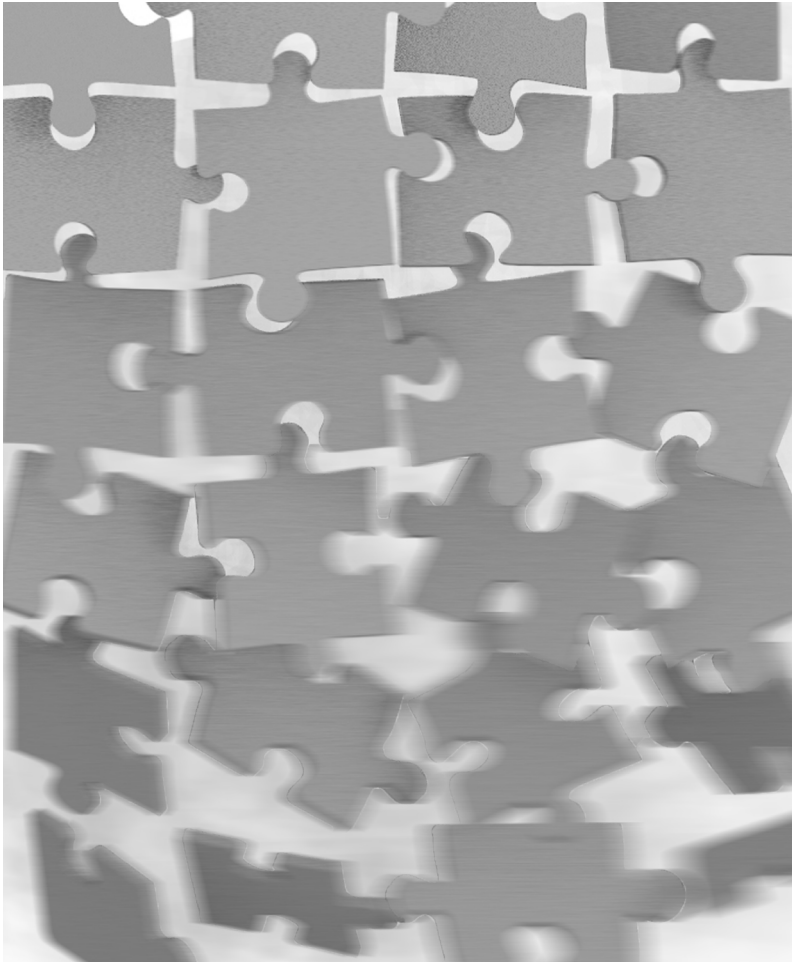


WHY STRUCTURALISM FAILS IN INTERPRETING VISUAL ART: A Derridean Argument



ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the application of structuralism as a method of interpreting visual art, with a focus on Jacques Derrida's critique of the concept of the frame as presented in *La vérité en peinture*. Structuralist methodology seeks to interpret artworks through segmentation and analysis of internal relations. However, Derrida's notion of the frame challenges the feasibility of defining clear boundaries between an artwork and its context, thereby undermining the foundational premises of structuralist interpretation. By constructing an argument based on these Derridean reflections on the frame, this study highlights the conceptual limitations of structuralism when extended to visual arts.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the relationship between the epistemic subject and the artwork, the process of interpretation plays a central role. Interpretation must proceed methodically to avoid arbitrariness. One of the widely discussed methods includes structuralist interpretative approaches, which emerged in the early twentieth century based on the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.¹ Following its dominance within the field of linguistics, structuralism developed into one of the primary methods of interpretation, especially in literature. This structuralist approach did not remain confined to literature. It extended to other contexts, particularly the visual arts, though not without criticism. I engage with one of the core critiques of this structuralist approach in visual arts by constructing an argument based on Derrida's reflections on the concept of the frame, presented in his essay *La Vérité en peinture* (*The Truth in Painting*).² By constructing this argument, I demonstrate that any conceptual analysis of the frame that relies on separating the context from the artwork itself—on which structuralist interpretation methods inevitably does—is inherently begging the question. In a second step, possible remedies to this conceptual flaw are explored and discussed.

II. FROM LINGUISTICS TO ART: STRUCTURALIST METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

Structuralist assumptions, such as the preference for synchronic analysis of structure over diachronic evolution or relational meaning, can be applied beyond linguistics to sign complexes in general.

Whether this adaptation from a strictly linguistic theory to an interpretative method is as straightforward as it seems, however, is a subject of debate. I will not delve into this debate here but will proceed from the premise of a basic structuralist interpretative possibility for artworks. Edmund Leach provided one of the most recognized examples of such an interpretation, proposing three steps that a structuralist interpreter of visual art should follow. These steps, as presented by Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, are as follows:³

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- 1 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (Grande Bibliothèque Payot, 1916).
 - 2 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (The University of Chicago Press, 1987).
 - 3 Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *The Art Bulletin*

1. Framing: The structuralist linguist delimits his subject of study by treating only the static linguistic system at a given moment, excluding its historical variation. This delimitation does not necessarily refer to time. With the visual arts, spatial delimitation is more pertinent. The structuralist art interpreter must first precisely delimit the subject of study spatially, distinguishing context from the work's inherent elements.
2. Segmentation: The structuralist linguist divides the delimited linguistic system into linguistic forms, which will later be set in relation to each other to explore the system's structures. The interpreter of a visual artwork must similarly segment the delimited subject by graphically schematizing the divided sections, which are then separated into individual components.⁴
3. Establishing Syntactic Relations: The structuralist linguist describes the linguistic system by outlining the relations among its constituent linguistic forms. Similarly, the art interpreter should describe the relations between the segments identified in step two, particularly those in which syntactic relations create a semantic tension. According to Leach, syntactic relationships, especially between semantically contradictory forms, carry significant informational value.⁵ The juxtaposition of culturally contradictory elements, for example, holds high semantic value. Thus, identifying oppositions is paramount.

At this point, important formal remarks are necessary. It becomes clear that Leach's three steps follow a certain logic: if establishing syntactic relations (3) is possible, then segmentation (2) must also be possible. This is because the feasibility of creating syntactic relations requires the existence of distinct forms that can be related to each other. Furthermore, if segmentation (2) is possible, delimitation (1) is also possible. The ability to segment implies the possibility of isolating individual forms, hence the ability to delimit the entire artwork is also possible as it is fundamentally the same operation. If (1) is impossible, then (2) would also be impossible.

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- 73, no. 2 (1991): 174–208.
 - 4 Edmund Leach, "Michelangelo's Genesis: A Structuralist Interpretation of the Central Panels of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling," *Semiotica* 56 (1985): 11.
 - 5 Leach, "Structuralist Interpretation," 19.



This is crucial for the argument proposed later as if these logical connections hold, it would suffice to present a sound argument against the feasibility of (1) to establish the impossibility of (2) and (3) as well:

$$\begin{array}{ll} P_1 & (3) \rightarrow (2) \\ P_2 & (2) \rightarrow (1) \\ P_3 & \neg(1) \\ C_1 & \neg(2) \quad (P_3, P_2) \\ C_2 & \neg(3) \quad (P_1, C_1) \end{array}$$

III. THE ARGUMENT

A. GENERAL FORM

Regardless of whether one believes Derrida was aware of the logical consequences his reflections on the concept of frame would have on structuralist methods of interpretation, the argument we can construe based on his reflections, as outlined in this section, indeed employs it. Our argument for P_3 , or the negation of the possibility of (1), can be easily constructed as a modus tollens:

For every artwork x :

- P_a If (1) is possible for x , then the frame of x is clearly definable.
- P_b It is not the case that the frame of x is clearly definable.
- K Therefore, (1) is not possible for x .

The logical form here is correct, and opponents cannot contest it based on structure alone. To determine whether the argument can be considered sound, a closer examination of its premises is required. This will be undertaken in the following sections.

B. THE FIRST PREMISE: P_a

This material conditional must be considered true: the prerequisite for framing x , or delimitation by interpreting the epistemic subject, is the ability to precisely define a frame for x . This constitutes an epistemic prerequisite—if framing is not feasible, no epistemic subject could perform the act of framing as defining a frame would be impossible. Importantly, “frame” does not necessarily refer to a physical border in

this context, like the frame of a painting, but to the abstract concept of distinguishing between the intrinsic elements of the artwork and its context.

C. THE SECOND PREMISE: P_b

The second premise appears to be the decisive and likely most contentious point. It is the actual Derridean core of our argument as it is drawn from Derrida’s statements in his section “Parergon.”⁶ The broader context of his reflections on the frame, especially his Kantian interpretations, will not be considered here. For this paper, the premise we can get from his text is the focus. The claim that the frame of an artwork is indeterminate at first glance may seem bold. Derrida does not explicitly present this as a standalone thesis, but his essay lends itself to this interpretation.

What does it mean that the frame of x is indeterminate? Derrida might refer to the frame as a “place deprived of place.”⁷ This spatial metaphor may initially seem obscure, but it sheds light on the thesis in question. A place that is not a place is a location that exists in our general understanding yet lacks the definitional criteria of a place, rendering it unworthy of such status. Derrida’s obscure formulation likely seeks to convey there is a general concept of the frame, but it does not genuinely merit the status of a concept as forming a clear notion of it is essentially impossible.

To substantiate this reformulated thesis, it is helpful to establish an intuitive idea of the frame: The frame of an artwork undoubtedly serves to delineate an inner from an outer aspect. This involves the precise delimitation of the work as the object of study, distinguishing between the intrinsic elements of the artwork and its context. A preliminary necessary condition for defining the frame of x might therefore appear as follows:

delimit an exteriority, or alternatively, an interiority of x .

Here lies the core issue: This initial condition already contains terms that could only be defined through a pre-existing concept of x ’s frame. As Derrida highlights:

This permanent requirement—to distinguish between the internal or proper sense and the circumstance of the object being talked about—organizes all philosophical discourses on art, the meaning of art and meaning as such . . . This requirement presupposes a discourse on the limit between

⁶ Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, 15–148.

⁷ Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, 38.



the inside and outside of the art object, here a *discourse on the frame*.⁸

The verb “to presuppose” is crucial here. Discourse concerning an assumed exteriority or interiority of *x* already presupposes discourse on the frame of *x*. We cannot define a supposed frame of *x* in terms of *x*’s exteriority and interiority as this would entail assuming what the very concept we are attempting to define enables.

One might object that delimiting the exteriority/interiority of *x* is merely a suggested condition for a conceptual analysis, derived from intuition. Perhaps it is possible to provide a conceptual analysis for the presumed frame of *x* without relying on the concepts of interiority and exteriority. We will return to this point later.

It thus becomes apparent that the concept of the frame is not, in fact, clearly and precisely definable. What we intuitively understand as a “frame” for Derrida is, following Kantian tradition, a so-called *parergon*:

A *parergon* comes against, beside, and in addition to the *ergon*, the work done [*fait*], the fact [*le fait*], the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside. Like an accessory that one is obliged to welcome on the border, on board [*au bord, à bord*]. It is first of all the on (the) bo(a)rd(er) [*Il est d’abord l’à-bord*].⁹

It represents an ornamental framing element that is not completely inside or outside the artwork (*ergon*) and attempts to encompass this conceptual no-man’s-land we just encountered. However, this merely shifts the issue of defining the frame concept. By accepting the existence of frames, we simply acknowledge their conceptual indeterminacy, even elevating this indeterminacy as the definition of the frame itself. Certainly, this is an unsatisfactory solution, though the concept of *parergon* will be revisited later.

For now, it is established that the argument against the possibility of conceptual analysis of *x*’s frame has shown that both P_b and P_a are true, and therefore the entire argument presented in the first section is sound. Hence, (1) is impossible, making (2) and thus (3) impossible as well. At first glance, our argument appears successful.

IV. ATTEMPTS TO DEFEND STRUCTURALISM AS A METHOD OF INTERPRETATION

Whether our Derrida-based argument is truly flawless and achieves its objective—to delegitimize structuralist interpretive methods—will be examined in this section. Here, potential counterarguments and their respective challenges, advantages, and limitations will be presented, though this discussion does not claim to be exhaustive as the constraints of this paper prevent full exploration.

A. THE LOGICAL STRUCTURE OF INTERPRETIVE STEPS: TRULY CONDITIONAL?

A potential first critique concerns the correctness of the two premises establishing the conditional structure of the three steps in the structuralist interpretive method. One might dispute that (2) is only possible if (1) is also feasible.

The previous connection relies on the assumption that delimitation and segmentation are identical types of operations: Segmentation is understood as nothing other than framing, albeit within a larger framed context. Thus, if one shows in (1) that the operation type “framing” is impossible, then it follows that (2) is also impossible.

What if segmentation does not require such precise framing? Fundamentally, the structuralist interpretive method at this point merely requires an operation that isolates individual forms within the artwork, which will later be syntactically positioned in (3). The goal is to identify elements that can be embedded semantically in a syntax in (3).

Segmentation need not necessarily involve Leach’s precise geometric division of visual elements, which would require framing, but could instead involve the iconographic identification of elements without needing a clearly bounded representation area. Of course, creating syntactic relations requires that elements hold a certain spatial position within the artwork. However, they do not need to be understood as precisely delineated sections of the artwork. Therefore, the conditional relationship between the possibility of (1) and (2) does not necessarily entail a type-identity of operations.

If we accept this view, our entire argument collapses. If (2) does not require framing, then it does not follow that (2) is only possible if (1) is possible as (2) can occur without the operation of framing.

⁸ Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, 45.

⁹ Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, 54.



Consequently, proving (1) false does not suffice to invalidate (2) and then (3) as our argument seeks to do.

However, this objection is precarious. It should not be overlooked that the connection between (1) and (2) extends beyond the type-identity of the epistemic operation performed by the subject. There is also a methodological connection: (2) can only occur after (1) is completed. These steps must be performed in succession given that we are dealing with a practical interpretive method. Segmentation could be performed without necessarily involving framing. However, for these steps to collectively constitute a method, the artwork as a whole must first be delimited, meaning (1) must take place prior to (2). Although this solution would nullify Derrida's logical progression, it does not necessarily restore structuralist interpretation as a viable method.

Furthermore, it could be argued that segmentation is understood as something other than precise framing. If so, what remains "structuralist" about this method? Structuralism aims to recognize clearly segmented forms and structures. Vaguely identifying elements without precise segmentation within the specific work is theoretically inconsistent with the structuralist label.

B. AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE FRAME

A more intriguing counterargument proceeds as follows: Our argument relies on the Derridean second premise:

P_b It is not the case that the frame of x is clearly definable.

If we negate P_b , the entire argument collapses. How can we justify this negation? It would require showing that the concept of the frame of x can indeed be defined without recourse to the terms interiority and exteriority of x , as discussed previously, since these terms only gain meaning through the concept of the frame. Therefore, we would need to propose a conceptual analysis of the frame that does not depend on terms which are themselves created by the very concept being defined.

At first glance, this appears difficult. We have already seen that the condition initially seems necessary—delimit an exteriority or, alternatively, an interiority of x .

But what if this condition is not necessary after all? Perhaps the concept of the frame can be understood in an entirely different way while still establishing interiority and exteriority.

Interestingly, Derrida himself ascribes purely decorative functions to his concept of *parerga*. To support this view, he relies on counterfactual conditionals, repeatedly arguing that if artworks lacked *parerga*, they would display inherent deficiencies. While the *parergon* is not part of the artwork itself, it compensates for these internal deficiencies. In Derrida's perspective, the *parergon* transcends its own exteriority by intervening in the interiority, which would otherwise reveal internal flaws:

The *parergon* inscribes something which comes as an extra, *exterior* to the proper field . . . but whose transcendent exteriority comes to play, abut onto, brush against, rub, press against the limit itself and intervene in the inside only to the extent that the inside is lacking.¹⁰

Therefore, a new conceptual analysis of the frame seems possible. The condition it would require:

serve as ornament (compensating deficiencies of x).

However, it remains debatable whether this new frame concept truly resolves the issue we raised in the context of structuralist interpretive methods. Recalling that our objective is to find a frame concept that legitimizes the first step of structuralist interpretive methods—framing—it becomes apparent that the concept of the frame theoretically presupposed here is the intuitive concept of framing embodied by the condition of delimiting the exteriority/interiority of x .

Framing, the act of delimitating the subject of analysis, becomes challenging if the frame concept used is solely based on decorative functions. In the interpretive process, the first step from the epistemic subject's perspective would then involve identifying elements fulfilling decorative functions.

Some may argue here that it is not only the frame within an artwork that serves a decorative function, making clear delimitation problematic even though it is essential. Structuralism, in its core tenets, assumes the existence of clear, objective, and recognizable structures within artworks. Hence, it is plausible that structuralist delimitation demands clarity. Critics may contend that decorative functions are insufficient conditions for defining the frame so that the condition of delimiting the exteriority/interiority of x is unavoidable and our argument remains valid. If one disagrees with this critique and believes that a precise frame can indeed be identified solely through decorative functions, it would seem that structuralist interpretive methods have been saved from Derrida's argument.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, 56.



V. CONCLUSION

It is evident that the argument constructed here exposes a fundamental conceptual flaw in the structuralist method, one that is difficult to remedy. Although the correctness of the Derrida-based argument may be partially questioned, no counterargument offers a solution that avoids such extensive modifications to structuralist interpretation to retain its structuralist character. It appears that Derrida has dealt structuralism as an interpretive method a nearly fatal blow. The limited prevalence of structuralist interpretations like Leach's confirms this victory over structuralism as a method of interpretation. An exception here is literary studies, where structuralism still serves as a theoretical basis for interpretation in many contexts. However, this is understandable as the applicability of the frame concept to literary artworks remains uncertain, and so-called structuralist interpretive methods are based on other parts of structuralism shifting focus away from the concept of frame. The argument presented here is most effective when applied to structuralist interpretations of visual art, where frames undoubtedly exist in some form. How it applies to structuralist approaches in literature remains an open question. The unique aspect of approaches like Leach's is that they apply a method rooted in literary studies to visual art. This paper has demonstrated the potential problems with such a transfer.



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