Hubert Damisch

The Origin of Perspective

translated by John Goodman

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
Perspective is not a code.

There are paradigms and paradigms.

The "purpose" of so-called scientific perspective.

Panofsky and the avant-garde in 1925.

Merleau-Ponty and the watchword of a return to primitive thought.

Wittgenstein: a new "sensation."

Perspective as myth, or how to get rid of it.

Space according to reason.
Perspective, a Thing of the Past?

To treat perspective under the rubric of symbolism is to enter into a dilemma, which Cassirer described perfectly and which can be reduced, as we have seen, to a choice between two hypotheses, one of which I would designate as strong and the other weak. Either the analysis will succeed in exposing the element or principle operative in the form of "perspective" as it does that of every other symbolic form—at which point it will have satisfied the demands of the project to establish a morphology or general grammar of the symbolic function, perspective being one of its components. Or it will fail—and focus should be shifted to a (regional, specialized) history that would retrace the genesis and evolution of this form and describe its successive manifestations, assessing their various cultural implications but never really confronting the question of the status of the form of "perspective" in the symbolic order.

At first glance the "strong" hypothesis (which is that of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms) has against it, since we are dealing here with perspectiva artificialis, that it is difficult to see how the latter would be accessible to an analysis using the notion of the sign, rigorously construed. Although it managed, over an extended historical time frame, to appropriate for its graphic ends a set of objects essentially borrowed from architecture—aediculae, architectonic elements, colonnades, coffered ceilings, and vaults in recession, not to forget the pavement divided into squares that was the foundation of costruzione legittima, study of whose trace lines would eventually lead to the discovery of the vanishing point, according to Panofsky's argument—perspective is not a language, in Saussure's sense of a system of distinct signs that correspond to distinct ideas. But neither is it a code, at least not a numerical one, deploying a finite number of discrete elements. A brake and a guide for painting (briglia e timone della pittura, to cite
Raphael, Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia, ca. 1515-16.
Bologna, Pinacoteca Nationale. Photo: Giraudon.
Leonardo$^1),$ of which she is the daughter but which she in turn demonstrates, perspective only has a generative function in some secondary sense. Its purpose is not to facilitate the production of statements, of pictorial propositions. Its value is essentially reflexive and regulatory—which suffices to define a certain regime of painting, if not of representation. Thus there is no need to feign astonishment at the relatively small number of quattrocento works evincing strict perspectival construction; any more than to dwell on the fact that sixteenth-century painting seems to have veered away from the "exercises in perspective" dear to quattrocento artists, viewing them as the expression of a passing fashion. As a paradigm or regulatory structure, perspective is sometimes in operation precisely where one least expects it, where its intervention is least visible. If such is the case, it is because—as I've already suggested—the goal of costruzione legittima is not restricted to regulation of the diminution and conjugation of figures within the perspectival tableau; its function as a paradigm extends much further, or deeper, providing painters with a network of indexes that constitutes—I posit this hypothesis again—the equivalent of an expressive apparatus or sentence structure, one corresponding—in Cassirer's terms—to the symbolic element that is fundamental to the form of "perspective." Eventually the play of the paradigm makes itself felt through only a few coherent benchmarks (to which the notion of the sign is pertinent, but on another level and, if I may say, within a different perspective than that of the system, whose reversal, or relapse, it would represent), and eventually reference to the model assumes the deceptive character of, if not its repression or denial, then its explicit negation, which demands to be interpreted as such.

I will cite one among the many possible examples. Marisa Dalai has shown how the formal organization of the Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia by Raphael seems to have been devised so as, on the one hand, to impede any effect of depth suggested by the vedute between the heads of the figures, which open onto the surrounding landscape, and, on the other, to accommodate the foreshortened musical instruments scattered across the foreground: the compact mass of draped figures framing the saint creates a screen blocking all escape into the background, while the geometric construction of the objects

does not conform to the constraints of any single viewpoint. A signal example of the negation of the paradigm to rhetorical purpose, namely representation of how the saint, to paraphrase Baldassare Castiglione, "having become blind to terrestrial things, had eyes only for celestial ones." But Cecilia does not see the angel musicians appearing behind her on a gold cloud. She hears them, whereas, according to conditions of presentation usually holding for altar paintings, the high horizon line, the difference in scale between the foreground objects and smaller angels, and even the breach cut into the chromatic intensity of the deep blue sky should all contribute, whatever Marisa Dalai may say, to an effect of a perspectival da sotto in su, one all the more fully controlled for falling within the edges of a painting as opposed to spreading over the expanse of a ceiling or cupola. The paradigm does not cease to operate here; on the contrary, its double negation is equivalent to an affirmation and corroborates Panofsky, who maintained that perspective opened up an entire new realm for religious art, that of the "vision" as understood in its most exalted sense, and which, though taking place within the soul of the depicted personage, is made tangible to the viewer as a disruption of prosaic space.

"Paradigm": the word, as I've stated, can be a source of confusion, given the ways it has been used in the history of science. If, like Thomas Kuhn, one understands the term to designate a model of scientific practice which is installed as normative at the beginning of a coherent tradition, as was the case with Ptolomaic astronomy or Newtonian mechanics, then there's nothing to prevent us from treating perspectiva artificialis, painter's perspective, under an analogous rubric, without prejudicing its relations with the geometric optics of the ancients and perspectiva naturalis of the medieval period. But if one understands by it no more than a constellation of ideas and notions, of beliefs and prejudices that impose their law, in a given period, on all production in the field of science and thought generally, as in that of

---

art, the temptation will be great to view \textit{perspectiva artificialis} as only a conventional form of presentation perfectly suited to the times in which it was devised. Such that Samuel Edgerton could write, ignoring the fundamental question of the \textit{Philosophy of Symbolic Forms} as well as Kuhn's real understanding of the notion of "paradigm," "the words 'convention' and 'symbolic form' signify only [as regards Renaissance linear perspective] that artists of that time sought out and practiced this construction in response to specific cultural demands within the Renaissance paradigm";\textsuperscript{5} the same author assures us that the "mechanical structure" of this paradigm was finally determined by Newton, without evincing the slightest concern over the gap of three centuries separating the initial experiments of Brunelleschi from the articulation of the principles of Newtonian physics, not to mention the scientific revolution having transpired in the interim.

However crude it might be, the ultimately Hegelian approach adopted, as we've seen, by Panofsky enabled him to posit an analogous parallel between the history of \textit{perspectiva artificialis} and that of other cultural formations, beginning with art, the field in which it first attracted attention through the creation of spectacular effects, but which manifestations simultaneously stimulated intellectual work incontrollable within the bounds of any particular discipline. If a priori one considers a given civilization or culture to be an expressive totality, with each of its composite parts functioning as a kind of reduced matrix of the whole, the question of the systematic articulation of their diverse manifestations is resolved in advance. History—as too often happens even in contexts quite removed from the Hegelian tradition—can then take the place of "theory," it having only to produce the elements of the synthesis in accordance with which the period was organized, and this without reference to a "vision of the world" or any specific "mode of production."

The sign would here recover its cognitive rights to the extent that perspective construction could be considered the "sign" of an historical conjecture, which would find there its symbolic expression in the context of which it would have to be studied. As already noted, it's certainly not my intention to deny the relevance of a historical approach to the problem any

\textsuperscript{5} Samuel Edgerton, \textit{The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective}, New York, 1975, p. 162.
more than the interest of contextual studies (which presuppose, however disagreeable Edgerton might find this, a minimum of erudition as is evidenced by the chapters he himself devoted to contemporary developments in cartography as they relate to the translation, in early fifteenth century Florence, of Ptolemy's *Geography*). But there is a great danger of treating perspective as just one object among others, if not as a simple product or effect, whereas it interests us here primarily as something that is *productive* of effects, insofar as its capacity, its power to inform extends well beyond the limits of the era in which it was born. Without any doubt, our period is much more massively "informed" by the perspective paradigm, thanks to photography, film, and now video, than was the fifteenth century, which could boast of very few "correct" perspective constructions. But evolutionism precludes our regarding these as anything more than simple survivors or archaic holdovers, even positively prohibiting us from thinking them in any other terms: when new ideas come to light, when new demands assert themselves to which a culture cannot respond in the terms already available to it, the "paradigm" should cede its place to another that is better adapted to them. If one holds that the theory of relativity signaled the fall of the reigning paradigm, the following conclusion is unavoidable: just as linear perspective provided the set of conventions best suited to that representation of "truth" prevalent in the Renaissance, "it is widely agreed [I am quoting Edgerton] that Cubism and its derivative forms in modern art are in the same way the proper pictorial means for representing the "truth" of the post-Einsteinian paradigm."7

Such a remark would make us smile, if it weren't so consistent with statements frequently made by cubism's epigones, with the partial exception that critical literature of the 1920s more often referred to so-called noneuclidean geometries than to the theory of relativity per se, which resisted fantastic translations into the visual order. Panofsky himself would later cede to this fashion of his period, of which "parallel chronologies" were the ultimate expression: in his great book on early Netherlandish painting, he went so far as to state that perspective construction "formalizes a conception of space which, in spite of all changes, underlies all postmedi-

---

6. Ibid., chapters 7 and 8.
7. Ibid., p. 162.
eval art up to, say, the Demoiselles d'Avignon by Picasso (1907), just as it underlies all postmedieval physics up to Einstein's theory of relativity (1905).”

Roland Barthes has described his bemused irritation at radio broadcasts proposing circumstantial connections of the kind “1789: convocation of the Estates General; departure of Necker; Concerto for Strings no. IV in C Minor by B. Galuppi,” thereby suggesting to the general public the idea of a one-to-one correspondence between history and works of art. But what are we to make then of a statement such as Panofsky's, which places the art of the Renaissance and the âge classique or the Baroque, and all modern science as well, from Galileo to Newton, from Desargues to Jean Poncelet, under the rubric of an aftermath, or—to use Panofsky's own term—of the prefix "post" (and, what's worse, as it's used in the term "postmedieval")?

It is not a matter of chance that studies of perspective enjoyed their greatest vogue at a moment in which it might have seemed that modern art had definitively turned away from it, as a result of its determination—as Malevitch put it—to "make paintings" rather than painting objects and "repeating nature," and the current revival of interest in it is symptomatic too. It is all the more remarkable to observe that in the heat of the battle for abstraction, in his discussion of it Panofsky chose to ignore something that his deliberately historicizing approach to the problem should have placed center stage, namely the rupture effected in the pictorial order by Cézanne. This would have entailed him, as a good neo-Kantian, to begin by undermining the pretense of so-called central perspective to restore an image of the objective world, showing its value to be entirely relative and strictly conjunctural, on the basis of pseudoscientific considerations borrowed form the physiology of vision, before dealing, in a note that must have been added to the final pages of his study very late, with avant-garde debates whose echoes reached him from Berlin or elsewhere, notably in an article by El Lissitzky published in 1925. If we are to believe Lissitzky, antique

perspective limited and enclosed space, apprehending it, in conformity with the postulates of Euclid as a "rigid tri-dimensionality." Shattering one-point perspective into a thousand pieces, contemporary art, in its futurist guise, was said to have broken with this delimiting notion of space to arrive, under the banner of suprematism and neoplasticism, at representing intervals of depth not extensively, and by means of foreshortening, but—joining forces here with new ideas in psychology—intensively through the juxtaposition of colored fields of different values and tonalities. Though (like the author of the *prouns* himself) he said not a word about the problem posed by the resort, in paintings, to so-called axonometric perspective, in which the vanishing point is cast into the infinite, with "orthogonals" transformed into groups of parallel lines on the surface, Panofsky nonetheless observed that the way chosen by Lissitzky, the conquest of an "imaginary space" engendered by the rotation or balancing of mechanically manipulated volumes, was altogether consistent with a euclidean framework—as are today the optical deformations and transformations possible in electronic images, a fact that bears witness to the continuing productivity of two- and three-dimensional geometry, if not of perspective itself at the end of the century which began under the sign of the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* and the theory of relativity.

While Panofsky says nothing about Cézanne, it was contemplation of this painter's work that led a philosopher like Maurice Merleau-Ponty to question the nature of the ascendancy of the perspectival apparatus over perception and to query the conditions in which painting might succeed in getting free of it so as to effect a return to the amorphous perceptive world that is its perpetual raw material, rather like philosophy as conceived by Husserl would do. The philosopher openly avowed that Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form* and the classic analysis of Cézanne's work by Fritz Novotny, *Cézanne and the End of Scientific Perspective*, had influenced his own reflections in important respects. It was from Panofsky, as much as Novotny (Cézanne is another matter, one to which I will return subsequently), that he borrowed the idea of perspective as "cultural artifact." But in the "working notes" published by Claude Lefort as an appendix to the unfinished essay *The Visible and the Invisible*, the question of the means by which one might revert from a perception shaped by culture to a "crude," "primitive" perception is explicitly raised. And this question, cutting through the mirages of historicism and relativism, goes right to the heart of the problem: "Of what does information consist? By what act can it be unravelled?"  

The idea that perspective could inform perception, orienting it so completely that it shed its polymorphic character to become "euclidean," encourages one to think that the model's power could not be measured by the visible effects it has left in the field of art, any more than by its explicit impact in the realm of verbal discourse. It is perception itself, and not representations employing the means of art and discourse, that would be necessary to liberate from the rule of the perspective paradigm. Without doubt, any thesis according to which *culture informs perception in a way that allows us to say that culture is perceived* is circular, though it is advocated by any analyst pretending to acknowledge, in a period's artistic production the expression of a vision of the world whose very concepts it would determine.

---

But in the case of perspective the information is not reducible to a historical given, nor to a stylistic trait. Certainly Merleau-Ponty was not disposed to admit that the privileged status of what he called "euclidean perception" was an effect derivative of "pregnance," in the sense used in the psychology of form and which expresses itself, as Jean Piaget asserted, as controlled compensation for the deformations to which perceptual structures are subject. In his eyes, as in those of Panofsky, whom he would have been among the first to read in France, the privileged status of linear perspective was far from absolute, but it still struck him as revelatory of the fashion in which perception misapprehended itself, to such a point that, whether termed "life," "natural perception," or the "savage mind," it is prone to put the immanent universe in its place, tending of itself toward autonomy, reducing the transcendent status claimed by the euclidean world for itself to that of one of its many aspects. "The key is in this idea that perception qua wild perception is of itself ignorant of itself, imperception, tends of itself to see itself as an act and to forget itself as latent intentionality, as being at—." Or to put it another way (though, as Merleau-Ponty emphasized, this is another way of phrasing the "same problem"): "how every philosophy is language and nonetheless consists in rediscovering silence." 13

I will not here address the question of what it might mean to speak of a "euclidean" perception, or of a vision "informed" by perspective, a perspective—I am still citing Merleau-Ponty—that would correspond to an "adult vision" as well as to "the invention of a world that is dominated and possessed, through and through, in an instantaneous synthesis" 14 a vision in the first person that is coherent, that evinces mastery, and that would imply as its condition the position of a subject that could eventually reclaim it for its own, as its own property, its own representation. I will only point out that those who, like Ernst Gombrich, dismiss this idea, see nothing contra-

13. "La clé est dans cette idée que la perception est de soi ignorance de soi comme perception sauvage, imperception, tend de soi à se voir comme acte et à s'oublier comme intentionnalité latente, comme être a—"; "Comment touce philosophie est langage et consiste cependant à retrouver le silence." Ibid., pp. 266–67; English trans., p. 213.
dictory in conceiving of perception as an active process of selection, decoding, and anticipation. Merleau-Ponty had no objection to this, provided one knew how to discern, beneath the information, the operation of language and its discriminating systems, and took note of the fact that it is inherent in the perceived to be always already there, to be not the product of the act of perception but its reason—as, in his view, the overarching project of philosophy should be to renew contact with the world as “significant being” (sens d’être) absolutely distinct from that which is represented.

In its capacity as the subject of a praxis, the subject of perspective appears to be bound up with a logocentric rationality by means of which the teleology of “natural light” is converted into an ideal entity, there where the perceiving subject demands, on the contrary, to be described “as a tacit, silent Being-at...” the self of perception as ‘nobody,’ like Ulysses, an anonymous one drowning in the world but who has yet to make his way through it. Nobody as imperception, evidence of nonpossession: it is precisely because one knows too well what one is dealing with that one has no need to posit it as object. Thus it is the cogito that we must persist in trying to “start over”: this same cogito of which Lacan thought the perspective configuration offered an analogon, an imaginary version, if not a mute one. But it would be going too far to speak of a “tacit cogito,” a notion that is implicitly a contradiction in terms, as Merleau-Ponty himself noted, after Ludwig Wittgenstein. It is the very question of subject and object, of transcendence, of intersubjectivity, of nature, that must be thought through anew. As Jacques Bouveresse has observed, this Husserlian project of reduction in many respects resembles that of Wittgenstein, who also posited the idea of a descriptive philosophy, of a phenomenology setting itself the task of destroying the cardinal concepts of metaphysics: “subject,” “transcendental signified,”

17. Ibid., p. 272; English trans., p. 219.
19. "... comme Etre-à tacite, silenceux..."—le soi de la perception comme ‘personne,’ au sens d’Ulysse, comme l’anonyme enfoui dans le monde et qui n’y a pas encore tracé son sillage. Personne comme imperception, evidence de non-possession: c’est justement parce qu’on sait trop bien de quoi il s’agit qu’on n’a pas besoin de le poser en ob-ject.” Ibid., pp. 254-55; English trans., p. 201.
"essence," etc. But Wittgentsstein's horror of the pathos of initiation, of commencement, of origins, his view that any attempt to return to silence by means of language and philosophy was absurd, these suffice to make him the anti-Husserl par excellence. In his view it is language, not the perceived, that is always already there: all statements (beginning with cogito ergo sum) should be comprehensible by others if the speaking subject (who is at one with what is spoken) himself understands it. Such that all "vision" should be sharable by others if the "subject" can see: there is no vision that is not accessible to some possible description or designation, as well as simultaneously ascribable to a given distance and a given point of view as the very condition of vision. Just as there is no private property in language, there is none in perception: the very idea of a "perspective" contradicts such a notion. The problem then is how to distinguish that which is perceived from that which is represented. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence: but can't we try, if not to show it ("Don't look at my finger, look in the direction in which it is pointing"), at least to derive some sense of it, in such a way that language might articulate its silence, and discourse gain access to it?

Merleau-Ponty considered all of these objections, and more than once, as can be seen from his working notes. "Raw," "primitive" perception must be invented: it only remains to determine what role language is to play in this "invention." Wittgenstein maintained that the discovery of the "optic chamber" had led to a new way of speaking, a "new comparison," and, if one can say this, a "new sensation." For our present purposes the question comes down to this: Must description necessarily resort to means that are those of representation, borrowing its forms, its metaphors? From the nonphilosophical place at which he believed we had arrived, Merleau-Ponty saw no possible way out other than to make a completely new start (the pathos denounced by Wittgenstein), to reject the instruments with which reflection and intuition had fitted themselves out, to install oneself "where they have not yet been distinguished, in experiences that have not yet been 'worked over,' that offer all at once, pell-mell, both 'subject' and

'object,' existence and essence." Now, if there is any "experience" that philosophy has worked over, apparently to the point of satiety, it is surely that of representation in its perspectival guise. If this same philosophy should be reducible, as Wittgenstein believed, to a technique for analyzing concepts, it might seem as though such a reduction of the concept of "perspective" were already well advanced. But can we be so sure of this? Could it not be that having never been submitted to a proper philosophical critique, the perspective paradigm, as sometimes happens with texts, has acquired over time a kind of mythic power that is only reinforced by the uses to which it lends itself in contemporary philosophy?

* 

I will take a single example, one that is now rather commonplace: the idea that perspective has become archaic, that its time has passed (painters' perspective, not that of architects and geometers, which is another story entirely), that the life cycle of classic representation has run its course. This is not a new idea. But it is significant that those artists and critics who were among the first to propose it based their argument on the cubist experiment and its immediate antecedents. I emphasize again that one of the basic tenets of the prevailing artistic discourse, and a commonplace of criticism, holds that the lesson of Cézanne (that of Seurat usually being passed over in silence) signaled the end of so-called scientific perspective and at the same time of an age, many would say the age par excellence, of representation. That does not prevent us from referring back, if not to Ghiberti, at least to Leonardo da Vinci, from finding in his Treatise on Painting—the first critical edition of which dates from the end of the nineteenth century—the premonitory symptoms of a critical trope that has scarcely changed since that time, one that holds that costruzione legittima reduces the viewing subject to a kind of cyclops, and obliges the eye to remain at one fixed, indivisible point—in other words, obliges it to adopt a stance that has nothing in common with the effective conditions of perception, any more than it does with the goals of painting, as properly understood.24

23. Merleau-Ponty, op. cit., p. 172; English trans., p. 130.
A woodcut by Albrecht Dürer is frequently invoked as illustrating the unbearable constraints entailed by these demands. And, in effect, it shows an artist caught up in a veritable pillory as he draws the contours of a (nude) model in front of him, gazing at her through a transparent, squared screen, his eye immobile at the tip of a stiletto. But Dürer’s image, far from treating the operation of perspective (less preoccupied with the rationalization of vision than with the rationalization of representation), rather describes the apparatus to which the painter should turn to facilitate rational construction, to obtain a rendering that is perspectively correct by purely mechanical means in conformity with the principle of the velum posited by Alberti. In itself such an apparatus had no experimental value, as opposed to the “gate” conceived by the same Dürer to demonstrate, in geometric terms, the point-by-point correspondence, in relation to a common point of “origin,” between the object and its projection onto an intersecting plane. In the terms of Saussure one would say perspective was a dense system (un système serré). But the network, quite dense in fact, of constraints that define it nonetheless provides the basis for a new kind of liberty illustrated by another print, this one by Abraham Bosse, the friend and correspondent of Desargues: here “perspectors” move at will over the terrain, each on his
Is the mythic status of such images in contemporary writing the result of simple ignorance and misunderstanding: ignorance and misunderstanding of what *perspectiva artificialis* really was in its time, leading to a miscomprehension?
sion of its original context, of its historical roots? Panofsky saw quite clearly that the recent quarrels about perspective were not new ones and that there have been many, in the past, who would argue from the individual and subjective element it introduced into art to impugn it, while others, by contrast, declared its imposition of rigorous mathematical order to be intolerable. The fact that its operation can be viewed as affirming the reality principle or as expanding the sphere of the ego, this ambiguity, this apparent contradiction, makes it easier for us to grasp how painters' perspective led to an ongoing investigation of the uses to which it could be put, into how it would best be employed. And how this could in turn imply the task, at once both historical and philosophical, or reopening this interrogation, of exposing its sources, recovering its beginnings, locating the traces of its development in the perspective configuration itself, as it was historically constituted; just as it could be taken to imply another task (without doubt a more tedious one), that of taking the precise measure of ongoing resistance to it.

But while even today perspective poses unresolved questions; while it is not merely a thing of the past; while it continues to inform, if not our perception, at least our discourse, our thought, and while one can conceive of the project of dispensing with it, or breaking it down, or—better yet—of deconstructing it, history will not be sufficient for such an undertaking, it won't provide us with this last word on the matter, and it can't even instruct us as to what we should understand "history" to mean. The same holds for perspective (that of painters) as holds, according to Merleau-Ponty, for philosophy and the work of art: "[It] is an object that can arouse more thoughts than are 'contained' in it (Can these be enumerated? Can one count up a language?), that retains a meaning outside of its historical context, that even has meaning only outside of that context." The key phrase here is "that even has," namely a meaning that is its own, as opposed to being borrowed from the context. This is an assertion historians will have difficulty accepting, perhaps even declaring it to be incomprehensible. But if something like Merleau-Ponty's "sedimentary" or "vertical" history should be thinkable, and through it such things as the histories of art, philosophy,

and thought (to say nothing of the history of science, which imposes this
idea on us, or better yet, which is the realization of this history), it must of
necessity be predicated on such a position, and proceed in a way that does
not preclude us from doing history, in the conventional meaning of this
term, from going back further than Gottfried Leibniz, and even Descartes,
in an attempt to discern the intentions of the “inventors” of perspective.
And that leaves us free to exploit everything philology and erudition can
teach us that might serve to advance our project of rejuvenating the per­s­ectival experience, of “working it over,” such that in the end—perhaps—
we might have a better grasp of the meaning of “perspective”—and of
“experience.”

The phenomenological watchword of a return, beyond the objective
being “historical truth” instituted by Descartes as the sole realm of
legitimate scientific inquiry, to an “organic” or “primitive history”
(Urhistorie), this science of a pre-science, as Merleau-Ponty dubbed it,

itself has a long history—as do contemporary calls for an art brut, un­

ardished by cultural determinations (though always produced by individuals of
great cultural sophistication), and the validation of “primitive” thought
forms because they purportedly accord more immediate access to a part of
experience that our science has spurned, has allowed to lie fallow. As
Jacques Bouveresse has written in discussing Wittgenstein, subjective space
is no less “constructed” than objective space. It results from the addition of
something, what Maria Reichenbach called a “subjective metric,” to this
latter space: “Visual space, which we are tempted to call ‘primary,’ can itself
be interpreted as a second order construction erected on the foundation of
physical space.”

Jean Paulhan associated cubist painting with the idea of
“space prior to reason” (un espace d’avant les raisons): a space of which, so to
speak, we have no idea, “that falls on us without warning! A space in which
we have no part, yet [whose existence] is incontestable! A space . . . felt by
the heart, and which is not mediated by perspective—I mean by reflection,
combination, arrangement, in short, by method and its reasons.”

29. Ibid., p. 221; English trans., pp. 177–78.
Leipzig, 1928, p. 86; English trans. by Maria Reichenbach and John Freund, The Philosophy of Space
and Time, New York, 1958, p. 83.
fact that perspective must be challenged, that the attempt must be made to
break it down, to deconstruct it, makes it clear that we are dealing, rather,
with a space “after” or “according to reason” (un espace d’après les raisons). As
for the other kind, nothing can be said about it without resorting to the—
second order—resources of negation.
What is thinking in painting, in forms and through means proper to it? And what are the implications of such "thinking" for the history of thought in general? Another book would be required to elucidate this subject or this point. The one (the book) the reader has just finished was intended only to make visible and comprehensible how painting not only shows but thinks, through forms that might be designated as symbolic in Cassirer's sense. I state once again: in the historical context in which we placed ourselves, perspective artificialis provided the painter with a formal apparatus like that of the sentence, with which it shares many features. Starting with its organization of point of view, vanishing point, and distance point, and the other corollary points designating here, there, and over there—which is sufficient to make it possible to speak, again nonmetaphorically, of a geometry of the sentence that would have its analogue in the figurative register. What is demonstrated by the group of Urbino perspectives, and had previously been demonstrated by Brunelleschi's configuration and would be demonstrated again by Las Meninas, is that the sentence is not assignable to a single system of pronouns and positional indexes in space and time. The formal apparatus put in place by the perspective paradigm is equivalent to that of the sentence, in that it assigns the subject a place within a previously established network that gives it meaning, while at the same time opening up the possibility of something like a statement in painting: as Wittgenstein wrote, words are but points, while propositions are arrows that have meaning, which is to say direction. 88

The perspective paradigm effectively posits the other, in the face of the "subject," as always already there: it introduces a third party, previously excluded by an art (like that of the medieval period) that was essentially contemplative, that precluded all possibility of passing from one position to another as well as of entering into the painting as if it were a "scene." Merleau-Ponty repeats the following argument taken from George Berkeley: what we call "depth" has meaning only for a spectator viewing it laterally, in profile, so to speak, 89 which brings to mind the notion of the distance point, whose function in this context is decisive, as I'll demonstrate else-

88. "Names are like points; propositions like arrows—they have sense." Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, op. cit., 3.144.
where. That laterality has a role to play in painting is proved by Carpaccio’s Saint Ursula cycle; likewise the light in the Urbino perspectives and in Las Meninas, where it comes from windows opening onto the room from the side of which we see only the embrasures. This three-term structure allows us to more fully grasp what’s at issue when the authors of treatises sometimes express themselves in their own name or in the first person (“this is what I do when I paint . . .”), sometimes appeal to the reader (“if you* want to construct . . .”), and sometimes give voice to a third party (“the contradictor will say . . .”). Alberti’s Della pittura provides a perfect illustration of this conceit, which he manipulates with unequaled mastery: in book I Alberti discusses construction of the perspective checkerboard on a plane in the first person; in book II he shifts to the second person to justify the difficulties he’s setting the reader, and to teach him how to construct a scene in elevation; but he is careful at the beginning to ask the dedicatee, namely Brunelleschi himself, to come to his defense against “pecking” detractors.90 In the same way the analogy we’ve drawn between the perspective paradigm and sentence structure (dispositif d’énonciation) allows us to understand how Serlio could maintain it was easier to teach perspective through dialogue (conferando in praeentia) than by means of writing, or even drawing (in disegno)—namely bodies constructed in elevation from their ground section. For when putting the figures of plane geometry into perspective, one remains in the register of writing, of redigere,91 which obliges us to distinguish between two modalities or moments in the operation called projection, that of the actual tracing and another in which one liberates oneself from it. However that may be, his wariness is justified: perspective tends toward discourse as toward its own end or reason for being; but it has its origin (or its departure) outside speech, outside the phonic element: on that plane where painting is inscribed, where it works and reflects on itself, and where perspective demonstrates it.

* French familiar form—TRANS.

90. “Piacciati adunque leggerimi con diligentia et se cosa vi ci par da emendarla corregimi. Niuno scriptae mai fu si docto al quale non fussero utilissimi gli amici eruditi et io in prima date desidero essere emendato per non essere morso da detractori.” Alberti, Della pittura, op. cit., p. 54; English trans., p. 40.