



# The Characteristics of Line of Western Contemporary and Modern Painting

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the multifaceted characteristics of lines in Western modern and contemporary painting. It delves into the existential mode of existence of lines, arguing that they are not merely material elements, but medium for the expression of human thought, emotion and self-formation. Drawing from Karl Popper's division of three worlds, it highlights the multifunctional role of lines in constructing space, interpreting time, conveying ideas and sensual empathy through theoretical discussion and analysis of examples of Western contemporary art. This paper concludes by emphasizing the enduring relevance of existentialism in the art world of the 21st century and the infinite possibilities inherent in artistic creation and research.

**Keywords:** line in painting, Western contemporary painting, existential existence, functionality of line.

## 1 Introduction

Painting is composed of points, lines and planes - where points are tiny lines and planes are made up of countless lines. Therefore, lines, as one of the indispensable elements in composing an artwork, have always been of great research value. This paper is devoted to the study of the characteristics of lines in Western contemporary and modern painting, especially their existence and functionality.

The functionality of lines is predicated on their existence, which can be understood in two ways: objective material existence and existential existence. Different modes of line existence also manifest different functionalities. In the history of Western art, with the evolution of artistic purpose and ideology, the line has transformed from being submerged in the composition to an element with independent aesthetic value. The advent of existentialism broadened the understanding and definition of existence to include emotions, thoughts, and the freedom to shape oneself as an expression of human existence. Consequently, the functionality of lines was expanded. Lines not only depict the objective material world, but also serve as a means of communicating human emotions, thoughts and ideas as the artist shapes himself.

This paper does not delve into the details of the objective material existence of lines and their manifested functionalities, as they are not the central focus of the era under

examination. Instead, we focus on the existential existence of lines, guided by Karl Popper's delineation of the world [1], and emphasize the four functions of lines: constructing space, interpreting time, conveying ideas, and sensual empathy.

We introduce the concept of “existential existence” for the first time to describe a mode of existence that is more closely related to the human psyche and ideas. In comparison to spiritual existence, it more accurately describes the way in which the line exists beyond its objective materiality. Existential existence first affirms the materiality of lines, implying that the line, as a tangible medium, carries the artist's perspective on the world, their emotions and thoughts. Existential existence does not negate objective material existence; rather, spiritual existence is the other side of material existence. In this study, we emphasize their coexistence, offering a novel perspective for discussing the modes of existence and functionality of lines.

## 2 Literature Review

In painting, the objective material existence of lines is endowed by human beings, and human beings also impart a certain existential existence to lines. Through lines, artists express their psyche, emotions, thoughts and self-conception. In modern painting, artists have come up with a new mode of perception called pure perception [2], which undoubtedly influenced the way people perceive lines. For example, Merleau-Ponty drew from Kohler's assertion that lines are patterns of representing the emergence of things [3]. Lyotard affirms that graphics are a fusion of the rationality and the sensibility [4]. Deleuze proposed that “lines elevate mechanical forces to the level of perceptible intuition” [5]. Intuition exists within humanity itself. The existential nature of the line is implicit in all of these ideas.

Based on their mode of existence, the functional aspects of lines deserve extensive research. Merleau-Ponty suggested from a spatial point of view that lines, like in modern geometry, serve as “constraints, separations, and adjustments of a certain preliminary spatiality” and essentially have the function of engulfing space and other external elements [6]. Deleuze believed that lines are diagrammatic and therefore have the function of detaching from figurative representation [7]. Meanwhile, Li implied the visual, formal, and expressive functions of lines through his analysis of artworks [8]. These works provide valuable analyses of the functionality of lines, each focusing on different aspects, but lack a comprehensive and systematic discussion.

As suggested by Kandinsky, lines have a translational function [9], which means that all phenomena, both internal and external, can be expressed through lines. Similarly, Lyotard acknowledges the function of graphics and subsequently affirms the function of line in producing truth, beauty and emotion [10]. Graphics are a combination of rationality and sensibility, signifying the functions of conceptual expression and sensory expression in lines. Based on a categorization similar to the aforementioned literature, this paper provides insight into the role of lines in representing the objective and subjective world through human behavior and thought processes, starting from the existential nature of line.

Finally, research on lines in painting has been highly specific and varied in scope. This paper focuses on Western modern and contemporary artworks, especially two-dimensional images, classifies lines into single lines, groups of lines composed of multiple lines, and contour lines, inspired by Arnheim's classification method. It is worth noting that the use of lines in Eastern painting, especially in Chinese painting, has a long history with unique characteristics and systems. However, this falls outside the scope of this paper.

### **3 The Existence of Lines**

In the realm of human painting, lines exhibit a dual existence, both objective material existence and existential existence. Objective material existence is the universal mode of existence for all entities, living and non-living, in the universe. For a considerable part of history, the understanding of the existence of lines, and even of human existence, was confined to this mode. Lines that exist in this manner play a fundamental role in two-dimensional artwork, providing narrative assistance in the realistic representation. Specifically, in classical realism, lines are employed to depict the most fundamental dimensions of the objective material world—time and space—aiming for narrative objectivity and realism.

With the development of human philosophy, people gradually recognized an alternative understanding of existence that exists alongside objective material existence, which this paper refers to as “existential existence”. This revelation began with the awakening of self-consciousness and the advent of existentialism. Existentialism posits that existence precedes essence, which should not be strictly defined, but should emerge from continuous self-shaping. This self-shaping places emphasis on human spirit, thought, emotions, choices, and underscores freedom. In expressing existential existence through artistic creation, individuals entrust their subjective world to a medium, redefining and reshaping it, thereby conferring existential existence upon that medium. Lines serve as a quintessential example of such medium. Both modes of existence for lines in painting depend on human presence. Objective material existence relies on the simple movements of individuals, while existential existence relies on the human psyche and mind in addition to behavior. Lines that exist in different states have multiple functions in painting from objective to subjective, from superficial to profound, from material to spiritual. We will elaborate on these functions from two perspectives: interpretive and sensual representation.

### **4 The Functionality of Lines**

The functionality of lines is intrinsically tied to the way they exist. When lines exist as objective material entities, they contribute to the reproduction of reality and indirectly interpret time and space. However, when lines exist in an existential form rooted in human behavior and thought, they can serve as traces and direct interpretation of time and space, as well as being used to express human behavior and thought, effectively

communicating ideas. The functions associated with line as an objective entity are beyond the scope of this paper.

We categorize lines into single lines, groups of lines, and contour lines, primarily analyzing their functions in interpreting time, space, and ideas, as well as in sensual empathy in an existentialist context. This corresponds to the artists' exploration, understanding, and representation of Karl Popper's three worlds: the physical world, the world of objective products of human mind, and the world of subjective perceptions and experiences [11].

#### 4.1 Construction of Space

Lines, line groups, and contour lines play a crucial role in the construction and interpretation of space. Firstly, lines express space through their unique positions or angles. They disrupt the continuity of the content of the painting, create spatial separation and generate new spaces. Sometimes even the frame of the artwork plays this role as part of the composition. Francis Bacon's triptych, *Three Studies of Lucian Freud*, is a typical example: two sets of parallel frame lines fracture the boundaries between illusion and reality, guiding the viewer's gaze back and forth between the spatial representation of the artwork and the real space. Spatial variations can also be interpreted by line groups through variations in the different positions of the lines within these groups, their different lengths, thicknesses, vertical or curved states, and the number of lines included. The space formed by these line groups and spatial transformations can pull and drag the viewer's visual focus, capturing and freezing the ever-changing dimensions of time and space within an existential framework.

Contour lines narrate space through contrasts of light and dark, reality and illusion, and their own states. As the French philosopher Deleuze once wrote, "contours are made to vibrate" [12]. In other words, contour lines evoke a shivering effect, representing change and movement in, and distinguishing between, internal and external space. In Bacon's artwork in 1976, *Figure Writing Reflected in Mirror*, he uses contour lines to compress and squeeze the figure, demarcating the confined, enclosed internal space surrounded by contour lines from the boundless, expansive, unrestricted outer space [13]. Contour lines can also create discontinuities in existing space through their own fluctuating states of presence and absence and the process by which the observer suspects their existence. This recognition of the discontinuity in contour lines results in changes in spatial positioning and demonstrates the intensity of the subject's presence in space, dividing spaces into foreground and background or real and illusory realms.

#### 4.2 Interpretation of Time

The logic behind the interpretive aspects of lines themselves, line groups formed by the "proliferation" of lines, and the presence of lines or line groups as contour lines in painting is rooted in the artist's behavior and thought. We first discuss the behavioral factors behind how lines interpret time.

The representation of time inherent in lines records the repetitive process of transitioning from one posture or state to another. This process interprets change, which is

always a reflection of the passage of time, thereby further elucidating time. Each line exists independently of the other, and the traces formed by the lines represent instantaneous actions. The process of transitioning from lines to groups of lines, either by keeping all the lines in the change process or by deleting the old lines to reveal the new ones, records different moments of action. The records of these different moments reveal differences in the position and state of the lines and line groups, highlighting differentiation, and thus leaving an imprint of time. In this context, lines and line groups can also include contours. William Kentridge's animated films, for example, progress the narrative through the process of repeated negations, erasures, revisions, and alterations of charcoal lines, demonstrating differences and depicting the passage of time.

In painting, blurry figures and scenes composed of constantly shifting line groups can signify the existence of changing time. This portrayal, compared to a definitive, realistic depiction, appears more authentic as it captures a true record of a moment's passing. The artwork, *Diego Seated in the Studio* by artist Alberto Giacometti in 1950, illustrates this concept effectively.

### 4.3 Conveyance of Ideas and Concepts

In the previous discussion, we primarily focused on the artist's behavioral logic behind lines and their role in constructing or interpreting the fundamental dimensions of time and space in the objective physical world. In this section, we will address the conveyance of ideas associated with lines, groups of lines, and contour lines.

Lines and groups of lines can produce two types of images: unrecognizable chaotic images and recognizable symbolic images. Both can convey ideas and thoughts. Chaotic images directly record the artist's actions—physical movements and mental thoughts—without recognizing, carrying, or displaying the creator's thoughts. Symbolic images, on the other hand, mimic familiar objects or conventionally recognized symbols (primarily text) through easily identifiable features. We recognize them through our experiential knowledge and understanding of the objects or text, allowing the artist to convey their thoughts. It is also possible to connect specific words or letters with meaning in a work based on the artist's writing and depiction style, size, placement, structure, etc., creating relationships of indication, naming, description, classification, etc., all of which work together to express conceptual ideas. For instance, in Magritte's work, *The Treachery of Images*, the word "pipe" and the image of a pipe are linked together to convey a specific idea. Accordingly, lines and groups of lines that initially have no particular significance form recognizable letters and objects, thus enabling the interpretation of ideas. Graphic and text symbols can complement each other, mutually interpreting and effectively illustrating the coexistence and separation of the "not yet said" of graphics and the "no longer represented" of text. In this process of connecting text and graphics, a vague region for conveying ideas is initially formed, creating a sense of intuition that is not easily expressed. Subsequently, these symbols and graphics interact, interweave, separate, merge, and ultimately point to a stable space, which is the site of idea manifestation. This is the functionality of lines or groups of lines that convey ideas.

When lines are used as contour lines, they can convey ideas through their own states. As mentioned in Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane*, viewers attribute independent appreciability to the external contours of lines based on their perceptions and reflections. For example, one may notice that in a painting, a smooth line may have a jagged contour, while a jagged line may have a smooth contour. In painting, the contour of each line can be treated differently. Contour lines are an integral part of lines, so when lines act as contour lines, the state presented by the contour of lines can be regarded as the state of the lines themselves, that is, the state of the contour lines, which can convey ideas. Artist Daniel Richter, for instance, emphasizes the contouring effect of lines through thermal images, X-rays, electrocardiograms, contour lines. His work removes the presence and realism of scenes or bodies, using various forms of contour lines to emphasize the viewer's inaccessibility, the ambiguity of specific objects, and the estrangement from historical events.

#### 4.4 Sensual Empathy

In addition to analyzing from the artist's perspective, we can also take into account the role of the viewer in interpreting the emotional release and evocation function of lines – the interpretation of the world of subjective perceptions and experiences. The emotional release of an artwork is an manifestation of the artist's feelings, spirit, perceptions, emotions, and more conveyed through lines, groups of lines, and contour lines. The evocation function, as proposed by German aesthete Wolfgang Iser, suggests that artworks present themselves as open structures that call upon the viewer to spontaneously engage with the artwork through imagination, filling in the gaps and recreating the artwork. The combination of these two processes makes the presentation of the artwork more complete.

According to Wilhelm Worringer, the essence of every work of art is the objective manifestation of artistic will, and the composition of artistic will that determines artistic activity comes from the accumulation of time and the influence of people, events and objects in the surrounding environment, which leads to people's mental attitude towards the world. He defined this psychological attitude as the "world view", encompassing an individual's subjective experiences, perspectives, and sensations about the world, evoked and triggered by objective objects. This perspective can be used to explain that when viewers observe the lines, groups of lines, or contour lines created by the artist, the sensory experiences they generate not only stem from the emotional characteristics conveyed by the artist's artistic will, but also from the viewers' own sense of the world. In other words, the emotional resonance ultimately evoked by lines, which intertwines with the artist's feelings, is highly relevant to the viewer's cultural background, religious beliefs, experiences, emotions. When the viewer's emotions resonate with the artist's emotions, forming a vibration, the sensory manifestation of lines becomes complete and fulfilling.

## 5 Conclusion

The importance of lines in modern and contemporary painting cannot be underestimated, and there is no single definition of its mode of existence and functionality, which deserves constant exploration and discussion. From an innovative perspective of existentialism, this paper provides a new definition of existential existence, arguing that existential existence is a way of existence of line that is different from objective material existence. Instead of denying objective material existence, it affirms human subjectivity, including the expression of thoughts, ideas, spirit, emotions, and the projection of self-shaping. Based on this, lines in the forms of individual lines, groups of lines, and contour lines have the functions of constructing space, interpreting time, conveying ideas, and sensual empathy. The works of several well-known Western contemporary artists vividly demonstrate these characteristics of lines.

Certainly, existential existence is just one of a myriad ways in which people understand existence. The functionality of lines depends not only on how people understand the world, but also on the different states of lines in various spatial dimensions in different domains. Moreover, the methodology used in this paper is applicable to the study of other elements in painting, such as points and planes. Just as existentialism continues to thrive in the 21st century – where humans are free, limitless, and have infinite possibilities – the exploration and contemplation of art remains an endless endeavor.

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