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PERSPECTIVE: REALISM OR ILLUSION?



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Abstract. Pavel Florensky’s interpretation of the the Christian icon, according to the Second Council of Nicaea (787), which stated the equivalence between word and image, with the consequence that Icon had not to be considered merely and illustration of the Holy Scripture, but a means of revelation, indicates the distance that separates the Orthodox traditional Icon-painting from western-naturalistic art, born at the time of the Florentine Renaissance. Moving from a thematic of apparently mere artistic interest, the Russian philosopher analyzes the deep spiritual meaning of the Icon questioning the philosophical and metaphysical status of the image, called to respond to the crucial responsibility of being a threshold between visible and invisible, truth and illusion, according to a philosophical tradition which has its roots in Plato’s *Republic*. Placing the Icon and the Image in general at the threshold between these opposites, Florensky invites us to recognize in the Image a symbolical potentiality in which the spiritual destiny of ourself and our civilization is decided. Florensky’s hermeneutical analysis identifies in the invention of the linear perspective the turning point of the definitive detachment of the spiritual history of the Western

Christianity from the Russian Orthodoxy. After considering various theories and interpretations of the perspective, inclusive contemporary writings to the invention of this technique, we conclude with Florensky and his contemporary E. Panofsky, that linear perspective is not “realistic” representation, but a symbolic form, expressing the anthropocentrism and *Wille zur Macht* of the age of the technique.



Keywords: space, perspective, reality, illusion, Renaissance, image, nihilism



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Европа и Россия: парадоксы родства

ПЕРСПЕКТИВА: РЕАЛИЗМ ИЛИ ИЛЛЮЗИЯ?

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Аннотация. Толкование христианской Иконы дано Павлом Флоренским согласно Второму Никейскому собору (787). Последний установил эквивалентность Слова и Образа, вследствие чего Икону следует рассматривать не просто как иллюстрацию Священного Писания, но как средство откровения. Это указывает на дистанцию, отделяющую традиционную православную иконопись от западно-натуралистического искусства, зародившегося во времена флорентийского Возрождения. Отталкиваясь от темы, казалось бы, чисто художественного характера, русский философ анализирует глубокий духовный смысл Иконы. Он ставит под сомнение философский и метафизический статус Образа, призванного быть гранью между видимым и невидимым, истиной и иллюзией, согласно философской традиции, уходящей корнями в «Государство» Платона. Ставя Икону и Образ вообще на грани между этими противоположностями, Флоренский предлагает нам признать в Образе символическую

потенциальность, в которой решается духовная судьба нас самих и нашей цивилизации. Герменевтический анализ Флоренского определяет в изобретении линейной перспективы поворотный момент окончательного отрыва духовной истории западного христианства от русского Православия. Рассмотрев различные теории и интерпретации перспективы, включая современные сочинения, посвященные изобретению этой техники, мы вместе с Флоренским и его современником Э. Панофски приходим к выводу, что линейная перспектива — это не «реалистическое» изображение, а символическая форма, выражающая антропоцентризм и *Wille zur Macht* (Волю к власти) в эпоху техники.



Ключевые слова: пространство, перспектива, реальность, иллюзия, Ренессанс, образ, нигилизм



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“The things that are seen are the visible aspect of those that are not seen”: this famous statement attributed to Anaxagoras effectively summarizes the awareness of the existence of two worlds for human intelligence, communicating yet separated “by the visible aspect,” from the image, a threshold that can open from the visible world and lead to the intelligible one.

As we will see later, the position of two worlds, both possible horizons for the cognitive life of the human soul, is also the foundation of Pavel Florensky’s philosophy of icons.

Julius Evola, a rather controversial Italian author of the 20th century, in his masterpiece *Revolt against the modern world*, opens his work by immediately introducing a clear distinction, which is at the same time a clear distinction between the attitude and the destiny of a soul and of a civilization:

To understand both the traditional spirit and modern civilization as a negation of it, we must start from a fundamental point: from the doctrine of the two natures.



Pavel Alexandrovich Florensky (1882–1937)

There is a physical order and a metaphysical order. (...) there is the upper region of being and there is the underworld of becoming. More generally: there is a visible and a tangible and, beyond it, there is an invisible and a non-tangible as the overworld, principle and true life.

[Evola, 1998, p. 43]

It is very interesting that Julius Evola, in establishing this foundational knowledge at the root of every living philosophical and wisdom tradition, places modern, materialistic civilization as its antithesis, now incapable of remembering, if not actively grasping, the spiritual and intelligible “double” of corporeal reality¹, limiting one’s cognitive and existential horizon to the material contours of this:

Although it is difficult for moderns to conceive it, we must start from the idea that traditional man knew of the reality of an order of being much vaster than the one to which the word “real” generally corresponds today. Today, as a reality, basically, nothing is conceivable that goes beyond the world of bodies in space and time. (...) Normal modern man forms his image of reality only as a function of the world of bodies.

[Evola, 1998, p. 43]

¹ I’m referring here to the masterpiece of Antonin Artaud, *Le theatre et son double*, dedicated to the potential of theatre as a privileged space for experiencing the spiritual double of the body and of the human action. See [Artaud, 1985].

This described by Evola is perhaps the most final manifestation of the era of human history described by Nietzsche as nihilism, or the inability to still read an *Hinterwelt* [Nietzsche, 2009] in the human experience, a projection of values or of Being perceived with such certainty and faith, as that, from which the reality experienced daily descends from, as the foundation of this and its origin.

Where does this long path of blinding or oblivion of being originate from? If it is a process so ancient as to find traces of it even in the hermetic *Lament of Asclepius*², Pavel Florensky instead sees its origin in the era traditionally considered as the highest moment of the history of art and of Italian culture in general, if not even European: The Florentine Renaissance, and in particular the aspiration to naturalism in painting which materialized exemplarily in the invention and technical, formal and artistic development of linear perspective.

To this type of art, and to the awareness of oneself and the world that are at its foundation, Florensky opposes the ancient iconography of the Russian Middle Ages, developing an aesthetic and a conception of the Icon rooted in the knowledge of the “two natures,” as he himself states on the first page of *Ikonostasis*:

According to the first words of Genesis, God “created the heaven and the earth” (Gen. 1, 1) and this division of all creation into two parts has always been considered fundamental. Thus in the confession of faith we call God “Creator of visible and invisible things,” Creator of both visible and invisible things. These two worlds — the visible and the invisible — are in contact.

[Florensky, 1993a, p. 3]

For the Russian philosopher there are two worlds or planes of reality ontologically heterogeneous with each other, even if in contact, one illusory and one real, and a threshold both separates them and keeps them in contact: the image, and in a privileged way, the Icon.

Pavel Florensky’s analysis and reflections on Western painting and its figurative and epistemological foundation are placed in this concept of tradition, and in the implicit criticism of modern civilization as antithetical to it: linear perspective.

Florensky in fact contrasts Russian-Byzantine iconography with Western religious painting, which began in the Renaissance, and defines the latter as “a radical artistic falsehood” [Florensky, 1993a, p. 46].

For Florensky, evidently what is at stake here is not a question of aesthetic taste, conservatism or Slavophilia, but rather the relationship between man and the truth.

² See: [Hermetica ... , 1995; Yates, 1964].

From a representative and even historical point of view, as Florensky correctly demonstrates in his treatise *Obratnaja Perspektiva*, and in parallel Erwin Panofsky in the contemporary *Die perspektive als symbolische Form*, perspective arises and is in fact a form of illusion, a trompe-l'œil, or a representation which, through a work of mathematical construction of space, represents on a two-dimensional surface an image of objects as they are perceived by the human eye in space, creating an illusion of three-dimensionality³.

The fact that despite this intrinsically and admittedly illusory character, this type of art has the ability to produce meaning and aesthetic effects, even sublime, on human beings, is not disputed by the Russian philosopher.

Indeed, it is the mimetic adherence to the way in which human beings perceive the natural world, which represents the most problematic aspect.

In this skepticism towards naturalistic representations of reality, Florensky reveals his Platonic lineage.

In book X of the *Republic*, in fact, Plato had warned against the mimetic arts, which by reproducing the sensitive perception of empirical reality, distance man twice from reality, which is of intelligible nature, and of which the sensitive world is only an imperfect copy.

The mimetic arts are therefore the copy of a copy, twice distant from the truth. The degree of truth of the arts is therefore also lower than that of things⁴.

For Plato, however, the theme is not purely aesthetic or epistemological, but has a strong ethical and pedagogical connotation: the objects produced by artists have the ability to exert an effect on the human soul, leaving an imprint on it (Rep. 377b), with the risk, if left to circulate indiscriminately, of unaccustoming man to the reminiscence of the intelligible world, with the consequence of a progressive oblivion of true reality, to chain his conscience to the semblances of sensitive phenomena.

That it is chains and slavery⁵ is explicitly expressed by Plato in the VII book of the *Republic*, where he describes the human condition, lowered into the sensitive dimension and immersed among the copies of what truly is, comparing it to that of chained men, forced to keep their gaze fixed towards a rock wall on which are projected the shadows of individuals carrying vases, wooden or stone images of men and animals. The things that truly are, of which men can only see the shadows projected on the bottom of the cave, are ideas, which are metaphysically and epistemologically preceded by the Good, which like the sun gives life, being and intelligibility to the

³ See also: [Gombrich, 1984].

⁴ For Plato's critic of mimetic art, see: [Wind, 1985].

⁵ On the theme of physical nature as a prison in the Platonic philosophy see: Plato, *Crat*, 400c; *Gorg.* 493a; *Phaedr.*, 250c; *Phaedr.*, 62b; and also: Plotin, *Enn.* IV 8.

Whole. The shadows represent the dimension specific to man in the daily life of being thrown into the world: perspective, opinion, the passively affirmative attitude towards the immediate appearance of the senses.

It is this type of existential drama, inherent to the epistemological and spiritual danger of naturalistic representation, which animates the vehement criticism of Florensky, here truly both a philosopher and shepherd of souls, worried about their fate.

That the naturalistic illusion of linear perspective is adequate to restore to man the way in which he perceives the natural world is beyond question, but at the same time this is precisely what is problematic about it: naturalism and realism, for the Russian philosopher, represent antithetical terms⁶.

If we talk about reality, about the truth of a representation that talks of being and not of appearing, and in particular, if it talks of the divine, we understand how Florensky frames the question in terms of Platonic descent, posing the philosophical problem of the “truth” of naturalism.

As the Italian scholar Chiara Cantelli has well highlighted, Florensky’s position can be framed as a “regression to Nicaea II” of the concept of sacred art⁷.

As it is known, the debate on the icon in the first centuries of Christianity was of an eminently theological nature and concerned the legitimacy of depicting the figure of Christ and also the relationship that the image could establish with the divine logos, in relation to the word of the sacred texts. This problem was opposed, even drastically, on the one hand by the iconoclasts, who appealed to the Old Testament prohibition on translating the word into images, and on the other by the iconodules, who based their veneration of icons on the dogma of the Incarnation, that is, that Christ had appeared historically in human and corporeal form and therefore, as he was visible, is also depictable⁸.

The Council established the dogma of the veneration of icons, in the same way in which the verbal image must be venerated, also establishing the premises for a discourse-in-images of fundamental importance for every form of symbolic theology.

The principle of equivalence between word and divine image, based on the direct relationship between the icon and the dogma of the Incarnation, established in canon 82 of the Council, will determine the elaboration of a sacred art by the Orthodox Church: “The icon is not an art aimed at illustrating the Holy Scripture, but a language that is equivalent to it and (...) that corresponds to evangelical preaching” [Ouspensky,

⁶ See: [Florensky, 1974].

⁷ See: [Cantelli, 2011]. See also: [Oppo, 2014].

⁸ On the patristic disputes on the status of the sacred image and on the relevance of these theological foundations for the understanding of the aesthetics of icons, see: [Parry, 1996; Kitzinger, 1954; Ouspensky, 1980; Ouspensky, Lossky, 1950; Bettetini, 2006].

1980, pp. 90 sgg]. This is certainly not a mimetic representation of an object, but a vision of the spirit to which faith leads: “The basis of an icon is a spiritual experience” [Florensky, 1993a, p. 74].

The dogma established by the Council is that art, where inspired, supported and guided by true faith, is not mere illustration, but itself *lògos*, word. This point, to which Florensky’s conception of the icon follows, marks the great watershed with Western art, long before the experience of the Florentine Renaissance. As Uspenskij observes [Ouspensky, 1980, p. 94], in fact, in the West the two levels gradually separated, ending up assigning to the image an illustrative role compared to the word, therefore finally just a pedagogical and catechetical role⁹.

As we already recalled at the beginning of this article, Florensky bases his philosophy of the icon on a clear distinction between two ontologically distinct levels of life, that of contingent, transient and deceptive sensitive appearance, and that of a reality, which is a divine truth, which has within itself the dynamic capacity to transfigure the man who, by welcoming it, tends towards it.

The icon plays the role of a threshold of contact between these two levels, both separating and joining them, like Jacob’s Ladder (Gen. 28, 12–13), from which divine messages continually descend and men transfigured by faith ascend¹⁰.

The iconographer’s work of art is ontologically different from the autonomous object-work of Western art, the fruit of individual genius (and will), which can find a place in a prince’s living room as well as in a museum. By its essence the icon is not a “work”, it is foreign to the concept of genius, of creativity, and eludes categories of sensitive beauty: it must not “please,” but lead, reveal, be vehicle¹¹:

The icon does not intend in any way to communicate emotions to the faithful. Its purpose is not to arouse in him some human feeling of a natural type, but rather to convey every feeling, as well as intelligence and the other faculties of human nature, on the path of transfiguration.

[Uspensky, Lossky, 1950, p. 38]

Precisely because of its psychagogical character of invitation, guide and intermediary towards a reality which is only the object and justification of the work, naturalism is foreign to it, as is its author’s ambition to stand out for his own

⁹ See: [Oppo, 2014, p. 138], also more in general: [Gombrich, 1950].

¹⁰ The topos of the Jacob’s Ladder is endless, but we invite to consider: [Ball, 1958; Eusterschulte, 1997; Pirari, 2016].

¹¹ I use this term referring to Grotowsky’s concept of “Art as a vehicle”, in my opinion quite close to Florensky’s conception of spiritual art. See: [Grotowsky, 2002].

originality. The icon is established by the Council, the task of the iconographers is to reproduce it endlessly, infinitely striving to assimilate to the Saint or the most perfect represented in it.

This is why Florensky in *Ikonostasis* goes so far as to deny Rublev's autonomy from his work, or rather to identify him with it, since what illuminates and distinguishes his being rests in the archetypal supramundane reality of which the icon and the painter himself have been able to become manifestations.

Florensky's criticism of the use of linear perspective in religious painting is also located exactly at this point.

The mathematical construction of space proper to perspective fundamentally reproduces a structure of the relationship with reality in which the observing subject dominates the represented object, framed so to speak, in his complete disposal.

In its deep psychic and anthropogenetic layers, the representative model betrays the desire to master, to possess the portrayed object, to magically exercise one's mastery over it (...) it [perspective] is therefore the faith in a world made for man.

[Carboni, 2019, p. 51]

This objectification of the object in a space so intellectually dominated is for Florensky a figurative anticipation of that *Weltanschauung* which will be formalized philosophically by Immanuel Kant¹²:

There are only two experiences of the world: human experience in the broad sense and scientific, i.e. Kantian, experience, just as there are two types of relationship with life: the internal one and the external one. Just as there are two types of culture: contemplative-creative and rapacious-mechanical.

[Florensky, 1985, p. 138]

In Florensky's reflection, Kantian transcendental metaphysics, which places a transcendental subject, the synthetic center of the entire possible and known phenomenal world, at the foundation of the *a priori* structure of empirical knowledge, is a sort of philosophical translation of that anthropocentric and reifying perception of the world, which is both the result and the condition of possibility of the era of technology that began with fifteenth-century humanism and the Florentine Renaissance, of which the technique of depicting the space of linear perspective is, so to speak, the symbol.

¹² See: [Florensky, 1985].

On what basis does Florensky feel he can make this comparison, relating the perspective to Kantianism and especially to an anthropocentric-technical vision of the world?

We see that the pictorial technique of perspective — from the Latin *perspicere*, looking through — is a geometric-mathematical procedure by which is indicated a set of projections on a plane of objects, such that what has been drawn corresponds to the real objects as we see them in the space¹³. This is possible through a graphic process that needs an object to represent, the observer, and a support on which to represent the object (table, wall or sheet of paper). The sheet of paper must be imagined as if it were a transparent plane placed between the object and the observer, and it is assumed that visual rays start from the observer's eye and surround the object (visual pyramid). These rays intersect the transparent plane (perspective picture) and this intersection constitutes the perspective representation. Since the rays start from one open eye and not from two, vision is said to be monocular. In a perspective the observer's eye is called point of view, all the lines perpendicular to the perspective frame converge in a single point called the vanishing point which corresponds to the point of view. The horizon line passes through this point¹⁴.

Now for Florensky this does not constitute a mere and neutral representative artifice, but the symbolic expression of a relationship of technical domination of the individual subject's *Wille zur Macht* over the world given to him, thus reified in a space no longer alive and free, but geometrically organized according to a spatial hierarchy that refers to the eye of the observing and dominant subject.

So the perspective is in definitive expression of the

spirit of the Kantian conception of the world, with its transcendental subject that reigns over the illusory world of subjectivity (and, what is worse, does so in a coercive manner), our artist, among all the points of infinite space (which in Euclid are strictly equal), chooses just one, exclusive, unique, which stands out from all the others for its value, a monarchical point, if we can say so, but whose only prerogative is to be the place where it is found the artist himself or, to be more precise, where his right eye is located, the optical center of his right eye. All places in space, in the light of such a way of thinking, are places devoid of quality and equally colorless, with the exception

¹³ For an accurate analysis of the geometrical fundamentals of perspective, with regard to their philosophical implications, see: [Prospettiva e geometria dello spazio, 2005].

¹⁴ For a broad and in-depth discussion of perspective, with regard to its history and meaning and implications for the history of Western thought and culture, see: [Damisch, 1987; Marinelli, 2021]. Also, more in particular about the singular historical figures, who have been central in the development of perspective: [Della Francesca, 2018; 2008; Leonardo da Vinci and optics, 2013; Beltrame, 1996; La prospettiva rinascimentale ... , 1980].

of this one place which dominates over all the others, as it has received the privilege of being the seat of the optical center of the artist's right eye. This place is proclaimed the center of the world and claims to spatially project the epistemological, absolute, Kantian character of the artist.

[Florensky, 1985, p. 150]

The judgment of the contemporary Panofsky is similar, who in his *Die Perspektive als symbolische Form* maintains that "the perspective conception of space (...) seems to reduce the divine to a mere content of human consciousness" placing itself as "a sign of a beginning, when modernity arose anthropocracy" [Panofsky, 1980, p. 126].

The opposite of this type of representation is the *obratnaja perspektiva* of the Icon, where, so to speak, the painting looks at the person, and not *vice versa*.

Reversed perspective involves an inversion of the constituent structures of linear perspective: the lines no longer meet at a vanishing point located behind the painting's plane, but rather at a point located in front of it. In this way the space is deprived of depth and the image reaches out towards the viewer. That is, in icons the world represented radiates towards those who open themselves to receive it; reality is something vital and not a dead material which is ordered in space on the basis of a single subjective point of view which imposes itself as unique and absolute¹⁵.

Furthermore, the icon is not constituted as a perspective system with a single vanishing point in the viewer: it presents multiple points of convergence and each object represented has its own perspective. This is what Florensky means when he speaks of polycentricity¹⁶: the property according to which the individual elements of reality are not simply things, but rather "centers of being, condensations of being subject to their own laws and each having their own form" which cannot be considered as "indifferent and passive material that can be used to fill any pattern" but "they must be understood according to their life, they must be represented through themselves (...) and not in the glimpses of a perspective prepared in advance" [Florensky, 1985, p. 137].

The inverted and polycentric perspective of the icon is contrasted by Florensky with the linear and unicentric one of the Renaissance painting, which expresses a specific conception of reality based on the claim, by the human subject, of the absolute value of his own point of view in relation to reality, therefore conceived as pure lifeless matter. This perspective, consciously or not, removes reality from its transcendent dimension, trivializes it, makes it a dead material that can be manipulated, an object of man's technical will.

¹⁵ See: [Cantelli, 1997, p. 105].

¹⁶ See: [Florensky, 1985].

Here the two types of perspective reproduce the ontological dualism on which Florensky's reflection is based: on the one hand the illusory nature of the everyday and sensitive world, which corresponds to the illusory naturalism of linear perspective; on the other, the reality of divine truth and multifaceted life illuminated by an understanding inspired by faith.

The entire philosophical question relating to the status of the icon is played out in this fundamental distinction of real truth versus appearance. Florensky reads this story in terms of an "authentic truth" as opposed to an "inauthentic truth," and therefore his initial statement regarding the "falsity" of naturalistic religious art, developed in the Florentine Renaissance, is explained.

The truth of the icon stands against the truth of Western sacred art, as an object that does not have its end in itself, but in a tension of *adequatio*, *homoiosis*, to an eternal archetype, with which, being the *Deus Absconditus*, can only establish a symbolic relationship¹⁷.

Florensky defines his aesthetic vision as a denial of the naturalistic path undertaken by Western art, the criticism of which he carries out starting from the technical artifice on which the entire adventure of his mimetic illusionism is based: linear perspective.

Florensky's reasoning starts from considerations of a geometric nature: in *Itoghi* he starts from the idea of representation of a point in a space and for Florensky it is all too evident that "the awareness of the single point in the here and now has no reality whatsoever" [Florensky, 1974, p. 95] and to look for the same single point in a linear perspective "is the attempt of the individual consciousness to detach itself from reality, even from its own reality" [Florensky, 1974, p. 94]. The supposed "truthfulness" of the linear perspective representation is thus refuted at its roots: the perspective point of view does not establish an adequate description of reality, but the construction of a unitary and coherent representation, convenient for the observer, through the election of a single point of view, that of the human observer, and the exclusion of all other points of view. Therefore the content of the perspective is defined negatively as the negation of any other reality than that of the given point, if in fact a reality were admitted outside this point, another point of view would also be possible, and therefore the basic postulate of perspective, perspective unity, would disappear.

Florensky delves into these aspects in *Obratnaja Perspektiva*, starting from the more technical aspects and then expanding to considerations on their assumptions and philosophical implications.

¹⁷ For the relation between the ineffability of the One and the symbolic knowledge see: [Beierwaltes, 1997] and especially the milestone of the symbolic theology: [Pseudo-Dionysius, 1987].

After having noted how Russian icons from the 14th and 16th centuries show an apparent coarseness and continuous transgressions of every canon of naturalistic representation widespread in Western painting, he also notes how in them details and planes are represented together in the same spatial plane which cannot be visible at the same time. Thus “of the Gospel three sides and even the rib are seen simultaneously, the face is represented with the temples, ears and top of the skull turned forward and almost unfolded on the surface of the icon, with some parts of the surface of the nose and other parts of the visage, that should not be visible, turned towards the viewer” [Florensky, 1993b, p. 178]. Similarly, “the parallel lines that are not on the plane, which according to linear perspective should converge towards the horizon line, are instead divergent in the icon” [Florensky, 1993b, p. 178]. In short, a fundamental characteristic of reversed perspective, for Florensky, is the polycentricity of the representation: The drawing is constructed as if the eye were looking at the various parts of this changing place.

What does all this mean, the author asks? Are these simple errors or incorrectness?

It is instead very probable that in these painters there was a precise intention which aimed to paint not so much the object or nature as it appears to our senses, but their “scheme of reconstruction”, almost “potential folds” of the image itself. All aimed at indicating, on the one hand, a space of the icon different from a simple and illusory extension of our physical space; on the other, a conception of the world radically different from that established in modernity. In the essay *Obratnaja perspektiva* Florensky dwells on describing this aspect above all: the need for illusion which, starting from Greek culture, and from Anaxagoras and Democritus in particular, has made itself felt in an overbearing way; the desire to have a look at the artificial and illusionistic world, “as if,” the search for spectacle. For Florensky, this deception originates from the Greek theater and finds its full fulfillment in the Renaissance perspective and ends up leading to a spiritually sterile relationship with the world, where “life is only spectacle, and in no way action” [Florensky, 1993b, p. 178].

A representation that wanted to be properly realistic should instead be polycentric. In the Middle Ages, for Florensky, the concept came forward that reality, which is at least three-dimensional, could not however be brought back to a two-dimensional plane. There was a perception that “representing space on the plane is possible, but it cannot be done otherwise than by destroying the form of the represented” [Florensky, 1993a, p. 124]. Hence the final judgment on the capacity for truth of mimetic art, since “naturalism is forever impossible” [Florensky, 1993b, p. 248].

From this observation, the spiritual and symbolic space of the icon represents for Florensky the only artistic representation that can have ambitions of aesthetic truth.

Precisely through the resistance and non-belonging of the icon to the space of the physical world as this is perceived by man, it manifests the desire for a meaning other than the represented, or which through the represented tends towards the spiritual and metaphysical.

The vision of the world that it expresses is, as Trubeckoj recalls, “not a portrait but a prototype of future transfigured humanity” [Trubeskoj, 1965, p. 24]:

Our ancient ancestors were not philosophers but seers who expressed their ideas not in words, but in colors (...). The iconographers of Ancient Russia with wonderful clarity and strength embodied in forms and colors what filled their soul: the vision of a different vital truth and a different conception of the world. Trying to express in words the essence of their response, I am well aware that there is none capable of adequately conveying the beauty and power of this incomparable language of religious symbols.

[Trubeskoj, 1965, p. 13]

The icon does not establish a descriptive relationship with the objects of the world as from signifier to signified, its object is not the *how* of the world, not a possible or real state of things [Wittgenstein, 2003, prop. 6.44]: it does not belong to it as an entity among entities, but lives in it solely as a symbol, gateway and means of salvation. The icon speaks of the future, it shows the future of humanity, it responds to this world not by reflecting it as it is seen or perceived, but as it has always been and as it will be in a future that, so to speak, comes meeting the present, modifying it in its current structure, which, to paraphrase Trubeckoj through Simone Weil¹⁸, is marked by *force*, by the reification of being, which silences life by making it the object of one’s will to power¹⁹. Therefore, it is the temporal element, the fourth dimension, that gives true life to the icon and introduces a space different from the usual one; and time, together with space, is the other pillar founding the aesthetic uniqueness of the icon.

As the fourth dimension, which is added to the other three, the time of the Icon is not a simple co-presence of different times in a single one — the so-called *historia*, the ability to narrate a chronological event with a single image — but a sort of timeless present which includes within itself all possible temporalities.

The dynamics it narrates is a model as a promise of a possible transfiguration; it is the timeless vision of an archetypal instant: unlike the perspective cone which, so

¹⁸ See: [Weil, 1940–1941].

¹⁹ I evidently refer here to Nietzsche’s concept of “Wille zur Macht”. See: [Nietzsche, 1996].

to speak, targets the object of individual volition, it is given in an inverted temporal perspective, revealing an anticipated future, which realizes a past prophecy in the present.

In the icon the faithful see a possible transfiguration: in the image of Christ, Mary and the saints he sees the possibility of the redemption already announced in the Gospels, which finds living testimony, and therefore renewal of the announcement, in the iconic revelation²⁰.

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²⁰ See: [Trubeskoj, 1965, pp. 13 sgg].

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