell. In the 18th century, “ragoût” became the aesthetic expression to describe the harmonic correlation between the artwork parts and the whole. Especially in the *Salon de 1767* the concept of “ragoût” makes it possible to «rediscover the time that constitutes the present form of space», to quote Marcheschi. The viewer-copy-original relationship brings out the chronological simultaneity spatialised by the image and stimulated in particular by the “ragout”, i.e. a unity revealing the multiplicity of relationships.

The subject of walk as philosophy in movement is found in the *Salons* not only as the physical strolling along the exhibition, but also as the fictitious movement within the paintings, which are viewed as dynamic spaces that can be crossed by description and imagination. Diderot uses the rhetorical device of *ekphrasis* to recreate the space of the painting by means of writing. The reader is invited to cross this space and to experience the movement generated by the illusion, in its physiological meaning of impulse that brings one close to objects (or pushes one away from them)¹¹. The dynamism stems from the fact that we are attracted to painted things, such as Chardin’s biscuits and fruits, because their image stimulates our appetite: «c’est qu’il n’y a qu’à prendre ces biscuits et les manger; cette bigarade, l’ouvrir et la presser; ce verre de vin, et le boire; ces fruits, et les peler; ce pâté, et y mettre le couteau»¹², says Diderot in front of the *Bocal d’olives*. This is the effect of a great painter with his thick layers of colour, but it is also the consequence of the viewer’s position: the image turns into blurred two-

¹¹ On the relationship between physiology and aesthetic experience see P. Quintili, *La pensée critique de Diderot. Matérialisme, science et poésie à l’âge de l’Encyclopédie 1742-1782*, Honoré Champion, Paris 1999.

¹² D. Diderot, *Salon de 1763* in Id., *Essais sur la peinture et Salons de 1759, 1761, 1763*, Hermann, Paris 1984, p. 220.

dimensions if looked at from too close, but recreates and reproduces the truth again if observed from the right distance¹³.

The spatial distance between the viewer and the canvas must be appropriate, as must be the arrangement of paintings in the space of the Salon Carré in the Louvre; indeed Diderot does not hesitate to comment on *Tapissier's* good, bad or malicious choice. Moreover, it is known that the surface of the painting is enclosed by a frame and that in Diderot's text it is the Author, Title and technical details that play the role of framing and separating the different descriptions, which follow the order imposed by the *Livret*. Therefore, when the spirit opens up to the effects of painting, it is the very constraints of the framed image that break to make way for digression, being it narrative or reflective¹⁴. This happens because imagination activates our thought process when faced with an effective *mise-en-scène*; if the effect is true, then the viewer can conceive the development of the action far beyond the limits of the representation¹⁵. In empirical terms, trying to grasp the details one by one is a way of educating the eye to observe nature. For this reason, the space of the painted scene with its different perspective planes, variety of lines, arrangement of light and masses must give the impression of movement, that of the nature depicted and at the same time the activation of the viewer's mechanism of inner movement. The *Promenade Vernet* in *Salon de 1767* is the climax of this rhetorical and philosophical expedient. According to Diderot, linguistic expression cannot encompass everything that is visible in an image since the simultaneous existence of multiple objects in the space of the canvas cannot be forced into the linear sequence of the text. Therefore, only an animate description can bring back the spatial dimension of the experience. Here lies the philosophical problem of *Salons*: art, and especially paintings, must convey the truth of nature as is, which means that things, their relationship and their perpetual movement, or *mutatio*, must be represented. Details must be harmoniously connected to form the whole image and at the same time the artist must choose a significant moment, thus configuring nature as something animate. By filling the gap between image and language, Diderot turns

¹³ See M. Mazzocut-Mis, *Introduzione ai Salons*, in D. Diderot, *I Salons con i Saggi sulla pittura e i Pensieri Sparsi*, Bompiani, Milano 2021, pp. LIII-LVI.

¹⁴ L. Mall, *Parerga ou ergon: la problématique du cadre dans les Salons de Diderot*, in "Diderot Studies", XXXII, 2012, pp. 325-344.

¹⁵ See R. Messori, *La descrizione animata. Arte, poetica e materialismo sensibile in Diderot*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2017.

description into a complex dramaturgical mechanism: he recreates the illusion of the scene and puts the image into action.

Jean Starobinski shows how, in the field of aesthetics, the 18th century turns the hierarchical representation of space upside down, after centuries of central perspective predominance¹⁶. The multiplication of points of view and the variations of the movement of the scene are emblematic of this period, on a symbolic level as well. The movement of live nature is best expressed by wavy lines, while symmetry and straight lines are, on the contrary, symbols of inertia and immobility, as Diderot and C. L. von Hagedorn argue in their works, the *Pensées détachées sur la peinture* (1775-1781) and *Observations on Painting* (1762) respectively. Diderot developed this idea of space and movement widely in his analyses dedicated to arts, and then coherently put it in practice in his writings. His most famous novel *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* is an especially fitting example; the characters are constantly in motion, and their progress is continually distracted, generating a non-linear narrative trajectory that is also susceptible to a philosophical interpretation. This is the core of the contribution of Z. Ghassemi, called *Schrodinger's Narratives: Denis Diderot's and Laurence Sterne's Manipulations of Time and Space* where the author analyses how Diderot manipulates space in *Jacques le fataliste* following in the footsteps of his English model *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Lawrence Sterne. In the works of both writers, the space of the page becomes “three-dimensional” thanks to several commentaries aimed directly at the reader. The interactive space of narration, due to a massive use of metalepsis (as per G. Genette's definition), completely loses its symmetry – that between reader and history, and that between reality and fiction – and eventually takes up a new configuration. There are significant differences between Sterne and Diderot, yet both novels lack an ending. The narrative movement of the characters is interrupted, thus avoiding the reproduction of the biblical structure of the tale based on the beginning-middle-end scheme, on which most Western novels were based on¹⁷. The structure of dialogue in *Jacques le fataliste* is close to a theatrical piece, this being one of the differences with *Tristram Shandy* since Sterne aims at transforming reading into a

¹⁶ See J. Starobinski, *L'invention de la liberté, 1700-1789*, Gallimard, Paris 2006, tr. it. *L'invenzione della libertà 1700-1789*, Abscondita, Milano 2008, p. 101.

¹⁷ See F. Kermode, *The sense of an ending: studies in the theory of fiction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000.

social act. The importance of the theatrical nature of the dialogues in Diderot's works is confirmed by C. Piccione's article, *Come Macbeth si lava le mani. La concezione diderotiana del movimento fra i primi scritti di estetica teatrale e i «Salons»* (*How Macbeth Washes Her Hands. Diderot's Conception of Movement, between His First Writings on Theatre Aesthetics and the Salons*), which highlights the centrality of theatre in Diderot's understanding of the arts. The point of reference of Diderot's materialist philosophy, as already mentioned, is nature. In ethics, politics, and aesthetics it is impossible to identify a general norm coherently derived from a theoretical foundation, according to a philosophical system based on metaphysics. Diderot claims that we should look at nature¹⁸, with its constant changes, movements, variations and nuances turning each situation specific, and use that as the criterion to judge the true, the good, and the beautiful. Visual arts must, therefore, mirror this moving and ever changing nature; in painting and theatre the "tableau" is a microcosm that exists regardless of the viewer. Diderot sees the stage as a living painting, while at the same time theatre acts as the model for the painter, thus creating a virtuous circle. In theatre, however, natural representation is not exclusively up to the *mise-en-scène*, but also to acting, particularly through gestures; it is essential that, in plays, gestures are executed fluidly. The importance of gesture is reminiscent of Du Bos's thoughts on theatre, yet Piccione shows how Diderot is closer to Saint-Albine's view on the impossibility of codifying theatrical movement, which intends to criticise the mechanical view of physiology. In order to be true, the action being represented, both on stage and on the canvas, must be characterised by dynamism according to an internal organisation that does not depend on the viewer's look. The distance between the scene and the viewer then allows the preservation of its symbolic dimension by generating an illusion. At the same time, this truthfulness can touch the viewer's sensitivity, who is thus moved by the same action that takes place on the stage. The fall of the fourth wall¹⁹ between the two spaces allows both to be crossed by dynamism and movement, as is clearly demonstrated by the description of theatres as real places of turmoil in *De la poésie dramatique*. Another point of convergence between Diderot and Saint-Albine is the importance of the actor's collaboration in the construction of the character. Diderotian

¹⁸ C. Duflo, *Diderot Philosophe*, Honoré Champion, Paris 2003.

¹⁹ See S. Lojkine, *L'œil revolté. Les Salons de Diderot*, Éd. Jacqueline Chambon (Actes du Sud), Paris 2007.

thought on this subject has been widely acclaimed, thanks particularly to the *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, whose success has lasted until the contemporary era. C. Uberti-Foppa has carried out a hands-on investigation on the prolificacy of some Diderotian views on theatre – even if centuries after they were developed – by interviewing contemporary actors. Some interesting elements emerge on the importance of space and movement in theatre from the actor’s interviews extracts that Uberti-Foppa quotes and comments in her article *Il teatro e l’indagine sull’umano. L’attore moderno in scena...all’ombra di Diderot (Theater and the Investigation of the Human Being. The Modern Actor on Stage... in the Wake of Diderot)*. According to the research, staged actions are the creative tools used to interpret the text productively instead of unoriginally. The actors’ actions and gestures – in other words the movements of the body in the space of the stage – are the evidence of the movement of the soul and what turns the viewer’s “tableau mouvant” on. This exchange of energy as a flux of movement is the outcome of another process actors put themselves through. One of the interviewees puts the focus precisely on the constant research needed to play a character; for him – and in accordance with Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien* – actors can only achieve that by applying a “distinct enthusiasm”. However, according to Diderot, this is not possible if the actors’ sensitivity is turned on and they feel the same feelings as the characters. Good actors are detached and fully in control of their emotions to better convey the characters. Some of the actors being interviewed - taking into account Grotowski’s work as well as other later theories on theatre - view this as the need to create an inner, empty space of sorts that allows the character’s truth to flow.

Space and movement in Diderot are thus two multifaceted concepts. By shifting the reference from the physical-metaphysical-theological level to the empirical-biological-artistic one, Diderot enriches these notions with multiple, new meanings consistent with his thought. These multiple meanings are tightly linked and counterbalance each other, providing tools that are still relevant today to understand our various experiences, including but not limited to the aesthetic one.