

The Forms of Violence

Author(s): Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit

Source: *October*, Vol. 8 (Spring, 1979), pp. 17-29

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778223>

Accessed: 26-02-2015 20:07 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The MIT Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *October*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Forms of Violence

LEO BERSANI and ULYSSE DUTOIT

From the ninth century B.C. through the reign of the last great Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal (688–627), the palaces of Nimrud and Nineveh were decorated with wall reliefs depicting scenes from Assyrian history. Most of the surviving examples of this art are now on view at the British Museum in London; the greatest number, and the most artistically impressive, come from the reigns of Ashurnasirpal (883–859) and of Ashurbanipal. The palace reliefs are pictorial narratives in which Assyrian history becomes primarily a spectacle of extraordinary power. The celebratory nature of the reliefs, the obvious relish with which the defeat, humiliation, and slaughter of Assyria's enemies are portrayed, and the profusely gory detail of the battle and the hunting scenes, would seem both to confirm the historians' view of the Assyrians as an intensely nationalistic, imperialistic, and violent people, and to justify the distaste one senses even in the admiration of Mesopotamian scholars for this art.



Figure 1 (All photos of Assyrian reliefs by Ulysse Dutoit.)

Essentially, Assyrian palace reliefs are condemned for what we will call narrative reasons. The story they tell is not ours. Subjects of only peripheral human interest transmit a message of repellent violence. But to what extent is Assyrian sculpture reducible to narrative accounts of it—accounts which inevitably stress the murderous violence of Assyrian history? In the section from the Lion Hunt reproduced in Figure 1, we are irresistibly drawn to the point of maximal violence. The movements of the wounded lion on the left and of the two horses compel a rapid reading of the scene from left to right. Our eyes stop at what appears to be the dramatic center of the relief: the plunging of the horseman's



Figure 2

spear into the lion's open mouth. But this anecdotal climax is ambiguous. First of all, the movement to the right continues *beyond* the climactic point. As a result, this movement does not merely serve the moment of violent contact between the animal and the man's spear; indeed, it carries the viewer away from that contact and thereby detracts from the impact of the lion leaping toward the left. If one looks more closely at this part of the scene (in Figure 2), it becomes even clearer that the juxtaposition of the two animals' opposite movements demands a continuously mobile reading of the scene rather than a visual stop at the lion's gaping, wounded mouth. There are, for example, formal relations in the scene

which distract the viewer from its violent subject: note the several parallel lines just below the spear (a series comprising the rein, the harness, the lion's leg, and the horse's leg), as well as a similarity in the broken lines which constitute the outlines of both the lion's paw and the hunter's tassel just beneath it. Finally, and most strikingly, the spear's identity is undermined by its participation in the triangle which it creates along with the rein below it and the part of the horse's mane between spear and rein. One's interest moves between the geometric and the anecdotal at the very point at which the anecdotal center of the scene is being most strongly emphasized.

The force of this violent subject is, then, contravened by visual abstractions which disrupt the spectator's reading of the subject. It is true that relations could be detected among the formal elements of any representation at all. But the close-up in Figure 2 should suggest what we believe to be the Assyrians' exceptional willingness to de-emphasize their subjects through various kinds of formal play. And because of this play, the mobility of the viewer's response can become more important than the violent movements which constitute the subject of the scene. The sculptural representation of the slaughter of lions offers the spectator an alternative mode of agitation; it is calculated not to produce "aesthetic calm" but rather to make us enjoy a kind of aesthetic violence—the "violence" of multiple contacts producing multiple forms. Finally, our perceptual wandering from one part of a scene to another is also an epistemological uncertainty about the identities of certain forms (a leg or merely one of several parallel lines, part of a spear or one side of a triangle).

The element of play is especially evident in the palace reliefs depicting the Assyrians' military campaigns. Play in these scenes is largely a question of a profusion of forms. So many things are going on at once—as, for example, in Figures 3 and 4—that we hardly know where to look. In Figure 3, we have a deceptive centering of all the action in the space between the top rungs of the two converging ladders. The ladders, as well as the men climbing them and the bowmen to the right, all point to this apparently central space, but we are subtly moved into an entirely different direction by the curved line of prisoners descending toward the left on the bottom slab. And yet, as Figure 5 clearly shows, the horizontal line which begins about two-thirds of the way up the curve draws us away from the prisoners and toward the group advancing from the right. Because the horizontal line of the pole being carried by the first man in that procession is extended by the right leg of the second man from the top of the descending curve, to look at the curve is already to begin looking away from it, to start moving toward the right.

Nothing is more typical of Assyrian art than such mobilizing strategies. Any focused point almost invariably includes the cues which keep us on the move. The sculptor manages simultaneously to bring a coherent centering to his scene and to transform every center into the margin of another (provisional) focus of our attention. Moreover, the connections from one section to another make it difficult



Figure 3

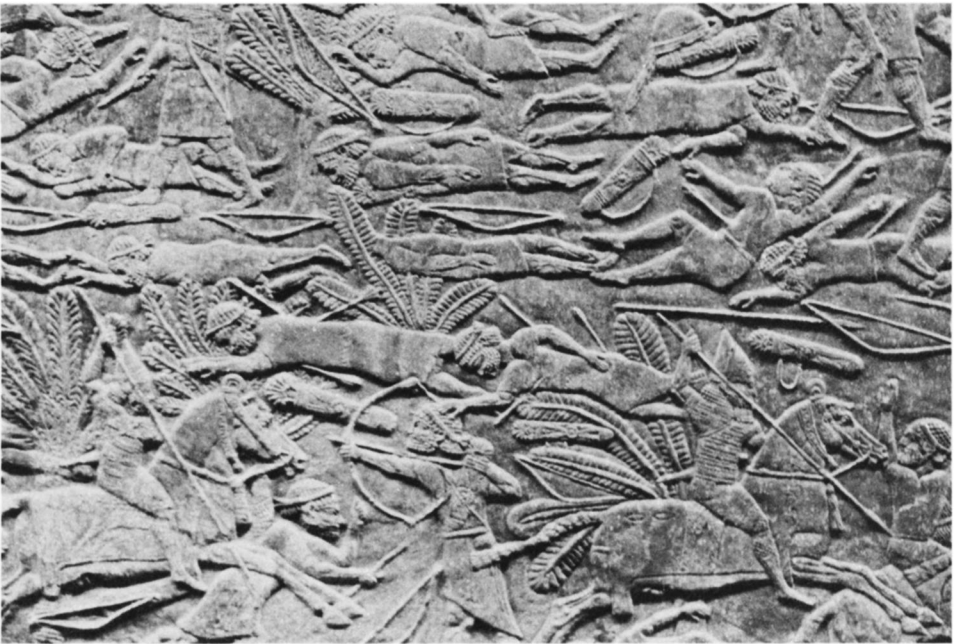


Figure 4

to settle on one “right” reading of these scenes—a reading which might guarantee our visual progress toward climactic spaces. We read not only from left to right on each slab; our taking in of the reliefs is always a complex sequence of horizontal *and* vertical eye movements, of movements from left to right and from right to left, of following a “story line” sometimes curved and sometimes straight.

*

By devaluing the content of any one scene of violence, the Assyrian sculptors train us to *formalize psychic mobility*. Mobility becomes a response to formal stimuli rather than a movement of identification with the narrative content of any representation. Nothing could be more antagonistic to the narrativizing of violence which has characterized Western humanist culture.

Narrativity sustains the glamour of historical violence. It creates violence as an isolated, identifiable topic or subject. A liberal humanist tradition has trained us to locate violence historically—that is, as a certain type of eruption against a background of generally nonviolent human experience. In this view, violence can be accounted for through historical accounts of the circumstances in which it occurs. Violence is thus reduced to the level of a plot; it can be isolated, understood, perhaps mastered and eliminated. And, having been conditioned to think of violence within narrative frameworks, we expect this mastery to take place as a result of the pacifying power of such narrative conventions as beginnings, explanatory middles, and climactic endings.

The practical implications of this view are numerous. They range from political efforts to restructure governments in ways which will minimize occasions congenial to violence, to a refusal of certain subjects in art (especially in popular arts such as television), subjects which presumably bring violent impulses to the foreground of the public’s desires. It is all right to study historical violence (only by studying it can we learn to arm ourselves against it), but few things are censored more harshly by the humanistic ethic we refer to than an “aesthetic complacency” in the images and language of violence.

We wish to take the opposite point of view: only a radically aesthetic perspective on violence (proposed, for example, by the Assyrian palace reliefs) will



Figure 5

allow us both to recognize and to redefine our constant implication in violence. In our culture, the “natural” tendency is to sequester violence: we immobilize and centralize both historical acts of violence and their aesthetic representations. A major trouble with this is that the immobilization of a violent event invites a pleasurable identification with its enactment. A coherent narrative depends on stabilized images; stabilized images stimulate the mimetic impulse. Centrality, the privileged foreground, and the suspenseful expectation of climaxes all contribute, in historical and artistic narratives, to a fascination with violent events on the part of readers and spectators. The historian’s or the artist’s privileging of the subject of violence encourages a mimetic excitement focused on the very scene of violence. The atrophied relations of that scene to adjacent (but background) activities blocks our own relations to those activities and limits the mobility of our attention and interest. All critiques of violence, to the extent that they conceive of it in terms of scenes which *can* be privileged, may therefore promote the very explosions which they are designed to expose or forestall.

The Assyrians appear to accumulate scenes of horror with a singular complacency, but the violent *spectacle* never maintains a privileged position in the palace reliefs. Such an art is enormously suggestive not only about aesthetic responses, but also about our moral relation to history. The Assyrians force us to see a continuity among all forms of violence. They refuse to melodramatize a type of violence which would appear to be inherently melodramatic. As a result, we are unable to abstract a particular historical horror from the disruptive mobility which is inherent to our contacts with the world. The murderous moments of history are perhaps efforts to stop that movement, to transform the mobile attention we bring to the world into a fetishistic immobilization of a privileged scene.

The very casualness with which the Assyrians treat violence should be instructive. The brutalities of war and of hunting are somewhat trivialized in their artistic re-creations. The great scenes of Assyrian history always include cues which invite us to dismiss their historical seriousness, cues which displace our attention and thereby prevent the stable reading of static images. Assyrian sculpture simultaneously celebrates, reformulates, and mocks the glory of Assyrian history. In art, omnipresent spectacles of historical violence can thus serve as a potential corrective to our fascination with violence in history. We are always implicated in violence; our choice is not between violence and nonviolence, but is rather between the psychic dislocations of mobile desire and a destructive fixation on anecdotal violence.

*

The subversion of the anecdote in the Assyrian palace reliefs depends in part on the artists’ indifference to psychological expressiveness. No two faces in the reliefs are ever the same, but the differences do not express different characters. The

Assyrians render distinctive details with a naturalistic scruple, although there is no sign in their work of the psychological intention usually associated with such scruples. The highly individualized heads in Roman sculpture, for example, are portraits of particular personalities. If we think of a psychologically nonexpressive figurative art, we are likely to take classical Greek sculpture as our example. The Greeks give us recognizable but idealized human figures, figures which are insufficiently individualized to be psychologically informative. We feel comfortable with the alternative best exemplified in Greek and Roman sculpture: between the subordination of the personal and the idiosyncratic to an idealized view of the human figure on one hand, and on the other, the triumph of the individual over the type in a richly psychological art.

But the Assyrians give us something outside this alternative: a realistic art in which the human body is individualized but nonexpressive. There is an impressive range of facial types in Figure 6, but they do not have the effect of substituting a more "refined" psychological interest for the grosser narrative design of glorifying the king. (Psychology would not in any case subvert narrative; it merely creates more sophisticated narratives.) The faces in Assyrian sculpture are blank or bland; a vague smile is the strongest expressive element in this representation of the Elamite king's worshipping subjects. In a sense, critics are right to speak of the palace reliefs as stereotypic; where they are wrong is in taking this observation as a self-evident condemnation. Given the extraordinary capacity for visual differentia-

*Figure 6*



Figure 7

tions which the Assyrians show in their art, it seems to us presumptuous to conclude that they are unable to imagine psychological differences. Or rather, it is a presumption typical of humanist culture to give the psychological imagination priority over other ways of imagining differences. The Assyrians never use a human face to tell a story. Faces interest them for their visibility, not for their depth. What strikes us as an exceptional respect for all the appearances in the universe—human as well as nonhuman—leads them to represent an incredible variety of volumes in men's bodies rather than the necessarily limited signs of a hypothetical and constraining human nature.

The Assyrians' imagination of difference involves a risky play with almost identical repetition. The palace reliefs often suggest a compulsive fascination with at least two versions of the same object or activity, but even such double images mobilize perception instead of arresting it. The general architectural design of Figure 7 is constituted by two sets of parallel diagonal lines which are intersected, in the middle of the scene, by the implied axes of a single vertical line and a single horizontal line. A potential architectural monotony is thus forestalled both by the conflicting directions of the two series of diagonal lines and by the powerful straightening effect of the centered cross. Another type of order is created by three sets of paired images: the huntsmen's heads, the lion's paws, and the two hands roughly in the same position. But this order is also thwarted by the peculiar

dissonances between the elements of each couple. The animal's paws move away from each other, and the upper paw is parallel not to its mate but to the tail draped over the shoulder of the man to the left. Also, which hand is the hand to the right really paired with? It lies on the lion's body in a position similar to that of the vertical hand to the left, and yet its diagonal shape makes it appear to be an extension of the arm rising diagonally toward it from the lower left. As is frequently the case in the palace reliefs, repetition gives rise to doubt or puzzlement in the spectator. One proceeds from *A* to its repetition in *A'*, but the latter contains a difference which makes us check the model by returning to *A*. *Repetition in Assyrian sculpture makes repetition itself problematic*. It appears to provide the strongest elements of order in our visual field, whereas in fact it initiates an inconclusive movement of perceptual verification on our part between the repeated terms.

A frequent configuration in the palace reliefs is that of two parallel lines fairly close to each other and, at some distance, another line parallel to the first two. Parallel lines create an order based on identical repetition. To read two parallel lines on a flat surface is to read the space between them as a space always identical to itself. Parallel lines can be used to reinforce narrative effects in painting and sculpture merely by providing the frame which focuses our attention on centers of narrative interest. The signs of exasperation with these framing effects in modern painting (such as the use of irregularly shaped canvases, or the

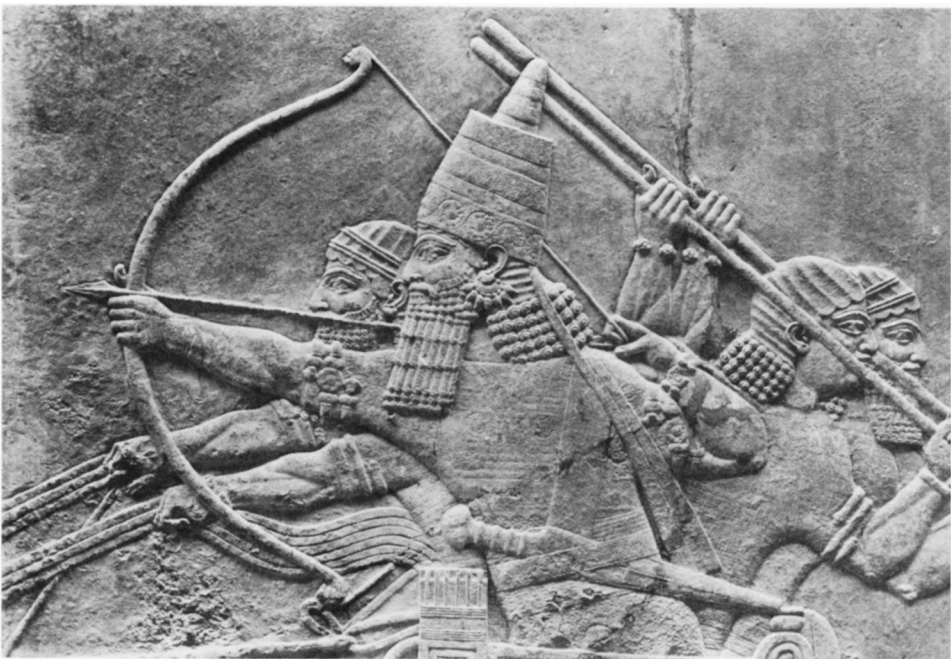


Figure 8

tracing of a mangled or incomplete frame within the painting itself) could be thought of as strategies designed to prevent this focusing on centers, to de-structure and disseminate the spectators' interest.

In Figure 8, it is the line of the bowstring, nearly parallel to the lines of the spears, which helps the Assyrian sculptors to de-center our attention. For in crossing the space between the two spears and the bowstring, we are drawn away from both the anecdotal violence accentuated by the spears (and the two hands) *and* the stabilizing order of parallel lines themselves. The line of the bowstring moves us toward the scene at the left and away from the potentially magnetic space between the bowstring and the spears. More exactly, the parallelism of the two spears and the bowstring should initiate a continuous movement between the scene to the right and the scene to the left. The empty space within the parallelogram is thus an extremely important part of the scene; our eye is always crossing this space in order to follow the contradictory cues on its edges. Could this space, then, be more important than the terminal points to which it leads us?

Let's take a more extreme example of space undesigned and yet crucial to the spectator's visual mobility. In Figure 9, each set of paws contains several parallel lines. We move between the image at the bottom and the image at the top partly because of this repeated design, and partly because the two fragments "come together" as bits of two implied diagonal lines which would meet on one of the claws of the animal at the bottom.

The empty space here, contrary to what can be repeatedly seen elsewhere in the palace reliefs, does not appear to be carefully designed; it may strike us as neglected, left-over space at the bottom of a scene and near the end of a slab. It is, we might say, merely between more interesting elements *and* spaces. But this very fact can help us to refine our notion of mobility. We wish to suggest that the spectator's pleasure in following all the cues in Assyrian sculpture which displace his interest and attention is less in the variety of scenes which he thereby takes in than in the very tension of the displacing movement itself.

In establishing continuously dismissed and displaced relational terms, the viewer of the Assyrian palace reliefs experiences a pleasure akin to the pleasure of desire. Desire could be defined as a pleasurable movement toward an absent source of satisfaction. The pleasure of desire is inseparable from the tension created by the lack in desire. Desire constitutes a mobile and indeterminate sensuality, for it is never quite focused on its object (which is both present and absent in the rich but insubstantial images of desiring fantasy). And the



Figure 9

incomplete pleasures of desire, incapable by definition of filling the lack in desire, stimulate the productive restlessness of fantasies always on the move. In the visual mobility which we have been describing in connection with the Assyrian palace reliefs, the spectator moves between two forms with a residual impression of the first form and in anticipation of the second. The latter will, presumably, “complete” the former by establishing a structurally intelligible relation with it. But, as we have seen, the second form also initiates departures toward other forms. This constant mobility leads us to postulate an aesthetic pleasure brought about not by aesthetic objects but by the spaces between their constituent parts. We may define this pleasure as an agitated crossing of the intervals which separate forms. Assyrian art is a lesson in *interstitial sensuality*.

*

As a final example from this extraordinary art, consider the representation of a lion being released from a cage in Figure 10. There is a powerful narrative line here: both the man and the lion direct our attention toward anticipated scenes of action to the left. The cages function as immobilizing frames, and in a sense the narrative movement in this scene is anti-aesthetic. It is as if violent pressures inherent to the action being represented made representation itself impossible; we have two picture frames in the process of being abandoned by their subjects.

And yet we are also drawn back into the frame—without, however, being forced to substitute a pictorial immobility for narrative movement. First of all, in terms of mere quantity of space, the nearly abandoned cages occupy almost the entire scene. Partly because of the prominence given to the repeated lines and forms of the two cages, they can compete for our attention with the dramatic subject in which they play only an accessory role. Above all, the lion’s progress is strangely arrested by a certain confusion between his body and the bars of his cage. An undisturbed narrative reading would require a clear sense of the lion *behind* the bars of his cage. In fact, his resemblance to the cage is emphasized by the blurred distinction between foreground and background. The next to the top bar in particular seems to be an extension of the lion’s body. At the same time, however, the leonine aspect of that bar is qualified by its relation, simply as a curved line, to the straight line across the top of the cage. We have, as it were, an overdetermined curve: it is simultaneously a nonfigurative line, the bar of a cage, and part of an animal’s body.

The inside of the cage is thus transformed from a narrative space (bars in the foreground, moving lion in the background) into a continuous aesthetic space of related forms. We are kept within the frame, but its contents have, so to speak, become extremely active without contributing to narrative movement. This activity is purely relational. It consists of contacts among juxtaposed forms, contacts which suggest a certain irrelevance in the anecdotal distinction between the animate and the inanimate. The lion, it might be said, leaves his cage by

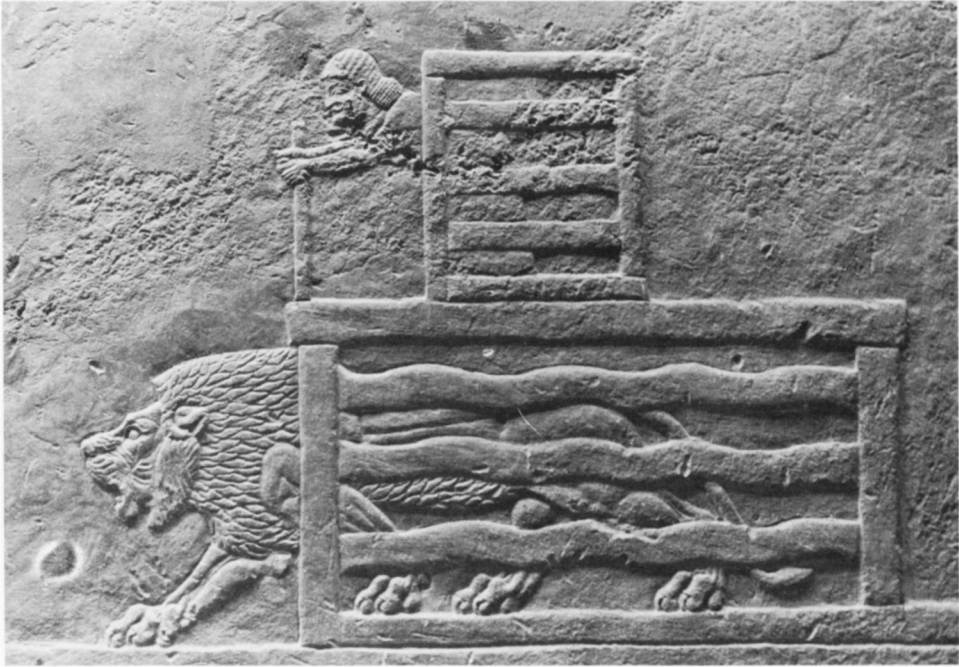


Figure 10

remaining within it, by the peculiar way in which he almost becomes his cage. As is frequently the case in the palace reliefs, relations make identities somewhat uncertain. Or, more exactly, the subject of the scene is its de-narrativization—that is, the process by which we substitute a reading of related fragments for the reading of a coherently structured anecdote.

Nonetheless, the narrative power of Figure 10 remains very strong. The movement toward the outside of the cage may very well strike us as more dramatically delineated than the relational activity we have just mentioned. Not only is the subject of the lion leaving his cage emphasized by the human figure's repetition of this action; we might also note that all the horizontal lines help to guide our attention to the long horizontal shape of the emerging animal's body. Furthermore, formal relations by no means only de-narrativize the scene. The implicit diagonals which connect the lion's face to the man's face and the lion's front paw to the top left of the man's cage have the effect of intensifying our attention to the most dramatically narrative aspects of the scene. There is in fact a complex diagonal structure in Figure 10. We have not only the lines just mentioned, but there are also implicit diagonals moving in the opposite direction, from the lower right to the upper left. These two series of diagonal lines "meet" in the small empty square to the left of the man's cage, and this space thereby becomes a focused element in the scene.

In conclusion, we might consider the emphasized emptiness of that square space as emblematic. The square is a cage which imprisons nothing. It is an insignificant focal point designed to scatter rather than to concentrate our attention. It is a space through which the play of lines compels us to pass repeatedly, and we might say that its interpretive location is somewhere between two very different readings of the scene. On the one hand, the structuring lines, which, if drawn in, would pass through the empty square, lead us back to narrative content. They help to define a particular incident and to place this incident within the larger narrative subject of the lion hunt. On the other hand, one series of diagonal lines leads us back to the wavering identities and predominantly formal relations within the large cage. The empty square thus mediates between two modes of attention: a narrative vision which organizes forms into the elements of a story, and a more agitated, erratic vision which substitutes related and continuously shifting bits and pieces for the static integrity and wholeness of being in narrative forms.

We have emphasized the second mode, for, in our culture, it is more neglected than the first; most importantly, it has provided us with the perceptual model of an alternative to narrative and historical violence. We may, however, perversely end with a more conciliatory remark, and note that the peculiar impression of balance and sanity which the Assyrian sculptors give us may be due to their willingness not only to fracture their subjects but also to regale us with images of the narrative violence so horrifying and so thrilling to the narrative spirit. The nearly indefinable quality of “betweenness” in the palace reliefs may, then, manifest an impressive hesitation or even ignorance, on the part of these anonymous ancient artists, about the forms of disruption and of violence which they had chosen to love.