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Inverse, Reverse Perspective as Subversive Perspective in Florensky's Silent Mutiny: A Debate

Visualising the *verbum dei caro factum est*

Panofsky (1892-1968) opens his *Perspective as Symbolic form* with *Item Perspectiva ist ein lateinisch Wort, bedeutt ein Durchsehung. Perspectiva* is a Latin word which means "seeing through," a Boethius-Dürer concept of perspective as a window. This was the main Quattrocento-Cinquecento idea of perception via *perspectiva*:[1] a Quattro-Cinquecento state whose re-birth one witnesses in the rationality of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: "positivism, linearity, and 'singularity' across a wide number of fields."[2]

Florensky (1882-1937) challenges this with his own version proposing transcendental reality as one in which and through which mankind finds itself *to be seen through*, instead of the Kantian passive immobile subject "acting" on the world through a window. The depiction by the subject of the subject's reality *being seen through* is integrally linked with what Florensky terms as *Polycentredness,* an intriguing parallel concept to Bakhtin's contemporary idea of *polyphonic heteroglossia*.[3] Essentially, and narrowly, this means that "the

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[1] Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 27.

[2] Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 150.

[3] Deborah J. Haynes, *Bakhtin Reframed* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 51-60; 143-144.

composition is constructed [*stroitsa*] as if the eye were looking at different parts of it while changing its position."[4]

In reverse-inverse perspective, which Florensky finds to have been already exploited in antiquity, there are two double actions, again reflecting and appropriating Bakhtin's philosophical concept of "the dialogic":[5] the action of "being seen through" and simultaneously the action of the subject perceiving the multi-view points in spatial, or rather in chronotopic movement, whilst being "seen through" and thus *grasping* or attempting to grasp *what is essentially a non-visual situation*, i.e. that of a transcendental reality, which for Florensky is the only reality.

Reverse-inverse perspective is a dialectical relationship between the viewer being seen and the viewer seeing: but not only, since this dialectical relationship is not only enmeshed within a multiplicity of perceptions but also in what Bakhtin terms as a "double-voiced discourse."[6]

We find Panofsky attempting to deal with this relationship, although as a Western scholar retaining a surgical positivist methodology, he gives weight only to one side of this double-dialectical link, albeit a very important one which reflects Florensky's concept here discussed. Heinrich Wölfflin's (1864-1945) contribution to the debate on the comparison between Renaissance and Baroque perspective evinced periodical differences in vision that, although not being discussed in this essay, add weight to this dynamic discussion.[7]

According to Panofsky, as Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk have noted, perspective in antiquity:

> was constructed in relation to subjective optical impressions. We do not see with a single, fixed eye, but with two constantly moving eyes. The result is an aggregate space rather than a modern systematic space ... and this is what antique art attempts to render ... form and plenitude coexist next to each other without being resolved into a unified view of space and time ... space in antiquity becomes an intervening medium with an independent vibrancy... [as opposed to] the Renaissance's understanding of space as homogenous and infinite constructed according to the vanishing axis principle.[8]

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[4] Pavel Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. Nicoletta Misler, trans. Wendy Salmond (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 197-272.

[5] Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 2010), 14-25.

[6] Alastair Renfrew, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (London: Routledge, 2015), 85-86.

[7] Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problems of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M.D. Hottinger (New York: Dover Publications, 1986).

[8] Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 104.

In fact, Panofsky calls this antique philosophy of space as fundamentally an "unmodern view of space."[9]

This reverse, inverse, distorted, so erroneously called false perspective enhanced through compositional *polycentredness* is the main issue proposed by Florensky not as a methodological technique but as an ontology which he redefines as "concrete metaphysics." Paradoxically, Florensky is here proposing, as Cubism does, the concept of "interpenetration" of multileveled realities, reflected also in Bakhtin's "intercorporeality and intertextuality."[10]

Florensky was much indebted to Oskar Wullf's work *Die umgekehrte Perspektive und die Niedersicht*. He was also close to Moritz Cantor's (1829-1920) mathematical philosophy and history which underlines the religious and spiritual justifications that ground a non or an anti-Quattro/Cinquecento perspectival philosophy in Ancient Babylonian and Egyptian civilisation.

Such ancient manifested lack of perspective is in fact regarded by the German scientist and mathematician as a higher form of artistic maturity, if not the highest teleological evolution. Florensky, being a mathematician himself, influenced by the Russian mathematician Nikolai Bugaev (1837-1903), appropriated Cantor's radical idea of mathematics and made mathematical philosophy central to his ontological studies as much as Bakhtian aesthetics appropriated mathematical and theological concepts.[11]

Analysing reverse-inverse perspective on its own as if it is a methodological process, as implied by Panofsky, to paint or to depict some outward reality, would be a very mistaken approach. Reverse-inverse perspective is Heidegger's (1889-1976) unearthing *aletheia* and Bakhtin's "authoring" which the Russian philosopher found to be realised in the icon. Reverse-inverse perspective is only one of the multilayer compositional philosophies and theological thoughts cobwebbing the whole idea of icon reading and painting, not as a mechanical method but as a transcendental metaphysical action in mankind's relationship with reality, defined by Florensky as the internalising of the external against the falsehood stemming from the mimetic illusion of traditional realism.

In fact, it is precisely here that Florensky is many a time misinterpreted as though he is absolutising the idea of reverse-inverse perspective and narrowing down the philosophy of the icon to some sort of a technical idea of perspective. On the contrary, the relationship between the viewer and the icon is one of "answerability" defined by Bakhtin as the "process of mutual response, concrete

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[9] Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 43.
[10] Holquist, *Dialogism*, 90-96; Renfrew, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 162-164.
[11] Haynes, *Bakhtin Reframed*, 13-14.

response" which for Florensky can only be found in his idea of "concrete metaphysics" when the symbol finds its tangible realisation. In other words, for Florensky "concrete" is the act of a holistic eye perceiving the whole. Here Bakhtin and Florensky intersect yet again. For Bakhtin "the ability to see time, to read time, in the spatial whole of the world ... is the ability to read signs in everything."[12]

Florensky applied Goethe's (1749-1832) *Urphänomene,* primordial phenomena,[13] probably unaware of Bakhtin's own appropriation of Ernst Cassirer's (1874-1945) *Urphänomene* philosophy. This interesting discussion on Florensky and Bakhtin, although as one can see is quite unavoidable, would unfortunately take us off track from this present debate. The important and vital element for the purpose of this essay is to understand the strong parallelisms at work between Florensky and Bakhtin.

What for decades Western scholars of positivist-enlightenment termed as "defective" Florensky terms as the only authentic path through "perspectival angular construction" (*razrabotka perspektivnih rakursov*). Such perspectival foreshortenings trigger the Bakhtian viewed-viewer separation that would maintain one's unique position outside the space viewed. The unBakhtian empathic force emanating from and to the icon must "be followed by a return to the self."[14] This return to the self is the authentic path towards meaning.

This is quite close to Bertolt Brecht's (1898-1956) *Verfremdungseffect*: alienation-distantiation effect. Brecht's breaking the fourth wall and exposing the hidden structure of theatre is playing the same role in creating a conscious distance and a return to the self as Florensky's perspectival foreshortenings and Bakhtin's critique of empathy.

Florensky gives a comparative example of such *defective* distortions between *Christ Pantocrator* at the State Museum of the Lavra of Sergiev Posad,[15] and a similar work lacking all these distortions that is contrarily formed of perfect composition.[16] Florensky comes to the fascinating conclusion that "the transgressions against positivist perspectival rules are not a permissible

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[12]   Haynes, *Bakhtin Reframed*, 72.

[13]   Sergei Baranov, "*An Examination of the Attitude of Pavel Florensky Towards the Interaction of Science and Theology.*" https://www.academia.edu/33813863/An_Examination_of_the_Attitude_of_Pavel_Florensky_Towards_the_Interaction_of_Science_and_Theology. Accessed July 4, 2018.

[14]   Haynes, *Bakhtin Reframed*, 44.

[15]   Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," 205.

[16]   Pavel Florensky, "*Obratnaya Perspektiva*," in *Filosofiya Russkovo Religiosnovo Iskusstva,* ed. N.K. Gavriushin (Moscow: Progress Publications, 1993), 247–264.

or tolerated weakness"[17] on the icon painter's part but rather are his positive strength.

The icon harbouring such so-called deformations is much more powerful aesthetically, philosophically, and ontologically than anything created with the utmost Quattro and Cinquecento disciplined "correct" manner. "Aesthetic seeing with participative thinking by a return to one-self constitutes aesthetic contemplation" which is realised under the "gaze of another and to look at oneself through the eyes of another."[18]

In the case of the icon's gaze, Bakhtin's "surplus seeing" would need a further transcendental qualification since the viewer here is in no position to see "further behind the image's space." This would be the core philosophical meaning of inverse perspective which creates the necessary ambiance for participation in the "emerging event."

Bakhtin's "double-voiced word"[19] through Florensky's concrete metaphysics transfigures itself into a polyphonic multi-voiced word as an orchestration in which every word struggles for meaning, defined as 'the inner principle or "word"[20] leading towards Florensky's meditative silence echoed in Dostoevsky's (1821-1881) Christ's silence whilst kissing the Grand Inquisitor.

Within such Florensky-Bakhtin dialogue one can understand why an icon is not a painting painted and viewed but a word written to be read. The icon is the word made flesh: *verbum dei caro factum est*. Florensky's icon is Bakhtin's novel. Contemplating "reading" the icon would be the *sozertsatel's* (contemplator) Bakhtian *response* making him, the contemplator, whole.

Contesting Florensky, Bakhtin underlines that "it is precisely our own selves that we cannot know, since the human psyche is set up to work 'from the outside in,' that is, to encounter and come to know truths from others,"[21] *drugost* and *inakovost* (otherness and otherwise-ness).

Although Bakhtin does go into the *superaddressee-avtor-sozertstael* aesthetic creative relationship,[22] he however seems to avoid the situation when this *drugost* is the "word" manifested by the icon. His "I-for-myself" and "I-for-the-other: The-other-for-me" circumvents Florensky's transcendental reality imbued in the relationship with the icon as the "word."

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17 Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," 204.
18 Renfrew, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 32-33.
19 Emerson, *The First Hundred Years*, 130.
20 Ibid., 173.
21 Ibid., 212.
22 Ibid., 217; 231.

And here we come to another biblical dicta, the interpretation of which can be clarified through this Florensky-Bakhtian dialogue. Through Bakhtin's *avtor-sozertsatel,* "the contemplator's response as a leap of trust undertaken only under conditions of love which sees only wholes" can one come to a closer understanding of "[T]hou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" with the help of Florensky's philosophy grounding inverse perspective.

A True Essence of Being, or a Verisimilitude to Appearance

Art evolution demands freedom from perspective for the sake of "religious objectivity and suprapersonal metaphysics"[23] against the dictatorship of the abstracted *single* person with the abstracted Cartesian *single* point of view, at this abstracted *single* specific moment, an abstracted *singleness* which demands thus a perspective of a "fragmented consciousness." This brings Florensky quite close to Bakhtin's belief that "a single consciousness is little more than a fiction."[24]

Florensky defines rational abstraction as an alienated mode of singling out, *abstracting out* only a particular from a holistic universal whereas he defines the *concrete* as a holistic eye-action perceiving the whole. This definition establishes his idea of concrete metaphysics which universalises the partial. These dialectics were fundamental to the work of Maltese artist Josef Kalleya (1898-1998) who exploited materiality's visual heaviness to explore his preoccupations with the immaterial and metaphysical.

What Panofsky termed as the "great evolution from aggregate space to systematic space,"[25] and the subsequent Bakhtian "return-back" to aggregate space as envisioned by Florensky's "concrete metaphysics" which according to the Russian thinker is the only direction and alternative to the modern alienation and abstracted fragmentation of reality. Fragmentation, and the critique thereof, is not new in the history of art. Harsh critics of the Baroque termed this as "butchery piles," "cut-up members," *spezzata* (Stigliani) (1573-1651), *mescolanza, accozzamento* (Baldinucci) (1624-1697), *sconcerto* (Boschini) (1602-1681), "rampant epanalepsis of *figure, figurette, figuraccie e figuroni*" (Gilio da Fabriano) (d.1584), *macchia* (Maffei) (1605-1660).[26]

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[23] Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," 208.

[24] Renfrew, *Mikhail Bakhtin,* 80.

[25] Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form,* 65.

[26] Philip Sohm, "Baroque Piles and Other Decompositions," *Pictorial Composition from Medieval to Modern Art,* ed. Paul Taylor and François Quiviger (London: Warburg Institute, 2001), 58-90.

Panofsky's trail from "aggregate space" to "systematic space" shows how this has lead to fragmentation oxymoronically through the authoritarian abstract rule of the "single point." Whereas Panofsky finds that this single point would evolve onto and in fact parallels the vanishing point in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's (c.1290-1348) *Annunciation* (1344), such singleness Florensky finds only in applied art, decorative, and theatrical art, whose task is not "the true essence of being, but verisimilitude to appearance."[27]

Such theatrical-cinematic "verisimilitude to appearance" goes diametrically against Bakhtin's idea of "polyphonic dialogism" and Florensky's "polycentredness's interpenetration." What we see is governed by how we see, and how we see has already been determined by where we see *from*.[28] Where we see from is not only narrowed down to an Einsteinian spatial-time displacement. It also encompasses the spiritual-ideological meaning of *wherefrom,* that is from which intellectual-spiritual baggage we determine our action of seeing.

Jean-Louis Baudry's (1930-2015) "apparatus theory" is quite relevant here. In his *Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus*, Baudry practically equates Quattro and Cinquecento perspective to the development of cinematic apparatus construction which positions the subject as the centre.[29] Panofsky himself implied how perspective is the dominant feature for "a highly formalised kind of performance aimed at the spectator."[30]

That is why, according to Florensky, perspective was in fact begotten by theatrics, the scientific scenographic explanation of an illusion, *screening* away the "light of existence" which was based on Vitruvius's definition of *Scenografia,* as *omnium linearum ad circini centrum reponsus*,[31] Panofsky's "centre of projection' of the eye. This is debatably defined as 'the correspondence of all lines to the vanishing point, which is the centre of a circle."[32] This idea of theatrical screen or veil-window defined linear perspective's role in radically changing the course of

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[27] Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," 209. These questions were also debated by Hans Belting in his book *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[28] Holquist, *Dialogism*, 164.

[29] Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Reader,* ed. Philip Rose (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 286-287; Iversen, "The Discourse of Perspective," 195.

[30] Iversen, "The Discourse of Perspective," 196.

[31] Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 38.

[32] John Hendrix, *Platonic Architectonics: Platonic Philosophies and the Visual Arts* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 28. For a detailed debate on this definition see Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 97-100.

painting from a status of metaphysical contemplation into one of an Aristotelian narrative story-telling.

Florensky believed that the Renaissance veil approach is precisely that border which *prohibits* the "seeing" of truth. It creates the "limit"[33] as against the icon's "dialogic uncompleted openness." Here Florensky challenges Leon Battista Alberti's (1404-1472) definition of composition in *De Pictura* as a relationship between "bodies," "members," and "surfaces" together combined to depict *historia. Historia* demands the use of linear single point perspective due to its narrative. Florensky's contemplation and Bakhtin's dialogism do not. The arrangement within the compositional pictorial space or on the picture plane became concerned with the idea of the narrative, and here the Western philosophy of perspective played the dominant role.[34]

In a rather strange manner Henri Matisse's (1869-1954) definition of composition (which has been here gleaned from various parts of the French artist's seminal essay) comes, if one delves deeper and re-qualifies Matisse's terms "decorative" and "condensation," weirdly close to Florensky's, albeit with a different approach, confronting the positivist philosophy prevalent in contemporary Europe:

> ...the art of arranging, in a decorative manner, the diverse elements at the painter's command to express his feelings, by condensing the meaning to its essential lines for a truer more essential character which the artist will seize so that he may give to reality a more lasting interpretation by realising a work that carries within itself its complete significance and impose that upon the beholder even before he recognises the subject matter for a soothing calming influence.[35]

Florensky's and Matisse's ideas of composition are here in dialogue. It is fascinating to sense how, as we shall see later, Florensky's multi-perspectival philosophy borders on that of Cubism whilst his idea of ontological composition is Matissean. In his pivotal essay, Florensky unfortunately did not deal with the construction of perspective through colour, except when he dealt with colour as "celestial sign."[36]

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[33] Holquist, *Dialogism*, 26.

[34] Charles Hope, "Composition, from Cennini and Alberti to Vasari," *Pictorial Composition from Medieval to Modern Times,* ed. Paul Taylor and François Quiviger (London: Warburg Institute, 2001), 27-44.

[35] Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter," *Art in Theory: 1900-2000. An Anthology of Changing Ideas,* ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 69-75.

[36] Pavel Florensky, "Celestial Signs: Reflections on the Symbolics of Colours," *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. Nicoletta Misler, trans. Wendy Salmond (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 119-122.

Sacrificing God: A Piece of Steel and a Magnet as Seen Through a *camera obscura*

The separation between aggregate space and Euclidian-Kantian systematic space, the oxymoronic separation from the window-veil illusion and transcendental concrete metaphysical truth, which provokes the severance of perspective from its spiritual dimension and finally displaced by the narrative triggered a further separation between figural composition and the narrative itself resulting in the dominance of the former, figural composition.

François Quiviger was quite correct when he stated that "the Battle of Cascina was perceived as a figural composition rather than as the expression of a Florentine military victory over the Pisans."[37]

This total disjointing between concrete metaphysics, truth, and perspective, opened the way for the Western approach of art that established the idea of the *decoration* of the narrative in the broadest sense of the term.

Thus, whereas painting *ought to* be truth of being, the Heideggerean *alatheia* proposing a "profound penetration of its architectonics, of its material, of its meaning,"[38] painting-as-decoration, is a lie, albeit maybe a beautiful one *replacing* reality, a façade of reality which displaces the truth of *being,* a façade which is based on empirical scientific positivist abstracted truth ushered in by the Enlightenment but which however loses the universal concrete *interconnectedness* with Man's being and the holistic spiritual reality. The scholastic *huperouranios topos* (place beyond the heavens) is transposed into the rationalist Renaissance *natura naturata* (nature/reality already created). A place beyond the heavens has been transformed into empirical nature, "detheologised."[39]

Florensky parallels Panofsky's *natura naturata* with his critical analysis of linear perspective as:

> ...a method ... which results from a Weltanschauung in which the real basis for half-real, things-notions is admitted to be a certain kind of subjectivity which is itself devoid of reality ... an expression of meonism (the non-existent/ nothing) and impersonalism, usually called 'naturalism' and 'humanism'- the trend that emerged with the end of Medieval realism and co-centrism.[40]

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[37] François Quiviger, "Imagining and Composing Stories in the Renaissance," *Pictorial Composition from Medieval to Modern Art,* ed. Paul Taylor and François Quiviger (London: Warburg Institute, 2001), 55.

[38] Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," 209.

[39] Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 66.

[40] Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," 264.

Whereas mankind's pathos in Medieval-Theophilosophy was the rooting of reality within Mankind's essence as one's objectivity, the pathos of the new modern Mankind is precisely Mankind's *fugue* and escape from reality. This fugue called for a particular method of depiction relating to this very escape of man's subjectivity, that is Quattro and Cinquecento perspective, a fugue towards the illusion of the vanishing point, an escape through the *window*. One underlines "life's creative foundations" whereas the other "the imitation of life's surface."[41]

The living active man is replaced by a Beckettian "dead" spectator awaiting *nothing*. The Bakhtian *event* of existence, which in Russian *sobyitye* means "co-being," the "sharingness of being,"[42] is de-robed from its heteroglossic uniqueness.

> The world is understood as a single, indissoluble and impenetrable net of Kantian and Euclidean relationships, having their focus in the I of the observer of the world, but in such a way that this I is itself inactive and mirror-like, a certain imaginary focus on the world.[43]

A subjectivity devoid of reality: an "I" without the outsideness "it needs to perceive itself."[44] This transforms perspective from its character as a *Dasein* modality, in other words from its ontological spatial form of "being-here," the modality of "being-here" into a narrow technical invention of a formal depiction. Whilst agreeing with Hubert Damisch in his critique of scholars who treat perspective as:

> ...if it were nothing more than a nifty technical device for systematically creating an illusion of space, so that foreshortenings and the diminution of size of objects in depth all obey a common rule and conform to a single viewpoint, one cannot narrow down perspective solely to how it organises the way we think about art and its history.[45]

Perspective is not only a mode of, but also a modality of existence. It dialogistically organises the way we are. Florensky goes further and also studies the *chiaroscuro* effect. He here juxtaposes or rather challenges the Baroque *chiaroscuro* "naturalism" and "butchery-pile"[46] with the icon philosophy of its "distinctive distribution of shadows."[47]

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41   Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," 210.
42   Holquist, *Dialogism*, 25.
43   Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," 264.
44   Holquist, *Dialogism*, 35.
45   Margaret Iversen, "The Discourse of Perspective in the Twentieth Century: Panofsky, Damisch, Lacan," *Oxford Art Journal* 28, no. 2 (2005): 191-202.
46   Sohm, "Baroque Piles," 58-82.
47   Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," 206.

The iconist's deliberate artistic calculations include the overall distribution of light underlining quite distinctly an absence of a definite focus of light. Light emanates without creating the naturalist-earthly shadows. Icon light distribution does not comply with human optical laws. The iconist "writes" a whole atlas of contradictory illuminations throughout the icon space, projecting forward masses that should be in shadow. Spirituality, metaphysics, ontology cannot create shadows.

For radically different reasons, and on distinctly diverse grounds, one can also find quite a strong critique of 'shadow butchering' in painting in various Baroque writings: "...baroque tenebrist truncation in which the essential is obscured in favour of the incidental ... visual amputation...;"[48] "... dawn as the executioner who chops the neck of shadows with the axe of rays."[49] Whereas Florensky's critical analysis is entirely based on the question of Being and Truth, Baroque writings utilise parallel arguments for the enhancement of the same "illusionary window" Florensky is challenging.

Razdelka is the next vital category undertaken by the Russian philosopher. This plays a central role within the icon's "polycentredness." *Razdelka*, in plural *razdelki* (linear divisions), are specific lines painted (often metallic paints) in a different colour from the one used for the object and corresponding place, lines which do not reflect nor represent anything "physically seen:" "a powerful condenser of intangible forces," to appropriate Valentin Voloshinov's (1895-1936) terminology.[50]

Fascinatingly Florensky compares these lines to electric field or magnetic lines of force, but which, in the icon-world express a "metaphysical schema of the given object, its dynamic, with greater force than its visible lines are capable of."[51] Such lines compose the architectonic structure of the dialogic seeing-as-action, Bakhtin's "dynamic of the architectonic event."[52]

These lines, sort of lines of force, stemming from Posidonius's "universal vital force" which found its echo in Henri Bergson's (1859-1941) *élan vital* and "the flow of inner time *durée*," laterally direct the movement of the eyes as one contemplates the icon. Florensky underlines that:

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[48] J. J. de Lalande in Sohm, "Baroque Piles," 75.

[49] Flaminio Strada in ibid., 76.

[50] Renfrew, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 152.

[51] Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," 206.

[52] Renfrew, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 51.

> ...if an artist in depicting a magnet were to be satisfied with showing merely the visible aspect then he would be depicting not a magnet but merely a piece of steel: the real essence of the magnet - that is, its force-field - would go not only unrepresented but also unindicated. Clearly in depicting a magnet, both the field and the steel must be shown: but their depictions must also be incommensurate, showing that the magnet's two dimensions belong to two different planes. The steel could be shown in colour while the field must be depicted abstractly ... I dare not try to instruct the artist in how actually to represent this unmingled mingle of two planes of existence ...[53]

Florensky's defining light forces depicted in silver/gold are enriched by comparing them to the Arab-Islamic philosophy enveloping the *mushrabijja* line screen, which is also a radical negation of, and an alternative to, the Renaissance "painting as window screen."

> In the Islamic world a screen is built at [this] threshold that becomes a focus of artistic energy. The screen is porous, but not for the gaze ... rather it is porous for light, a shift that also reverses the direction between inside and outside.[54]

The *mushrabijja* is a reverse perception that is specifically created to provide an orchestration of light forces, a "polyphonic interpenetration" of light waves. It succeeds in generating a dialogic "here-there" relationship via transgredience, a *passing beyond*.[55]

Departing from Hans Belting's (b.1935) idea that this structure "is not for the gaze," I would requalify this statement by asserting that this is for a particular type of gaze. The screen philosophy is beautifully reflected in Matisse's colour belief as a source of light itself.

As in icon art, light emanates onto the viewer by means of these forces described by Florensky, just as light passing through the Arab screen, which is porous for light "but not for the gaze." Here we have an "orchestration of light" just as in the icon's polyphonic composition of colour. The window in this case is that which screens out light, "rather than a window as an opening,"[56] a "screening-out" by which light becomes form itself.

When such ontological essence is solely appropriated as a façade methodological means to embellish a surface, the result is an abuse of appropriation. Such a deep metaphysical rendition of forces can be transfigured

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[53] Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition* (London: Lund Humphries, 2008), 65.

[54] Belting, *Florence and Baghdad*, 253-254.

[55] Holquist, *Dialogism*, 33.

[56] Belting, *Florence and Baghdad*, 255.

into a decorative-ornamental stance, as can be seen in Emvin Cremona's (1919-1987) work at St Cajetan's Church (Ħamrun, Malta).

This does not mean that appropriation always leads to this decorative embellishment. The "interconnectedness" of acts of creation which compose an architectonic relationship of what Bakhtin terms as "authorshipness"[57] serves to pollinate a whole mosaic of different forms rendering such Florensky forces.

It is within such parameters that Florensky deals with "contour," "assist*," ozhivki*, *dvizhki*, *otmetiny*, *probeli* paralleling Bakhtin's multileveled "microdialogue within"[58] and which "accentuate all the irregularities that should not have been visible."[59] This brings Florensky's ideas close to the philosophy of Rayism*,* founded by Mikhail Larionov (1881-1964) and Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962).

Whereas the "contour" provides the architectonics which structures the relationship between the icon, the contemplative "viewer" and Yuri Kariakin's (1930-2011) "finger pointing toward the truth"[60] as Florensky's idea of reality, the "assist" which as Spira underlines is not only "a special gilding technique for areas of particular sacredness ... such as the robes of Christ, thereby investing the technique - resplendent fans of golden rays, called assist - with a special spiritual significance."[61]

This surely influenced Larionov's Rayist paintings,[62] who wrote how art should depict rays stemming from reality: "We perceive a sum of rays proceeding from a source of light; these are reflected from the object and enter our field of vision." This in fact replicates Florensky's idea of how the invincible realm's energies become comprehensible through sensory images.

Larionov continues underlying that "the style of Rayonnist painting that we advance signifies spatial forms which are obtained arising from the intersection of the reflected rays of various objects and forms chosen by the artist's will." Florensky's counterpoint here is that the energies' interaction depicted through such rays and contours compose an ontology of being and not just Larionov's "forms chosen by the artist's will."[63] In Florensky's words:

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[57] Holquist, *Dialogism*, 149-182.
[58] Emerson, *The First Hundred Years*, 152.
[59] Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," 207.
[60] Emerson, *The First Hundred Years*, 130; 153.
[61] Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon*, 64.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 136-141.

> ...the invincible realm somehow becomes comprehensible to us and, further, its primary energies become actualised into sensory images, energies whose interactions constitute the ontological skeleton of a thing. For yes, then we can say that the assist-lines are the lines of energy constituting the force-field that is the thing itself...[64]

Within such a multilevel perspective and interrelated polycentredness one feels the rich "storage" and the non-fortuitous character of such creation as against Larionov's artist-centred will.

How such perspective reflects the nature or essence of objects and reality however defined is the central debate in Florensky. These questions are integrally linked, obviously enough, with the meaning itself of perspective. This of course quite interestingly relates with the much discussed and debated idea that "perspective depicts the world as only the imagination can see it. It constructs the world for a symbolic gaze" unlike the Cassirer-Panofsky Kantian approach of defining it as a construction for and on *space* rather than *gaze*.[65]

One may thus debate whether perspective is only an artificial technical method, a tool, a representational scheme, a system of rules by which one may represent not one's world/reality applied solely for a particular historical "reception-perception." Is it just one of the other many methodological possibilities throughout the passage of human history, by which one may interpret reality: an interpretation amongst others?

Or, on the contrary, may one approach the question by qualifying perspective as a "multiplicity in human perception"[66] reflecting the realisation of a world-view which transcends empirical actuality? Perspective is, in fact, the architectonics of the I-Thou-Other relationship, if one can again introduce Bakhtin to the dialogue on Florensky.[67]

Florensky defines perspective as the "true word of the world" against the idea that it is just a particular orthography relative to what Michael Baxandall (1933-2008) calls the particular "period eye," to the particular culture, to the particular socio-economic structure, and to the particular society-in-history. How can it be related to a historic particular style-genre defined as a particular way of perceiving reality?[68]

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[64] Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon*, 64.
[65] Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 16.
[66] Holquist, *Dialogism*, 22.
[67] Emerson, *The First Hundred Years*, 214.
[68] Holquist, *Dialogism*, 163.

As the "true word of the world," perspective finds itself in a quite enigmatic and paradoxical situation since, debatably, "the reality of another's time/space is different from my own."[69] If this is correct, then how are we to integrate perspective with style-genre, particularly when one is aware that "perception can only be achieved from a unique point in the spectrum of possible perspectives?"[70]

Style-Genre is, in fact, a socio-economic-historic decision of how a certain particular period "chooses" a mode of correspondence between points on the surfaces of reality and the points on the canvas. Such a choice depends on the attitude to the world, depth of philosophy, and perception of life, which altogether define what reality is for a particular period and for a particular historical world-view. Panofsky rewords this by underlining that it is "essential to ask for artistic periods and regions, not only whether they have perspective, but also which perspective they have."[71]

In Florensky's words, "depending on the inner need of the soul, however, a certain principle of correspondence is selected by an epoch," with all the principle's corresponding peculiarities. These particularities form *style-genre* and *manner.* The creator, who for many reasons absorbs this correspondence, is in a position to state the period's *Zeitgeist* through a corresponding *Weltanschauung.*

Florensky understood that Renaissance Humanist philosophy and psychology, amongst other things, were based on the belief that no knowledge is possible without sensation. This Renaissance combination, provided by the relationship between five external senses and "common sense," the combination of perception and cognition which, whilst provoking mental images as compounds of sensations, demanded the depiction of reality within a disciplined structure of sensory, even if illusionary, perspective.[72] This is what Florensky challenges.

Florensky counterpoints this by his six sub-textual categories, vital for the understanding of perspective and without which such perspective is only an illusion, as Renaissance perspective is. Florensky attempts to prove his main contention recalling Seneca and King Lear that "nothing is more deceiving than our eyesight."

The Renaissance philosophy of perspective, according to the Russian philosopher, is not only an illusion, a lie, but it also is "extremely narrow, extremely limited, hampered by a host of vital supplementary" and derivative

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69 Ibid., 166.
70 Ibid., 164.
71 Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 41.
72 Quiviger, "Imagining and Composing Stories," 46-48.

conditions without which it cannot function.[73] He starts by challenging the belief that space of the real world is a Euclidean space defining space as an objective and absolute space. Such Euclidean space is isotropic: it contains the same value when measured from different directions and not varying in magnitude. It is homogeneous, infinite, and boundless, encapsulated within the parameters of a three-dimensionality of a zero curvature.[74]

Florensky counter proposes a space which is not Euclidean, and not unitary but, on the contrary, multivalent, composed of differing "degrees" of rhythmic "extensity" to be grasped only if one defines perspective as "creative intuition."[75] Space perception is based on what is known as Nikolai Lobachevsky's (1792-1856) space *hyperbole* categories.

Furthermore, Florensky subverts the idea that there is only one exceptional and exclusive point of reference, "occupied by the artist himself," a monarchical point, and thus going against Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857-1913) "Mount Jura single vantage point"[76] and paralleling Bakhtin's multiple "chronotopic difference" and "simultaneity." The so-called royal view-point is precisely the centre of the world. It is from here that one encloses Kantian absolute space. It is also believed to be Being's *executive* and perceived from, and by *one* cyclopic eye.

"It is the centre that legislates the universe,"[77] forgetting however that "we see not with a single fixed eye but with two constantly moving eyes, resulting in a spheroidal field of vision" and that the "retinal image is a projection not on a flat but on a concave surface."[78] Reality thus is believed to be perceived through the absolutist throne of a mechanical *camera obscura*. A minimal change in position would cause the whole unity of the perspectival construction to shatter and fall apart.

Reverse-inverse perspective on the contrary is allowing, as discussed above, a multi-changing view-point that encompasses a hierarchical informative structure.[79] The narrowness and limitations of perspectival representation, according to Florensky, is enhanced by the belief that all reality and being are thought of as immovable and unchanging, static and immutable: a *dead world*,

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[73] Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," 261.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Boris Viktorovich Raushenbakh, *Prostrnastvenniye Postroyeniya v Zhivopisi* (Moscow: Nauka, 1980), 102-103.

[76] Holquist, *Dialogism*, 44.

[77] Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," 262.

[78] Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 31.

[79] Boris Viktorovich Raushenbakh, *Prostranstvenniye Postroyeniya v Zhivopisi* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo 'Nauka', 1980), 130-132.

and, in his own words, "a picture frozen in its ice-bound immobility."[80] This element induced Damisch to claim, quite similarly to Florensky, that Quattro-Cinquencento perspective is

> anti-Humanist [which] reduces man to an eye and the eye to a point, and to the Cartesian subject - itself a sort of geometrical point ... the subject is reduced to a point, the Cogito, and separated by an abyss from extended substance.[81]

This brings such perspective close to the idea of a photographic image of the world (the Zeno arrow paradox) which demands an act, or rather a non-act, of mental cognitive passivity by and of the viewer. Florensky is here harking us back to the Zeno/Parmenides and Heraclitus debate and paradoxes, and at the same time to the Bergson/Einstein debate so contemporary to him:[82] a debate one can also find in the Cubist's writings of the time, and particularly in Albert Gleizes (1881-1953) and Jean Metzinger's (1883-1956) *Du Cubism.*

As does Florensky, both artists underline that space is curved, malleable, irregular, and changing, Bakhtian "open-ended" and "unfinalised." Space is infinite and is itself an infinite number of dimensions, with figures and realities changing according to their relative position.

Florensky also challenges and confronts the idea that all psycho-physiological processes so vital to antique art[83] are to be excluded from the act of seeing, from the act of perceiving and from the corresponding representation. Thus, the very act of seeing together with the act of perceiving is barred from all other interacting and interpenetrating heteroglossic actions; that of memory, from all spiritual acts and forces, and from the act of consciousness and awareness. The *magnet* is debarred from its own magnetic forces.

Panofsky underlined this debarring in his *Perspective as Symbolic Form* when he stated that "perspective transforms psychophysiological space into mathematical space"[84] making one forget that the very act of seeing is an act hegemonically conditioned. Kepler himself termed this fact when he emphasised that one has to *be schooled* into linear perspectival construction.[85] Here one cannot by-pass Henri Poincaré's (1854-1912) revolutionary geometry. Poincaré believed that space relations are relativist and these have a psycho-physical origin and are hence

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[80]   Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," 263.

[81]   Iversen, "The Discourse of Perspective," 199.

[82]   Jimena Canales, *The Physicist & The Philosopher* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[83]   Iversen, "The Discourse of Perspective," 196.

[84]   Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 31.

[85]   Ibid., 34.

not an absolute reflection of external reality. There is no Kantian a priori category of a three-dimensional space. Geometry is only an accorded construction of the mind, an argument that does recall Saussure's parallelisms and radical ideas on linguistics and semiology. According to Florensky:

> ...if the six aforesaid conditions are observed, then, and only then, does the correspondence which a perspectival picture wants to convey between the points on the skin of the world and the points of a representation become possible. But even if one of the aforementioned six conditions is not observed in its entirety, then this aspect of the correspondence becomes impossible and then the perspective will then inevitably be destroyed.[86]

Juxtaposing these six categories with the birth of Cubism and other twentieth-century art movements introduces a quite intriguing aspect on Florensky's philosophy of perspective. His philosophy provides quite a sharp complementary parallel to Cubism and Rayism as discussed above. Cubism's "multi-view," "multi-experience," "perpetual successive moments," "accumulation" and "repetition" is clear for all. Although in his *The Meaning of Idealism*, Florensky criticised Pablo Picasso's (1881-1973) "cubism as geometric experiments from the poisoned soul of a great artist."[87]

Both Cubism's and Florensky's ideas harbour an intriguing overlapping philosophy of *Time* and *Space*.[88] Such parallelism does not stop at Poincaré or at Bergson whose ideas were so deeply embraced by the major Cubist artists. This relationship was already dealt with by Alexei Grishchenko (1883-1977) in 1913.[89] It also harked for a novel return to archaic truth epitomised by some authentic archetypal form. The two paths believed that 'in searching for a new model of artistic culture that was both objective and absolute, some avant-garde artists may have become sensitive to universal or archetypal forms and configurations that lay dormant in the national sub-consciousness:

> ... Florensky describes how the use of reverse perspective in icons corresponds to a metaphysical perception of reality as it is, in contrast to the naturalistic perspective of western art which attempts to rationalise the world, reducing it

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[86] Florensky, "Reverse Perspective," 263.

[87] Nicoletta Misler, "Pavel Florensky as Art Historian," *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. Nicoletta Misler, trans. Wendy Salmond (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 59.

[88] Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighten, *Cubism and Culture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 64-110.

[89] Alexei Grishchenko, *Misli Zhivopistsa o Sviaziakh Ruskoi Shivopisi s Vizantiei i Zapadom XIII-XXv,* (Moscow, Gorodskaia tip., 1913).

to the level of a human being's ability to perceive it ... men here become mere observers...[90]

Bakhtin similarly believed that in the "undying elements of the archaic ... these archaic elements are preserved ... only thanks to their constant renewal, which is to say, their contemporization."[91] Such archetypal forms can be unearthed solely on the rubble of the present becoming past. Let's remember Panofsky's positivistic words paralleling Florensky's metaphysical ones, when:

> ...work on certain artistic problems has advanced so far that further work in the same direction ... appears unlikely to bear fruit, the result is often a great recoil ... a reversal of direction. Such recoils ... 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.[92]

With such an insightful sharp awareness, it is surprising that Panofsky does not seem to accept the role of pre-Renaissance perspective. Whilst defining antique perspective as primitive, he stops short from his own conclusion quoted above, that one must turn back and abandon what has already been achieved "to turn back to more primitive modes." Unfortunately enough, he *seems* to be unaware of Florensky's diametrically opposed approach, in particular of the Russian philosopher's challenge against the Kantian constructive rationalisation of space.[93]

Florensky proposed that solely via inverse perspective can one attain the depiction of an ontological truth of our being sustained through the complete architectonics of a geometrical structure which webs the entire *Dasein* of our existence. This was the whole idea behind a complex and rigid mathematical structure composing the whole iconic depiction with *svitki* and *podlinniki* and *zastavitsa* which were, and still are, considered as sacred writings and geometric *bozzetti*, *copiati e ricopiati da generazioni* by the enlightened icon-creator (*znamenitili*).[94]

One finds such sacred ontological geometry and proportions not only in icon art but also in Islamic art, in which the *Divine Principle* is enveloped within infinite layers of hidden interflows, encompassing everything through symmetry

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[90]   Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon*, 70.
[91]   Holquist, *Dialogism*, 126.
[92]   Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 47.
[93]   Iversen, "The Discourse of Perspective," 196.
[94]   Egon Sendler, *L'Icona: Immagine dell'Invisibile* (Pisa: Edizioni Paoline, 1985), 86-87; Guillem Ramos-Poquí, *The Technique of Icon Painting* (Kent: Search Press, 1997), 60-63.

and harmony that can only be grasped by a particular kind of perspective.[95] Perspective here is established by the linkage between sensible geometry which leads to technical structures, and intelligible geometry which would lead to intellectual arts, 'the root to all knowledge.'[96]

Geometry and perspective, far from being technicalities, are regarded as spiritual functions. This is beautifully explained by Laleh Bakhtiar in her study of the tomb of *Imamzada 'Abdullah* (Farsajin), in which:

> ...in the same way that planar surface patterns exhibit cosmic norms and archetypal geometries, the tombs enshrine these same geometries and symbols in three-dimensional form - the cycles of time and space frozen in matter indicating a timelessness and unbounded space which transcends the wear and tear of worldly existence.[97]

Florensky's icon philosophy echoes the Islamic concept of the Door-Way *da ira 'ala,* that is the door threshold, not a Quattro-Cinquecento window through which an eye looks passively, but a perspectival path, Bakhtin's "event, created by sensible geometry to affect man's perceptual awareness of the experience on entering another state of consciousness."[98]

This "entering another state of consciousness" by the means of intelligible and spiritual geometry is, I believe, achieved by Mark Rothko (1903-1970) with his simple linear asymmetrical-symmetrical minimalist axial-radial octagonal chapel (1971)[99] for which perspectival path Barnett Newman (1905-1970), probably unaware of any Florensky-Panofsky-Bakhtian link, proposed his own inverse-reflective *Broken Obelisk* (1963-1967).[100] Axial symmetry dialogue with specular reflection and refraction immerses the "I" into a space of inverse perspective.

It is vital to remember here that whereas even for Damisch perspective can be defined as a structural "sentence" which "systematically organises material and positions" an "I" over against a correlative "you," for Florensky perspective is a

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[95]   Mikhail Aleksandrovich Marutaev, "O Garmonii Kak Zakonomernosti," *Printsip Simmetrii: Istoriko-Metodologicheskie Problemi* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo Nauka, 1978), 363-395.

[96]   Keith Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns: An Analytic and Cosmological Approach* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 70-102.

[97]   Laleh Bakhtiar, *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 100.

[98]   Ibid., 102.

[99]   Sheldon Nodelman, *The Rothko Chapel Paintings: Origins, Structure, Meaning* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 250.

[100]   Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Rothko* (Cologne: Taschen, 2003), 73-75.

modality for meditative metaphysics which he found encapsulated in the icon, and which I also find in Rothko.

In another peculiar way, and at first glance seemingly paradoxical, Florensky's philosophy is deeply close to Malevich's (1879-1935). In direct parallel with Florensky, Malevich was seeking to realise that state of consciousness in which the truth about reality is expressive of itself, not requiring the prisms of art and the mind to mediate on its behalf. In the context of the Orthodox tradition, St Gregory Palamas (c.1296-1357/59) also acknowledged that knowledge of the Divine is not attained through manipulation of self or circumstance but that it arises gracefully beyond the mind, as a function of reality: "If all intellectual activity has stopped, how could angels and angelic men see God except by the power of the Spirit?"[101]

This stripping away of intellectual thought, the cessation of all intellectual activity, thoughtlessness would lead us finally to what Malevich termed as the surrendering *the motive and concept of art* and Florensky's *sacrificing God as an object of mind or thought*,[102] and thus ultimately to the divine contemplation of silence.

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[101] Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon*, 61-62; 147.
[102] Ibid., 147.