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THE REVERSE PERSPECTIVE IN THE ORTHODOX ICONOGRAPHY ACCORDING TO P. FLORENSKI A DOGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The paper presents the approach to the reverse perspective in the Orthodox iconography, according to P. Florenski, highlighting the theological and artistically features of the iconographic study.

Keywords: representation, perspective, visual, space, plane

1. Introduction

One of the deepest or more profound studies concerning the exploration of the theological and artistically content of the Orthodox iconography is that of the priest P. Florenski. The depth and spiritual and artistically sensibility, noticed by his contemporaries [1], as well as his originality of thought are due to his distinctive individual structure, his universal spirit. These qualities are furthermore demonstrated by the scientific insight that he put forward in his discourses on perspective theory.

Applied to the iconographic structure, perspective theory changes and receives a new, unusual meaning, specific only to this structure. The icon emerged in the absence of the rules of painting realism. Instead of the homogenous, rationally constructed and illusory space of the painting, the icon proposed a reverse perspective, which nullifies the inner self centring process of both the artist and the beholder. The reverse perspective does not show in a realistic manner what exists, it does not stand for something else and it does not imitate. Instead, it reconciles the difference between the material sign and the abstract representation through the anthological participation. This leads the sign into reality, into the sacramental present of the existence of representation through the actions of divine grace.

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Looked upon from this perspective, the complementary plans, the parallel lines which are foreign to the iconographic style and which should, according to perspective norms, converge towards the horizon, are all drawn divergent, contrary to how they should be.

2. Presentation of the reverse perspective according to Florenski

The reverse perspective does not exhaust the diversity or particularity of drawing.

The device intrinsic to reverse perspective is, as Florenski shows, the polycentrism of plastic representation. In said polycentrism, each part of the iconographic representation, though drawn according to the rules of linear perspective, has "its own perspective centre", "its own visual angle", "its own horizon" [2] The drawing is represented in such a manner that the eye can look at its composing elements and see different things from different angles.

Among other devices of the same nature, which strive at artistic expressiveness, Florenski mentions the *sui generis* distribution of shadows that differentiate the icon from the naturalistic painting. This difference envisages an artistic process in search of attaining a maximum of expressiveness.

Another device is highlighting the outlines, although in reality they do not have a visible physical correspondent, which means we cannot really find them in reality as we notice them on clothes, in icons. Florenski says there is, however, a set of potential lines that can be compared to the "force lines of the magnetic or electric field or with the system of isothermal or equipotent curves, or any other system of curves for that matter" [2, p. 77].

These lines have a greater identity than the proper visible lines, although paradoxically they cannot be seen. They are tension lines. Drawn on complementary surfaces, they reveal in the conscience of the beholder the structured quality of planes and in doing so, they avoid limiting the beholder to a passive contemplation of the icon.

Unlike icons, regular paintings which are often the result of impressionism abolish the outlines, or simply strip them of their active component. The outline lacks the force needed to increase the intensity of energy [2, p. 77]. The question that arises is within what limits can reverse perspective be applied and what is its purpose?

Florenski mentions that the reverse perspective is not simply a failed or misunderstood version of the linear perspective, but an original way of encompassing the world, which should be held as a mature device, independent of representation.

Generally speaking, the perspective representation of the world is the only correct one, since it is the only one that corresponds to a natural and wholesome perception.

A departure from the perspective unity is a distortion of reality itself due to the unconscious substitution of drawing to decorative functions. Thus is the case of Leonardo da Vinci and his 'Last Supper', where Christ is shown just having a special value, but not being a special reality [2, p. 99].

In the face of this work, we are not looking at a specific reality, but we are looking at an optic phenomenon in which the laws of the Kantian space and those of Newton's mechanics rule.

In plastic art, the perspective representation is not an intrinsic characteristic of things, but only a device of symbolic expressiveness.

That is why, for the reverse perspective the linear one is related with the symbolic function of painting, it shows which the place of linear perspective among symbolic proceedings is.

The purpose of perspective is to give a certain spiritual impulse, to focus the attention on reality.

From this point of view, Florenski has the distinct merit of having discovered and elaborated on the truth that painting, like other plastic arts, rely fundamentally on geometry.

What does representing in geometric terms a certain reality mean?

First of all, it means placing the points of the perceived space in accordance with those of another space or of a plane surface.

Reality however is three-dimensional and art has to be in accordance with reality. Plane surface, on the other hand, is two-dimensional. The difficult question, both for art and geometry, is: can a three-dimensional figure be represented on a two-dimensional surface? Or, in mathematical terms, can the power of a three-dimensional figure be compared to that of a two-dimensional one?

At first it seems it cannot be possible, since a three-dimensional figure implies a multitude of two-dimensional sections and that is why its power is infinitely greater than that of any of its sections taken separately.

Florenski saw the full importance of this aspect, connecting it with the points ensemble theory.

Although he sees this complexity, Florenski starts from the scientific rigor of definitions, by addressing the power of any two or three-dimensional figure That is why there is no way of representing a four or three-dimensional reality on a plane surface. Moreover, Florenski asserts that it can be represented not only on a plane surface, but also on any straight line segment or curve line arc For the former, typical representations are those of Georg Cantor. For the latter, typical representations include those of Peano or Hilbert [2, p. 112].

Cantor's representations are found in the contemporary special mathematics theories. One of them is called the Cartesian rectangular coordinate system. This is a system formed from three rectangular lines, Ox, Oy and Oz, which have the same origin, O, a positive direction and the same measurement unit (Figure 1) [3].

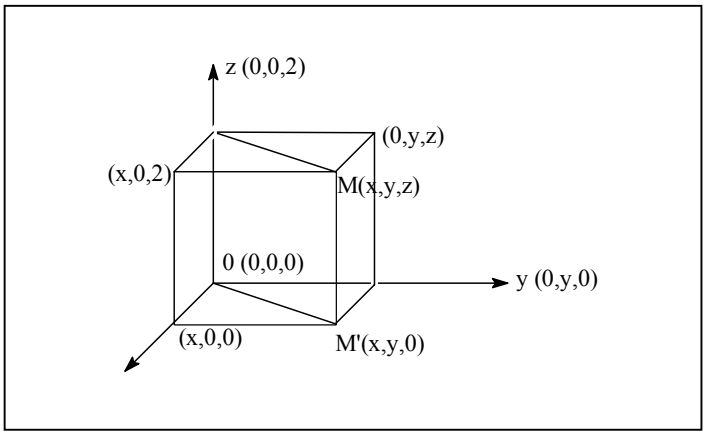

Figure 1. Cartesian rectangular coordinate system.

Each point M in space has a corresponding set of three numbers (x,y,z) called point coordinates and vice versa: each ordinate set of three numbers (x,y,z) has a corresponding and unique point in space.

3. The Cartesian rectangular plane coordinate system

It is the system which is formed of two perpendicular lines, Ox and Oy, which have the same origin, O, a positive direction and the same measurement unit (Figure 2) [3, p. 14].

Each point M in the plane has a corresponding set of two numbers (x,y) called point coordinates and vice versa: each ordinate set of two numbers (x, y) has a corresponding and unique point in the plane .

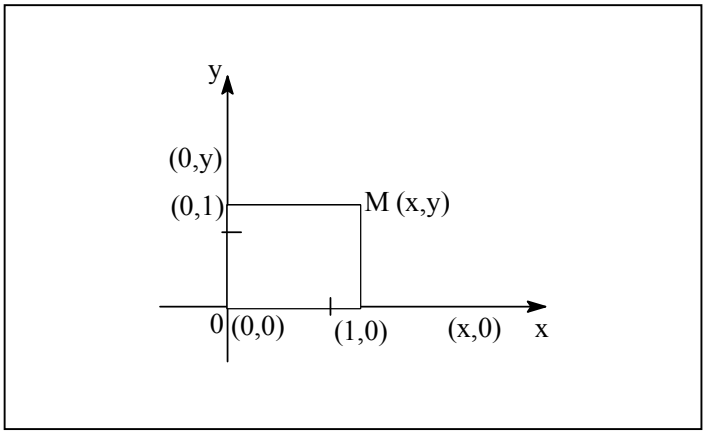

Figure 2. Cartesian rectangular plane coordinate system.

Georg Cantor has demonstrated through his analytical method the correspondence of each point of his side or the representation of the whole square on his side.

If it is represented by two coordinates X and Y the position of each point in the square through an analogue method the Z coordinate can be obtained which is relevant for a certain point on the side of the square (Figure 1). The reverse method can be obtained if a point on the segment is known and the correspondent point on the square will be found for the respective point on the segment (Figure 2). The natural conclusion is that the square is fully represented on its side.

The correspondence between the points of the square and the points of the curve can be built in order for a curve to be the secant at any given point randomly given on the side of the square.

The correspondence of the points of the curve with the sides of the square as one-dimensional spaces is easy and the points of the square can be represented on its side.

The curve of Peano and Hilbert, which is present in respect with other curve groups, has the advantage of practically giving the correspondence the points of the one-dimensional and two-dimensional image points.

Moving forward in his analysis Florenski, through the demonstrations of Netto, Tome, E. Jurgens, demonstrates that through the Cantor method a transmission of the image can be done point by point and only one point of the image corresponds to one of the representation and vice versa. Through this demonstration done by Cantor, the concept of representation is proven. But it alone cannot give the continuity so that the point which is being represented travels on the whole surface of the panel. Thus the representation of the square on a single line transmits all the points but is not able to give the form of the object as a whole. Florenski states that: "the content of the space is transmitted but not its structure" [2, p. 117]. For this reason alone a space can be geometrically represented on a plane surface but the initial form is lost. Even so, the form constitutes the object of the arts. Regarding object representation Florenski points out in 'Reverse perspective' that it takes place as long as through it a spiritual perception of the represented object is achieved and it is not a valid representation if it cannot push us beyond our on limits but it blocks us within them and thus giving us a poor excuse for reality.

The representation does nothing more than give significance and suggestion but it does not give a copy of that image. For this reason alone the relation between reality and a painting is only an analogy. The painting has a vast field of possibilities conditioned by the possibility of establishing the correspondence between the points of the objects and those on the surface.

4. The premises accepted by the artist for achieving the reverse perspective

The representation of the perspective is one of the multiple procedures for establishing an adequate correspondence between the object to be represented and the represented image.

The premises that the artist must accept are the following:

1. The outlook that the real world space is Euclidian, isotropic, homogeneous infinite three dimensional, with a null curve. The artist which uses the perspective has the belief that all geometrical structures are not abstract schemes but existing constructions which can be observed.
2. The artist conceives the existence of a special point exceptionally placed among the points of the infinite space. That point is the place where the artist itself is found. Basically, the artist regards life through a 'point of view' or has his own outlook on the world (Weltanschaunng). In principle this particular point is not different from any other point in space.
3. This personal point of view becomes the lawmaker of nature.
4. The world is regarded as being still and unable of being moved.

The perspective is thus a procedure which must derive from an outlook of the world, in which certain subjectivity although unreal is recognized as the true basis for representing semi-real objects.

In order to prove the fundamentals of perspective representation, Florenski analyses the notion of space. It is regarded on three levels: the abstract or geometrical space, the physiological space which includes the visible, tactile, auditive, etc. spaces.

To believe that the whole complexity can be reduced to a simple reference to the geometrical theory of figure propinquity in Euclidian three dimensional space, means to avoid the difficulties of the problem. Under the auspices of the abstract–geometrical relation, the Euclidian space is just a particular case from a wide range of spaces. In this respect, the Euclidian geometry is one of the existing multiple geometries and thus it cannot be stated that the physical spaces is necessarily and Euclidian one. Such an idea cannot go beyond the level of a postulate.

Even the visual space, the one closest to the Euclidian space appears different form it on a closer inspection, although in certain cases it can be subordinated to other categories of physiological spaces. Mach states that both the physiological and the geometrical spaces are versions of the three dimensional space. Constant movement of a point in the geometrical space corresponds to a continual movement of its respective point in the physiological space.

The physiological space is not homogenous but it is isotropic and this is self-evident in the different angle, distance and certain distances appreciations.

Thus it can be doubted the fact that the world is into an Euclidian space. The painter must not give in to abstract but rather portray what he sees in correspondence with reality.

The structure of the visual organ itself demonstrates that it must render something which is not subjected to the Euclidian geometry.

The painter has two different visual points and thus has a permanent correction of the 'illusionism' [2, p. 126].

In the painter's consciousness the visual image is formed in a synthetic manner much like a binocular image. Also a psychic synthesis is produced and it must not be confused with a photographical one-eye view.

The visual artistic image is constantly modified because even when the artist stands still, he is always moving (his eyes, head, body).

On the other hand because the world is full of life and not frozen stillness, the movement of all objects can be noticed. These are on the move and they grow and shrink. The artist mush synthesize because he does not depict the object but its life. Thus the prejudice according to which you must observe while standing still must be abandoned. The problem that must be taken into consideration has to do with the perception of the object.

The perception is established according to the living attitude regarding the object and reality. In case the artist has in mind rendering the perception obtained during movement it must be the sum of impressions gained while moving. Thus no method of relation with reality must be rejected in advance [2, p. 128].

The most common and viable perception of reality in movement is the living attitude towards reality, which has at its core the notion of movement. On the other hand, such a perception can be reproduced for example through the game of feelings regarding a person, the evolution of certain events. The difference consists in the fact that the rendered objects are in movement, while the painter moves less [2, p. 128]. Even here the movement of the painter is considered to be important. The observing nature of the artists is a complex psychic process in which the fusion of psychic elements is present. In order to investigate an object the fragmented image of its components must always pass through the retina. This demonstrates that the visual image offered to the consciousness is not done in a simple, effortless manner, but being built of particles attached in sequence through a special psychic process. In this regard the visual image is born through a constant process. In the process of perception, Florenski shows, the visual image is not obtained through one visual point but becomes the image of a multi-centred image [2, p. 129]. As long as he is alive, the human cannot fully enter the perceptive scheme.

In a live perception there happens a continuous transformation, a flowing, into a struggle which never stops to a form of a death scheme. Its representation and in general its dynamism are assured as far as they are retained by the artist from its different segments from his perception, which is more explosive and more expressive. The absolute understanding of art, claims Florenski, derives from the exigency of spiritual autonomy [2, p 131]. That is why the problem of the perspective doesn't count, but remains far from the creative conscience.

In this sense Paul Klee, a youth friend of Florenski declares: "Deeper a painter sees (watches) easier he can extend his points of view (Gesichtspunkte) from today to yesterday", and easier it is instilled to him instead of natural image given for granted, the unique being image of creation, as bringing to creation (Genesis). He can afford then the idea that creation could hardly be over and he extends with this each creation act from behind to forward, borrowing from Genesis' length. He goes even further. He constantly says to him: "this world appears in a different way and this world will appear in a different way."[4].

It is important to mention here Florenski's analyses regarding the space concept in art and its update into an Orthodox up to date iconography.

It is the case of the 'point' technique. It reproduces the transparency and the subtlety of light and shadow [5]. However, in spite of missing colours, the impression which such engravings produce, is pictorial; they are similar to the lithography or to the coal drawing, but with a superiority given by delicacy and elaboration. This system 'in points' and spots represents specific features of the painting. In iconographic representation of Resurrection from the church in Draganescu locality (Romania), these features can be fully noticed. The finesse and elaboration of this representation remained unique nowadays.

The line and the surface covered by 'point' technique are not, in this case, symbols of actions: they are by themselves realities, which precede directly the sensorial reception and they want to be considered as such: "It is not about a law which requires for a specific action from that person who admires the work of art, nor a symbol or a plan, it is about a gift made for the viewer by the artist, a gift which, without asking for rewarding, brings joy" (Figure 3) [5, p. 110].

Whatever the education of the viewer of the work of art would be, he already received for the future, without any effort, the joy that the light brings to him, as Florenski says. This joy was received also by the artist in his turn as a gift in order to pass on to the viewer.

In case of iconographical representation of Resurrection, the painter proves us how is he overwhelmed by the world universe came from the resurrected body of The Savior Jesus Christ, The Son of God.

5. Conclusions

The iconographic representation is eluding from the attempt of explaining it by principles or theories belonging to the plastic arts (e.g. the perspective theory). Instead of this, it appears the reverse perspective by which a decentralisation of the artist's and onlooker's ego is achieved.

The specific method of this perspective is that of the polycentric representation, in which each part of the iconographic image has its own horizons. The aim of the reverse perspective is to guide the attention toward reality. However, the painting depends on geometry because we talk about the possibility of representing a three-dimensional figure on a bi-dimensional surface. Florenski shows that either on a plane surface or on any other line

segment or curve, a three-dimensional reality could be represented, fact confirmed by the Mathematics.

Florenski's analyses also take into account the space concept in arts. We tried to actualise his analysis in the present paper by a new Orthodox iconographic representation, made by means of 'in points' method, by Father Arsenie Boca, in which he attempted to reproduce the light transparency of Jesus Crist's resurrection.

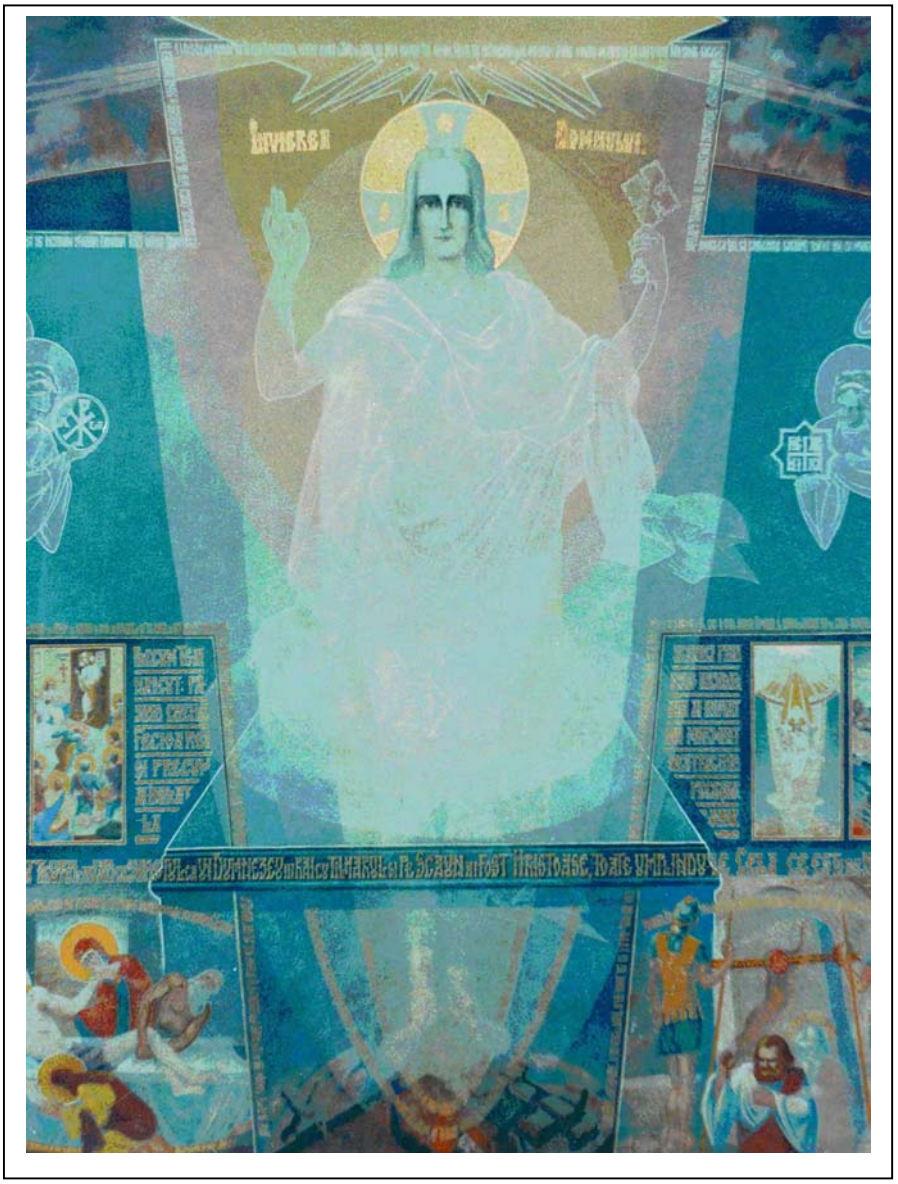

Figure 3. Icon of Resurrection from the church in Draganescu (Romania), painted by Arsenie Boca.

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