

The Hegelian Trichotomy Underlying Panofsky's *Perspective as a Symbolic Form.*

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On Panofsky's Organizing Thesis

In 1899 in the second edition of the *Classic Art*, Heinrich Wölfflin, by way of setting the tasks for future art history, remarked: 'There is still a great deal of work to be done here. Comprehensive and connected researches must be made into the development of draughtsmanship, the treatment of *chiaroscuro*, perspective and the representation of space'.¹ Ever since many studies have been conducted on these problems, artistic perspective and the representation of space have certainly received much of their due attention. At the same time, it could be noticed that almost all twentieth-century studies on perspective, especially those organized around broader theoretical frameworks, use Erwin Panofsky's essay *Perspective as a Symbolic Form* (1924) as a starting ground or at least a point of reference. This fact naturally prompts some intellectual curiosity as to the major ideas that underlie Panofsky's text.

The following text will be concerned with extracting a Hegelian intellectual background from Panofsky's main thesis, which is largely obscured by the more obvious Kantian and Neo-Kantian allegiances. I will side with Paul Crowther's view of the 'objective significance' of perspective in Panofsky's essay. I believe that this position is supported by the very structure of the text, which I see as organized around the philosophical-epistemological concept of the subject-object relationship, which unfolds in a typically Hegelian, i.e. dialectical and historically necessary, fashion. More concretely, the historical development of perspective is broken down into three major moments: Antique perspective which provides the thesis, medieval perspective which is the antithesis and Renaissance perspective as the synthesis. The necessary transition to the latter overcomes the imbalance between subject and object in the former two. Subject (in this case, the viewer/artist) and object (the phenomenal world) are thus unified. If this interpretation is accepted the Kantian and Neo-Kantian influence on Panofsky should be radically reconsidered. By proposing that perspective ultimately overcomes the distinction between subject and object and, by implication, that between thought and reality, Panofsky actually strays away from a basic tenet of Kant's philosophy (i.e. that there is such a distinction) into a pronouncedly Hegelian theme.

The title of Panofsky's essay signals a direct borrowing from Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Doubts have been raised by some of Panofsky's critics as to the appropriateness of Cassirer's concept to this kind of discourse on

perspective.² In what is probably the most recent important study on the subject, Crowther convincingly maintains that while Panofsky legitimately employs Cassirer's term he misunderstood Cassirer on one important ground.³ In reference to mathematical perspective Cassirer says that the reality of its elements 'is exhausted in their reciprocal relation: it is purely functional and not a substantial reality'.⁴ Panofsky interprets this to mean that mathematical perspective does not correspond to the way we see the world and the objects in it⁵ and is, therefore, only an abstraction from 'actual subjective optical impression'.⁶ Cassirer, however, very clearly speaks of *reciprocity* and not *abstraction* and it is the principle of reciprocity which lies at the heart of the definition of 'symbolic form'. Reciprocity consists in that the individual item manifests the universal while, at the same time, the latter can be grasped only as a function of the former. While misunderstanding Cassirer on this point, Panofsky projected a relativist view of the historical development of perspective. He thus allied himself with influential figures as Alois Riegl (1858–1905) by suggesting that Renaissance perspective is only one among several possible varieties of perspectival systems, each of which was tied to a historical and cultural moment. At the same time, Panofsky is by no means an absolute cultural relativist.⁷ By bringing Panofsky's position closer to Cassirer's philosophy Crowther shows that it can be read as implying an 'objective significance of perspective'.

The philosophical-epistemological problem of subject and object seems to have engaged intensely Panofsky's attention at the time of writing *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*. In the same year, he also published his essay "Idea. A Concept in Art Theory" (1924), in which the greatest difference between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is seen in terms of the subject-object relationship.⁸ Interestingly, this is exactly the thesis that Cassirer put forward in *The Individual and the Cosmos* (1927). Significantly, the discussion of the subject-object relationship in Cassirer's work is couched 'in the language of spatial vision'.

The 'Hegelian connection', which Panofsky's essay makes, is largely obscured by the more obvious Kantian and Neo-Kantian overtones that surface. Cassirer's concept of 'symbolic form', that Panofsky borrows, relies on Kant's notion of 'form'.⁹ Cassirer explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to Kant. In fact, Gombrich has been among the few, who mentioned Hegel's influence on Panofsky, though he does not refer specifically to *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*.¹⁰ The influence of Hegel is evident on many levels. First, there is Panofsky's claim that there is a deep, inherent connection between the worldview of a culture or society, this culture's philosophy of space, and the corresponding system of pictorial perspective. The notion of the interconnectedness of cultural phenomena, which ultimately constitute the 'spirit of the nation' goes back to Montesquieu (1689–1755), though he uses it in the more narrow context of law and legal systems (hence, the title of his work *The Spirit of the Laws*, (1749). Herder (1744–1803) talks more generally of forms of the spirit of the nation, where the latter constitutes a self-contained centre. It was Hegel (1770–1831),

however, who systematized the notion of *Volkgeist*, which as the temporary form of Absolute Spirit becomes the touchstone of his philosophy of history.

Second, Panofsky's triad of worldview-philosophical conception of space-pictorial perspective unfolds within a broader Hegelian trichotomy of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. The latter, since Fichte (1762–1814) provides the framework for the dialectical relationship between subject and object. The subject posits the object (thesis), to which it stands as negation (antithesis). The synthesis emerges out of the meeting of thesis and antithesis, whence the opposition between subject and object is overcome. This Fichtean scheme, as well as the overall dialectical method, is borrowed almost directly by Hegel¹¹ and it provides the basic framework of Hegel's philosophy. With Hegel, however, 'the dialectical sequence turns out to be the same as the historical sequence'.¹² It is this dialectical-historical dimension of Hegel's thought that, I believe, can be traced in Panofsky's essay. It is true that in *Perspective as a Symbolic Form* Panofsky never mentions his indebtedness to Hegel, but in another work he explicitly claims a Hegelian conception for art history: 'The Hegelian notion that the historical process unfolds in a sequence of thesis, antithesis and synthesis appears equally valid for the development of art'.¹³

When applied to the evolution of art, the Hegelian trichotomy is taken by Panofsky to correspond to the division of art history into the three periods of classical Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as the beginning of the modern era.¹⁴ Each of these three refers to and expresses – conversely, can be deduced from – the respective conceptions of space and the respective worldviews. Panofsky's theory of 'reversals' at the beginning of Section III, which we will again mention later, should be understood exactly in this context. According to the Hegelian view of history there is a succession of worldviews which is not a simple linear progression in time (what Hegel calls 'bad infinity'), but rather a cyclic unfolding of the historical process. Historical time takes us full circle to a beginning (the 'true infinite', according to Hegel).¹⁵ Panofsky is, in fact, suggesting that the evolution of art follows the same course.

The influence of Hegel, however, should not be taken too far. There is something deeply un-Hegelian about Panofsky's procedure of describing various perspectival systems in terms of the paradigm of linear perspective. This approach is also, of course, in obvious contradiction with Panofsky's professed relativism. Hegel himself never tired of insisting that we should not employ mechanically modern categories in describing phenomena of the past. The point had already been made by Herder in his essay on Winckelmann from 1777, where he discusses the fallacy of judging Egyptian art by Greek standards of excellence.¹⁶ In the *Aesthetics* one of the basic problems is how one describes the art of the past so that it becomes accessible to the present. From this point of view the question could be asked if the term 'perspective' is appropriate in any other case but that of mathematically constructed pictorial space, so long as 'perspective' means the rational geometry of vision.

If, however, we stick to our interpretation of the Hegelian context of Panofsky's essay, one would logically expect that Panofsky would start his exposition with Antique perspective as the thesis, then proceed to medieval perspective as the antithesis, and the final movement of the synthesis achieved by Renaissance perspective. What happens, however, is that both Antique and medieval perspective are discussed in their relation to linear perspective. As a result, the author's analysis opens with linear perspectival space. It is noticeable that in this approach Panofsky is close to a tendency still predominant in art historical studies, as witnessed by Stephen Melville's observation:

The Renaissance achievement of rational perspective becomes the condition of the possibility of the art historical discipline, and we are compelled to its terms whenever we look to establish another worldview that would not, for example privilege the Renaissance, but we can neither 'look' nor imagine a 'worldview' without reinstating at the heart of our project the terms only the Renaissance can expound for us.¹⁷

It is this manner of presentation that blurs the Hegelian scheme, which I believe underlines Panofsky's text, and what too makes it inconvenient for the author to refer to it.

As I believe that the Hegelian scheme gives coherence to Panofsky's text our discussion will proceed from Antique perspective through the medieval systems of the organization of pictorial space to the one in the Renaissance. In each case, perspective will be seen as 'symbolic form' in the sense of an expression of the subject-object relationship at the time. In this way Panofsky's definition of 'symbolic form' – 'a form through which a particular spiritual content is connected to a concrete sensory sign and is intimately identified with it'¹⁸ – will receive a more rigorous historicist and dialectical sense.

The First Element of the Trichotomy: Antique Perspective as the Thesis

Greek philosophy freed for the first time the concept of self-consciousness (subject) and the concept of the world (object) from the realm of myth. It expressed a specific world-view in which it was the subject that had an active and formative role. Let us see how the subject-object relationship was expressed in perspectival terms.

The whole system of perspectival measures in Antiquity strives to preserve the truth of perception. Presentation is concerned not with the object as such but with our mental image of it. This is why Panofsky stresses the importance of his claim that the aggregate perspective of Antiquity is truer to the process of vision than Renaissance perspective and describes closer the way in which we actually see our objects of perception. Put in simple terms, in Antiquity, both in philosophy and in artistic

practice, the claims of the subject almost totally supplant those of the object. In other words, there is an uneven balance between subject and object.

Section II of Panofsky's essay is specifically devoted to Antique perspective. However, due to the author's procedure mentioned above, this section would be impossible to understand apart from the previous one which introduces the subject of Renaissance perspective. Paradoxically, Antique pictorial space which holds as position of chronological precedence and is, at the same time, the first element of the dialectical chain is described in terms of its differences from the historically latest last element of the chain.

At the beginning of Section I 'a fully perspectival space' is defined as 'when the entire picture has been transformed' in distinction to 'when mere isolated objects such as houses or furniture are represented in foreshortening'.¹⁹ The first instance refers only to strict mathematical perspective as invented in the Renaissance, while the second – to other perspectival systems, as the one in Antiquity. The stress falls on the notion of entire transformation, which happens only with linear perspective and nowhere else. The condition for that is 'a fully rational – that is infinite, unchanging and homogeneous – space'.²⁰

At this stage we are also faced with the relationship between the perspective which was employed by the art, the intellectual conception of space and the worldview. Thus, Panofsky claims that 'Antique space is [...] the expression of a specific and fundamentally unmodern view of space' and 'furthermore the expression of an equally specific and equally unmodern conception of the world'.²¹ The scheme could be described by the relationship: Antique pictorial perspective – the Antique view of space – the Antique worldview.

Let us start with the structure of Antique pictorial space. While linear perspective is organised around the vanishing point principle (i.e. all orthogonals gather in a single point in the distance) Antiquity perspective, on the other hand, could be said to organise representation around the vanishing-axis principle. In the latter case 'the extensions of the orthogonals do not merge at a single point, but rather only weakly converge, and thus meet in pairs at several points along a common axis'.²²

What are the implications of a vanishing-point or vanishing-axis principle of pictorial construction? It is suggested that the Antique mode of representing space 'suffers in comparison to the modern mode, from a peculiar instability and internal inconsistency'²³ and reveals 'awkward discrepancies'.²⁴ What does that tell us?

Above all, it brings us to the middle component of the relationship of perspective – view of space – world-view. The two modes of representation refer to the two views of space – the systematic space of modernity and the aggregate space of Antiquity. The former is 'a perfectly unified world, a world where bodies and the gaps between

them were only differentiations or modifications of a continuum of an order',²⁵ the latter – 'was still perceived not as something that could embrace and dissolve the opposition between bodies and non-bodies, but only as that which remains, so to speak, between bodies'.²⁶ In other words, in this non-unified, aggregate space primacy is given to the object on its own. So, let's see how the object is taken to behave in Antique space and how it defines space:

The art of classical Antiquity was a purely corporeal art; it recognised as artistic reality only what was tangible as well as visible. Its objects are material and three-dimensional, with clearly defined functions and proportions, and thus were always to a certain extent anthropomorphised. These objects were not merged in painterly fashion into the spatial unity, but rather were affixed to each other in a kind of tectonic or plastic cluster.²⁷

At this point Panofsky turns briefly to Antique theories of space from Democritus and Plato to Aristotle. Aristotle's conception of space is particularly important as, in Panofsky's view, it is connected and even accounts for the aggregate character of Antique perspective. For Aristotle the primary category is substance and everything that exists, being *qua* being, exists in reference to substance. Space, too, is not primarily given but exists because of the object, to which in a manner it is affixed. Thus, space cannot be approached as a thing on its own right, because Aristotle denies the existence of an empty, abstract space, a void. As Cassirer notices, Aristotle's space remains attached to bodies and is nothing more than 'the boundary of the enclosing body around the enclosed body'.²⁸

It is this Aristotelian space and worldview that Panofsky suggests is in a direct relationship with Antique perspective. Antique space is not a pictorial unity in the strict sense; it is aggregate, so long as objects in it exist, in a manner, on their own and not in inextricable relationships with other objects in a unified space (this would happen only with the Renaissance). At the same time, the treatment of the object, even though as a separate item, would provide one of the elements for the synthesis achieved by the Renaissance. The other element was worked out by medieval art.

The Second Element of the Trichotomy: Medieval Perspective as Antithesis

If in Panofsky's essay Antique perspective is the thesis, medieval perspective provides the antithesis. While the imbalance in Antiquity was in favour of the subject, in the Middle Ages the imbalance continued but the stress was shifted onto the object.

Section III starts with an exposition of Panofsky's theory of reversals:

When work on certain artistic problems has advanced so far that further work in the same direction, proceeding from the same premises, appears unlikely to bear fruit, the result is often a great recoil, or perhaps better, a reversal of direction. Such reversals, which are often

associated with the transfer of artistic 'leadership' to a new country or a new genre, create the possibility of erecting a new edifice out of the rubble of the old; they do this precisely by abandoning what has already been achieved, that is by turning back to apparently more 'primitive' modes of representation. These reversals lay the groundwork for creative reengagement with older problems, precisely by establishing a distance from those problems.²⁹

The great recoil of the Middle Ages naturally and above all affects the relationship between subject and object. What happens in the subject-object relationship in medieval perspective, according to Panofsky, is a decisive shift of weight towards the object. The subject retreats to the background and the claims of the object are fully acknowledged.

In other words, in art historical terms, Antiquity has worked from a certain premise in a certain direction and had attained a full development of its perspectival system. The next step was from a different premise and in a different direction and it was taken by the Middle Ages. Abandoning – or negating, to use Hegelian language – the achievement of the period immediately preceding it, medieval art sought a support further back, to more 'primitive' modes of representation of space. The overall artistic development seems to unfold in a chain in which a complex relationship among the links is in constant play; adjacent links oppose each other and refer to more distant ones. This is exactly the manner in which the Hegelian model of history functions and Panofsky's term for an artistic 'reversal'/'recoil' corresponds in a fundamental way to the Hegelian notion of antithesis.

Why are the Middle Ages *the greatest* of those recoils? The answer is that first, it achieves a fundamental break with the preceding period and second, it does this in such a way as to act as a creative force for a still further development exemplified by the later modern period. In the context of the latter, 'the art historical mission of the Middle Ages' is seen to be 'to blend what was once a multiplicity of individual objects (no matter how ingeniously linked to one another) into a true unity'.³⁰ The 'multiplicity' of objects, linked to one another, but not homogeneously unified spatially is the situation we encounter with the aggregate perspective of Antiquity, while 'true unity' refers to the basic necessary condition for the realisation of modern perspective.

After expounding his theory of reversals, Panofsky continues with a brief discussion of the Byzantine, Romanesque and Gothic pictorial systems. Alongside, the connection is again made with the respective philosophical conceptions of space and worldviews. Thus, if in the case of Antiquity, it is Aristotle's philosophy of space that Panofsky is mostly concerned with, here it is Neoplatonism and the Scholastic version of Aristotelianism. Christian Neoplatonism is regarded as the backbone of Byzantine art and culture, while the reinterpretation of Aristotle's doctrine of space is discussed in connection with Gothic art.

a) Byzantine Pictorial Space and the Conception of Space

In the case of Byzantine art Panofsky maintains:

The individual pictorial elements, which had almost completely lost their gestural and corporeal dynamic relationship and their perspectival spatial relationship, could be joined in a new and, in a certain sense, more intimate relationship: in an immaterial but unbroken tissue, as it were, within which the rhythmic exchange of colour and gold or, in relief sculpture, of light and dark, restores a kind of unity, even if only a colouristic and luminous unity.³¹

This may not be the mathematically correct, spatial unity of the Renaissance but it nevertheless achieves in unifying the multiplicity of individual items – by means of light. It therefore is a step on the way to the unity of linear perspective and makes the latter possible.

Here ‘the particular form of this unity once again finds its theoretical analogue in the view of space of contemporary philosophy: in the metaphysics of light of pagan and Christian neoplatonism’.³² One of the most widely read writers in the Middle Ages, Dionysius the Areopagite (5th c. A.D.) describes Light in his *Celestial Hierarchies* as emanating from God and being imparted to the lower orders. Reality and thus art possess a reflected essence of the beyond of which we might get a glimpse by contemplating this world. In the vein of Proclus’s concept of the chain of emanations, Pseudo-Dionysius says, ‘the material lights are images of the outpouring of an immaterial gift of light’.³³

Divine Light through intermediaries illuminates the world. Space is unified through that reflected light and indeed it is ‘nothing other than the finest light’.³⁴ There is a special significance in that unity through light as ‘the world is conceived for the first time as a continuum’.³⁵ This is a view of a world ‘robbed of its solidity and rationality’.³⁶ In it space is transformed into a ‘homogeneous, so to speak, homogenising fluid, immeasurable and indeed dimensionless’.³⁷

The role of Byzantine art for the synthesis of Modern Times and it is seen in this unity of space by means of light and in the preservation of the perspectival space of Antiquity: ‘Thus Byzantine art – and for our purposes this is especially important – managed, for all the disorganisation of the whole, nevertheless to preserve the individual components of Antique perspectival space, and so to hold them in readiness for the Western Renaissance’.³⁸ In particular, ‘Byzantine art may have ended up treating landscape motifs and architectural forms as mere stage scenery before a neutral background; but these motifs and forms never ceased somehow to suggest space’.³⁹

b) Romanesque Pictorial Space

Romanesque art, however, achieves a far more radical transformation. Indeed, the Romanesque ‘completed the renunciation of Antiquity which Byzantine art never carried out’⁴⁰ and ‘destroyed the last remnants of the Antique perspectival view’.⁴¹ Here we have an uncompromising insistence on two-dimensionality that completely abandons any suggestion of space in depth. And yet, it is exactly in this radical transformation that we should seek the great contribution of the Romanesque for the modern view of space: ‘For if Romanesque painting reduces bodies and space to surface, in the same way and with the same decisiveness, by these very means it also manages for the first time to confirm and establish the homogeneity of bodies and space’.⁴² The explanation for this paradoxical suggestion is that once ‘bodies and space are bound to each other’⁴³ as a consequence ‘if a body is to liberate itself from its attachment to the surface, it cannot grow unless space grows with it at the same rate’.⁴⁴ The implication is that with linear perspective exactly this happens – a body/an object is left to grow and it carries the space attached to it along so in effect space itself grows.

However, how was this unity of bodies and space achieved? The Panofsky’s answer is rather laconic, but still it seems to make sense within the context of his discourse: ‘It [the Romanesque] did this by transforming their (of bodies and space) loose, optical unity into a solid and substantial unity’.⁴⁵

c) Gothic Perspective and the Conception of Space

The architectural elements of Gothic art with the new stress they place on the value of the body are all enveloped in the unity achieved already by the Romanesque. Thus, ‘the renaissance of a feeling for the body’⁴⁶ is accompanied by a similar process in regard to space. As Panofsky points out, a symbol of that development becomes the high Gothic statue ‘which cannot live without its baldachin’.⁴⁷ For the Gothic world-view ‘bodies and empty space are already considered equivalent forms for expressing a homogeneous and indivisible unity’.⁴⁸

The philosophical referent to that late medieval world-view should be sought in the specific modifications of Aristotle’s doctrine of space. Scholastic philosophy not only revived but fundamentally reinterpreted Aristotle. With Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–74), the Aristotelian emphasis on the finiteness of our world is shifted onto the infinity of divine omnipotence. The insistence on infinity concerns only the heavenly sphere, though Panofsky suggests that it acts as the first step towards the modern notion of an infinite universe: ‘it does probably already represent (in contrast to the genuine Aristotelian version) a true *energeia apeiron* (actual infinite), which at first, to be sure, remained confined to a supernatural sphere, but which could in principle take effect in the natural sphere’.⁴⁹ This proposition is further elaborated on in Note 36 to the text:

Whereas Aristotle had to reject from the start the possibility of an *energeia apeiron*, now just such an *energeia apeiron* is recognised behind the empirical world in the shape of divine omnipotence; what then prevents us from supposing that it could also concretise itself in the empirical world, expanding that world, as it were, into an infinite universe?

The whole discussion at this point leads to the sweeping conclusion that the Scholastic version of Aristotle acted as a prerequisite to the modern view of space.

Gothic art provides the last necessary factor for the fulfilment of the antithesis of medieval art that works towards the synthesis of modernity. The fundamental significance of the Gothic is seen to be its feeling for space that is one of the conditions for linear perspective. It is that North Gothic feeling for space in combination with the perspectival pictorial forms preserved by Byzantine art that makes a new unity possible. With a Hegelian determinism Panofsky claims that 'at this point we can almost predict where modern perspective will unfold'.⁵⁰ It comes as no surprise that 'the founders of the modern perspectival view of space were the two great painters whose styles, in other ways as well, completed the grand synthesis of Gothic and Byzantine: Giotto and Duccio'.⁵¹

At this stage we find ourselves at the threshold of modern linear perspective and henceforth the discourse in *Perspective as a Symbolic Form* centres on this problem.

The Third Element of the Trichotomy: Modern Perspective as the Synthesis

The rest of Section III is devoted specifically to modern perspective, a subject which, as we saw has been underlying the whole of Panofsky's text up to this point. It seems reasonable to claim that modern perspective is the logical synthesis of the thesis postulated by Antiquity and the antithesis developed by the Middle Ages. As Panofsky says, 'the great evolution from aggregate space to systematic space found its provisional conclusion'.⁵² This development of the system of perspective is deeply tied with the changed relationship between subject and object. For the first time the opposition between subject and object is overcome. This phenomenon occurs only with the Renaissance – as Cassirer would propose in *The Individual and the Cosmos* – and linear perspective provides its visual paradigm – as Panofsky's claims.

The Renaissance inherits from the Middle Ages an uneven balance of the subject-object relationship, centring on the object. On the one hand, looking back to Antiquity it finds another uneven balance, that time exalting the subject. According to Cassirer, what the Renaissance manages to do and in what lies its greatest achievement is that it establishes for the first time 'an ideal equilibrium'⁵³ between subject and object by not subordinating 'neither the subject to the object nor the object to the subject'⁵⁴ (*op. cit.*). Subject and object acquired their modern connotations.

Once the Aristotelian scheme of the world was overcome, the now infinite universe was pictured in an altogether different fashion. The very co-ordinates describing space and time acquire new values. Nikolaus Cusanus was the first to philosophically expound the idea of the relativity of place and movement. While space and time are *a priori* given, the points in them are only hypothetical and not absolute as with Aristotle. Their choice is an act of the free human mind. The ultimate task of the subject is to assemble the various viewpoints and unify them. Kepler further elaborates on that problem. The relativity of place and movement brings about a new relationship between subject and object. The active subject ideally posits the object in spatial and temporal terms.

The point that Panofsky makes is that the philosophically developed idea of the relativity of space and movement is the theoretical analogue that lies behind and is expressed through linear perspective. The Renaissance perspectival construction functions from the premise of this freely chosen position of the subject in relation to the object, presenting the object from a particular and 'subjective' point of view. At the same time, this subjective impression is highly rationalized and thus objectified by the mathematical construction of linear perspective.

Panofsky proceeds to outline schematically the basic stages of the evolution of systematic pictorial space in the Renaissance.⁵⁵ There are several chapters within the evolution of mathematical perspective.

a) Duccio and Giotto

Duccio's (d.1319) and Giotto's (1266?–1337) innovation consisted in the representation of a closed interior space felt for the first time in centuries as a 'hollow body'.⁵⁶ While with medieval – for example Byzantine – art, we have 'the wall or panel bearing the forms of the individual things and figures',⁵⁷ with Duccio and Giotto there is a reversion to what had happened in Antiquity – 'a transparent plane through which we are meant to believe that we are looking into space'.⁵⁸ Yet, this is still far from a fully extendable, truly infinite space. It is a space constricted on all sides and a picture plane that is not yet conceived as a section of space. It is also an inconsistent space, as not the entire plane, but only a part of it is unified. What is of significance, however, is that 'the view that had been blocked since Antiquity, the vista or 'looking through', has begun to open again'⁵⁹ and the first step towards a unified space was taken.

b) The Transitional Masters

The succeeding period followed in the path paved by the transitional masters. What was needed was a technique that achieves a full unification not just of the picture plane but of the entire space, which is what happens with the vanishing-point construction. A significant figure in that respect is Ambrogio Lorenzetti

(1285–c.1348) and Panofsky draws as an example Lorenzetti's *Annunciation* of 1344, in which the orthogonals of the ground plan are consistently orientated towards a single point. The extent to which this is so excludes the possibility of an artistic accident but much rather reveals a conscious effort and a mathematical intent. A further significance of Lorenzetti's work is the new treatment of the ground plane. Duccio's and Giotto's bound from all sides pictorial space with Lorenzetti is being opened on the sides and thus 'can be thought of as extending arbitrarily far to either side'.⁶⁰

Yet, even here there is only a partial unity, which does not involve the entire plane, as it is not clear whether the orthogonals lying outside the picture frame would necessarily have the same orientation towards the single point.

c) The Van Eycks and the Last Stage with the Northern Artists

The van Eycks take us one step further. It is with them that we have the first total unity of the entire plane. In Panofsky's opinion it was an entirely personal exploit of Jan van Eyck (1390–1440) to liberate the three-dimensional space – that was already a fact at the period – from its ties to the frontal picture plane. Ambrogio Lorenzetti had set space free at the sides and now Jan van Eyck was opening it to the front and thus striking the final chord in a development that was heading towards a fully extendable infinite space. In this way, we have an artistic technique that corresponds to the theoretical notion of the visual pyramid. 'The picture has become a mere "slice" of reality, to the extent and in the sense, that *imagined* space now reaches out in all directions beyond *represented* space, that precisely finiteness of the picture makes perceptible the infiniteness and continuity of space'.⁶¹ If we look at Jan van Eyck's *Virgin in the Church*, for example, we could notice that the illusion of space spreading out to the front does not terminate with the picture frame but is rather projected forward.

Artists like Dirk Bouts (c.1410–75) and Petrus Christus (c.1410–72 or 1473) gave the final touch to the development of pictorial space in the North. The very first step had been to conceive of space in depth and from there onwards, space had been set free on the sides and later on the front. Within this fully liberated space what remained to be done was to observe consistency. Complete organisation in spatial terms was realised by the vanishing-point construction, where all orthogonals of all planes converge into a single point.

The end of Section III, typically, concerns itself the philosophical analogue to these developments in artistic practice and theory. Linear perspective has become expressive of the modern view of space and Panofsky finds its referent in Kant's philosophy of space. Moreover, in Panofsky's opinion, Kant formalised a view of space that was given birth to in the Renaissance.

The space of Duccio and Giotto corresponds to the Scholastic reinterpretation of Aristotelian space and, as we saw, Panofsky considers it an opening phase of a new development. With the advent of a fully developed linear perspectival system, the Aristotelian and the Scholastic world-views were abandoned. The Renaissance launched the notion of an actual infinity/*energeiai apeiron* not only of God and the heavenly sphere, but of empirical reality as well.

According to Kant, space exists *a priori* and is ontologically given before objects.⁶² In the Renaissance we find this idea in Pomponius Gauricus, cited by Panofsky, who defines space as a ‘continuous quantity, consisting of three physical dimensions, existing by nature before all bodies and beyond all bodies, indifferently receiving everything’.⁶³ That ‘existing by nature’ of Gauricus is, in fact, Kant’s *a priori* existence.

At this point we should ask the question about Panofsky’s view of the role of modern perspective in the history of art. When that question was addressed in respect to Antique and medieval perspective, the answer was that they both had functioned, each in its own way, as prerequisites for the synthesis of Renaissance perspective. But what is the significance of Renaissance perspective itself? Panofsky’s reply is implied throughout the text and comes to light in Section IV. In short, to quote Christopher Wood from his introduction to the text – Panofsky sees ‘the special status of Renaissance linear perspective’ in the ‘equilibrium’ it creates between the claims of the object and those of the subject.

The final section of *Perspective as a Symbolic Form* describes the whole history of perspective as a ‘triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real’ running in parallel to a ‘triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control’,⁶⁴ as ‘a consolidation and systematisation of the external world’ alongside ‘an extension of the domain of the self’.⁶⁵ Modern perspective manages to synthesise in a unity basic and initially opposed phenomena. It achieves a balance between subject and object and their opposing claims by reducing the artistic phenomenon to ‘stable and even mathematically exact rules, but on the other hand, makes that phenomenon contingent upon human beings, indeed upon the individual; for these rules refer to the psychological and physical conditions of the visual impression, and the way they take effect is determined by the freely chosen position of a subjective ‘point of view’.⁶⁶

Thus the thesis-antithesis-synthesis trichotomy applied to the history of perspective refers to the basic philosophical problem of the subject-object relationship which in its stead draws the basic parametres of the concept of a world-view. The worldview of Antiquity is linked to a system of perspective, whereby the image is constructed mainly with the subject of perception in mind. In the Middle Ages, the ‘great recoil’ affects the view of the relationship between subject and object, as a result of which the emphasis is drawn away from the subject to fall on the object. Medieval images are, thus, organized almost exclusively around the claims of the object. In this respect

they become, in Hegelian terms, the anti-thesis of Antique images. The Renaissance achieves a synthesis in the sense that the uneven balance between subject and object is overcome and the claims of both are harmonized for the first time. For linear perspective to function means taking into account both subject and object. This, I have been suggesting, is Panofsky's overriding thesis.

Conclusion

In the present paper I have proposed that Panofsky's essay *Perspective as a Symbolic Form* is informed by a distinctly Hegelian intellectual approach. The evolution of perspective follows a pattern of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. There is a dialectical, as well as a historical, moment in this development.

Perspectival space in Antiquity is organized in accordance with the demands of the perception of the subject. In medieval art, on the other hand, there occurs a swing towards the object – perspective strives to preserve the truth of the object, largely disregarding subjective perception. In both cases an uneven balance between subject and object persists. It is only in Renaissance perspective that we find an equilibrium between subject and object. This idea, which it is suggested underlies Panofsky's work, has significant implications. Ultimately, the understanding of 'symbolic form' depends on the emergence of perspective as a dialectical and historical category. If our reading of Panofsky is correct, it can be claimed that the author saw the history of perspective as progressing by necessity towards the final overcoming of the dialectical opposition between subject and object. In this process the development of perspective is intimately linked to a corresponding development of the philosophical conception of space and the worldview.

If this interpretation is accepted, not only is Hegel's influence acknowledged but also the allegiances with Kantian philosophy are reconsidered. After all, Hegel's abolishing of the distinction between subject and object is a fundamental departure from Kant. Panofsky applies this idea to the history of perspective, whereby perspective becomes 'an objectification of the subjective'⁶⁷ – Panofsky's terminology is sometimes unmistakably Hegelian.

NOTES:

¹ H. Wölfflin, *Classic Art: An Introduction to the Italian Renaissance* (London: Phaidon, 1994).

² H. Damish, *The Origins of Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, c.1994), p. 11; M.-A. Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 114-57; J. Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994). S. Ferretti in her *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg: Symbol, Art and History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989, first in Italian in 1984) is not specifically concerned with this issue.

³ P. Crowther, *The Transhistorical Image: Philosophizing Art and Its History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Chapter: "The Objective Significance of Perspective: Panofsky with Cassirer".

⁴ E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), vol. 2, p. 84.

⁵ This view was actually popularized by Ernst Mach (1838–1916), a professor of psychology at Vienna University and it formed part of the discourse at the time. At the same time, and independently of Panofsky, the Russian scholar Pavel Florensky was concerned with exactly the same issues (see P. Florensky, *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, Chapter: "Reverse Perspective", N. Mislner, (ed.), (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), also M. Kemp and C. Antonova, "'Reverse Perspective': Historical Fallacies and an Alternative View" in M. Emmer, (ed.), *Visual Minds* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, forthcoming), vol. 2.

⁶ E. Panofsky, *Perspective as a Symbolic Form* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 29.

⁷ On the inconsistency of Panofsky's relativism see M. Iversen, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1993).

⁸ See Silvia Ferretti's discussion on that (S. Ferretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg*, pp. 163-6).

⁹ In Kant's view, reality is constituted according to a priori forms that the human mind imposes on the sensible manifold. There are two classes of forms: the sensible ones, i.e. time and space and the intelligible ones, such as cause and effect, substance, and attribute.

¹⁰ E. Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 28.

¹¹ R. Scruton, "Continental Philosophy: Fichte to Sartre" in A. Kenny, (ed.), *The Oxford History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 212; M. Forster, "Hegel's Dialectical Method" in F. Beiser, (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 159.

¹² Forster, "Hegel's Dialectical Method", p. 136.

¹³ E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 28.

¹⁴ The traditional division of history into three major periods is, of course, arbitrary and as such highly problematic. The recent *Oxford History of Western Art*, for instance, is organized around a different principle which disobeys divisions in historical time, as well as style labels.

¹⁵ As Hegel says in his introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*: "This progressing is no indefinite progress into infinity, but it has rather a purpose, namely a return into itself. For this reason we have also certain circularity. Spirit seeks itself" (Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, tr. T. M. Knox, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

¹⁶ See M. Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 2.

¹⁷ S. Melville, "The Temptation of New Perspectives", *October*, vol. 52, (1990), p. 11.

¹⁸ E. Panofsky, *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*, p. 41. Here Panofsky keeps close to Cassirer.

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- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 27.
²⁰ Ibid., p. 28.
²¹ Ibid., p. 43.
²² Ibid., p. 38. In fact, it has turned out that Panofsky was wrong in maintaining that ‘not a single surviving Antique painting possesses [...] a unifying vanishing point’ (p. 38), but the recent discovery of one or two exceptions does not seem to affect the author’s main argument.
²³ Ibid., p. 40.
²⁴ Ibid.
²⁵ Ibid., p. 41.
²⁶ Ibid.
²⁷ Ibid.
²⁸ E. Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), p. 184.
²⁹ E. Panofsky, *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*, p. 47.
³⁰ Ibid.
³¹ Ibid., p. 49.
³² Ibid.
³³ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works* (New York, 1987), p. 146.
³⁴ Quoted in E. Panofsky, *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*, p. 49.
³⁵ Ibid.
³⁶ Ibid.
³⁷ Ibid.
³⁸ Ibid., p. 50.
³⁹ Ibid.
⁴⁰ Ibid.
⁴¹ Ibid., p. 51.
⁴² Ibid.
⁴³ Ibid.
⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 52.
⁴⁵ Ibid.
⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 53.
⁴⁷ Ibid.
⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 54.
⁴⁹ Ibid.
⁵⁰ Ibid.
⁵¹ Ibid.
⁵² Ibid., p. 65.
⁵³ Cassirer, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
⁵⁴ Ibid.
⁵⁵ For a fuller account see M. Kemp, *The Science of Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).
⁵⁶ E. Panofsky, *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*, p. 55.
⁵⁷ Ibid.
⁵⁸ Ibid.
⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 56.
⁶⁰ Ibid.
⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 60-1.
⁶² On Kant’s conception of space, see P. Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); R. Walker, (ed.), *Kant on Pure Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); C. Parson, “The Transcendental Aesthetic” in P. Guyer, (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 62-101.
⁶³ E. Panofsky, *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*, p. 66.
⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 68.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 69.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 66.