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**Panofsky, Cassirer, and Perspective as Symbolic Form**

**Allister Neher**

**A Thesis**

**in**

**The Humanities Doctoral Program**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Panofsky, Cassirer, and Perspective as Symbolic Form**

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Concordia University, 2000

Since its publication in 1924, Erwin Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form* has been at the centre of debates in art history about the nature of pictorial space and its relation to lived experience. It is interesting though that despite the central role that this work has been given, no one has been able to provide an adequate account of what Panofsky meant by claiming that perspective is a *symbolic form*. Panofsky borrowed the term 'symbolic form' from the German neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer, who called his philosophy the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Most art historians have not been able to make sense of Panofsky's claim because they have not been sufficiently familiar with the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms and the philosophical traditions from which it derives. Other art historians, who have the necessary philosophical background, have maintained however that Panofsky's work was not in any significant sense indebted to Cassirer's philosophy. This dissertation counters that assessment by offering a detailed analysis of what is involved in the claim that perspective is a symbolic form. The analysis unites an exposition of Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms with an in-depth study of the philosophical assumptions at work in Panofsky's early art theoretical writings, and demonstrates how Panofsky's claim is in close accord with both the spirit and major tenets of Cassirer's philosophy.

**To John and Alice Neher, whose selflessness and hard work created a future in which their son could have the opportunity to think about the foundations of art history.**

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\*\*\*\*\*

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## INTRODUCTION

Without doubt the great majority of art historians would agree that Erwin Panofsky was one of the figures who contributed most to the development of the discipline in the twentieth century. His erudition was legendary, and he brought it to bear on an impressive range of subjects central to the history of art, including perspective.<sup>1</sup> Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form*<sup>2</sup> remains one of the most important texts on the history and nature of pictorial space; as Hubert Damisch has put it: "Qui s'interroge aujourd'hui sur la perspective, au double titre d'objet de connaissance et d'objet de pensée, le champ où il lui faut opérer reste soumis à la juridiction d'un texte désormais classique, mais qui n'en compose pas moins, à plus d'un demi-siècle de distance, l'horizon et le point de référence obligé de toute réflexion sur cet objet et ses entours, pour ne rien dire de ses implications théoriques et philosophiques."<sup>3</sup> Such evaluations could be multiplied for pages. The importance of *Perspective as Symbolic Form* is not confined though to the history of art; W. J. T. Mitchell has suggested that "The current revival of interest in Panofsky is surely a symptom of the pictorial turn, Panofsky's magisterial range, his ability to move with authority from ancient to modern art, to borrow provocative and telling insights from philosophy, optics, theology, psychology, and philology, make him an inevitable model

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Lascault, in an aptly appropriated Kantian turn of phrase, has said that "L'érudition de Panofsky est la condition de possibilité des découvertes parfois étonnantes qu'il formule, de la nouveauté de son discours," Gilbert Lascault, "Pour une histoire complexe," in *Pour un temps/Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Jacques Bonnet (Paris: les Éditions de Minuit, 1983), 188.

<sup>2</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991). Originally published as "Die Perspektive als 'symbolische Form'," in the *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg 1924-1925* (Leipzig & Berlin, 1927), pp.258-330.

<sup>3</sup> Hubert Damisch, "Panofsky am Scheidewege," in *Pour un temps/Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Jacques Bonnet (Paris: les Éditions de Minuit, 1983), 101.

and starting point for any general account of what is now called 'visual culture'.<sup>4</sup> The resurgence of interest in the 1980's and 1990's in Panofsky's early theoretical works has engendered an impressive body of publications that explore the ideas and arguments in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, but what is strikingly absent from the deliberations and disputes is a thorough and comprehensive examination of what Panofsky meant by calling perspective a *symbolic form*. And this is a matter that cannot be side-stepped, for, as the title announces, it is the defining claim of the work, and any exposition or evaluation of the text must be build around it.

It is not that no one has commented on his use of the term '*symbolic form*,' or that no one has ventured to reflect on why he might have chosen to employ it, but the reflections that have been offered have been noticeably thin, and no convincing effort has been made to determine how the idea of a symbolic form, which was taken over from Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of culture, informs Panofsky's project.<sup>5</sup> Consider this representative situation: one picks up William V. Dunning's book *Changing Images of Pictorial Space* and discovers that on this question he cites Michael Kubovy's book *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art*, to which one turns only to be referred to Samuel Edgerton's *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective*<sup>6</sup> (a strategy that I have come across more than once). So, what does the oft-deferred to Edgerton have to say? He begins not very hopefully by claiming that "Unfortunately, Panofsky never explained

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<sup>4</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. Ralph Manheim, 3 vols: vol 1, *Language*; vol.2 *Mythic Thought*; vol.3 *The Phenomenology of Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953-1957). These three volumes represent the core of the philosophy of symbolic forms, but as we shall see all of Cassirer's works are part of the same project.

<sup>6</sup> William V. Dunning, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space: A History of Spatial Illusion in Painting* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 38. Michael Kubovy, *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 164-5. Samuel Y. Edgerton, Jr., *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 153-65.

definitively just what he meant by the phrase "symbolic form,"<sup>7</sup> but he perseveres, and the result is worth quoting at length:

The symbols that man uses to communicate ideas about the objective world have an autonomy all their own. Indeed, the human mind systematizes these symbols into structures that develop quite independently of whatever order might exist in the natural world to begin with . . . .

The real thrust of [Panofsky's] essay was not to prove that the ancients believed the visual world was curved or that Renaissance perspective was a mere artistic convention, but that *each historical period in Western civilization had its own special "perspective,"* a particular symbolic form reflecting a particular *Weltanschauung*. Thus linear perspective was the peculiar answer of the Renaissance period to the problems of representing space . . . .

In the 15th century, there emerged mathematically ordered "systematic space," infinite, homogeneous, and isotropic, making possible the advent of linear perspective. . . . Linear perspective, whether "truth" or not, thus became the symbolic form of the Italian Renaissance because it reflected the general world view of the Italian people at this particular moment in history.<sup>8</sup>

To anyone familiar with the Kantian critical project and how it was transformed in Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, this will not do at all. And unfortunately these nebulous, unsubstantiated conjectures, born from a vague cultural relativism and delivered in an pseudo-Hegelian tone, represent the rule rather than the exception when the discussion turns to the question of what Panofsky meant by calling perspective a symbolic form. Surely one can do better than this.

Indeed, one can do better than this, but that requires a background in philosophy as well as the history of art. Hence, one often finds art historians who attempt to side-step the question, or ignore it, or, like James Elkins in *The Poetics of Perspective*,<sup>9</sup> do both. Surprisingly, the art historians who have the requisite qualifications have either not been

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<sup>7</sup> Edgerton, *op. cit.*, 154.

<sup>8</sup> Block quote as it is presented in Kubovy, *op. cit.*, 163-4 (from Edgerton, *op. cit.*, 156, 157-8, and 161).

<sup>9</sup> James Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).



forthcoming or they have thought that the question was not consequential. Damisch can serve as our representative of the last opinion:

In truth, these questions [about the philosophical status of perspective in the symbolic order] do not seem to have interested Panofsky, whose intention was, as he says quite openly, "to extend Ernst Cassirer's felicitous term [i.e., 'symbolic form'] to the history of art." The fact is, however, that, far from making reference to it from the start, he only introduces it after extended developments, supposedly based on psychophysiology, that directly contradict Cassirer's arguments because they take the retinal image, which has nothing to do with the symbolic order, to be the touchstone of perspective construction. And as for the definition he uses, which holds that perspective is one of those "symbolic forms" by means of which "intellectual meaning becomes so closely linked to a concrete sign as to indistinguishable from it," it is sufficiently vague and generalized to justify any interpretation one would like.<sup>10</sup>

My aim in this dissertation is, in summary, to displace the kind of indefinite and imprecise account that we find in Edgerton with one that is substantial and philosophically rigorous, and in turn counter those who agree with Damisch by showing that Panofsky's book is in reality closely guided by the doctrines of the philosophy of symbolic forms.

The title of my dissertation could have been "How Could Perspective Be a Symbolic Form?" That is the question that has guided its development. There are though two subsidiary questions that need to be answered in order to address the main one: the first is what does it mean to call something a symbolic form?" and the second is "what did Erwin Panofsky mean when he said that perspective is a symbolic form?" Clearly, the two are not equivalent: the question of what a symbolic form is and what can count as one can only be answered within the context of Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, while the question of what Panofsky meant depends upon how he understood Cassirer's philosophy and how he saw perspective as fitting it.

The conceptually prior question is obviously "what does it mean to call something a symbolic form?" Accordingly, Part I of the dissertation is devoted to providing an answer,

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<sup>10</sup> Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995), 11-12. Originally published as *L'Origine de la perspective* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987).

which takes the form of a general account of Cassirer's philosophy. The reading that I provide of Cassirer's philosophy is not intended to be complete (though it is a serviceable introduction to his work); my intention rather is to focus on those aspects of the philosophy of symbolic forms that bear most directly on answering the second question.

Chapter I is devoted to the philosophical environment in which Cassirer developed as a philosopher, his connection to the Marburg school of Neo-Kantianism, how he moved beyond it, and how he took from it the idea of the transcendental method, which he turned to his own distinctive purposes. Chapter II raises the question of what a symbolic form is, which leads to a discussion of the idea of symbolic pregnance and a number of other tenets that are foundational to Cassirer's philosophy. Chapter III deepens our understanding of the doctrine of symbolic pregnance, discusses Cassirer's reflections in the posthumous fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* on the ultimate basis of his philosophy, and addresses the important issue of how to identify and individuate symbolic forms. Chapter IV begins an investigation into Cassirer's concept of the symbol and the symbolic by introducing and examining the fundamental Kantian ideas upon which they depend. Chapter V continues this investigation and provides a more extensive account of how Cassirer's theory of the symbol is derived from Kant's concept of schemata. In conjunction with this, it also examines how the basic principles of Cassirer's structuralism are to be found in Kant's philosophy, particularly in what Kant says about form in the *Critique of Judgment*. The chapter closes by uniting these topics on form and structure in a discussion of how Cassirer's concept of the symbol is related to the idea of propositional function. Chapter VI provides an expanded context for Cassirer's concept of the symbol by comparing it to Saussure's and Peirce's models of the sign. These comparisons also reveal more about the general structuralist orientation of the philosophy of symbolic forms. Chapter VII concludes Part I with a discussion of Hegel, the other philosopher to whom the philosophy of symbolic forms is most indebted, and it provides a basic exposition of

those elements of Hegel's philosophy that are pertinent to Cassirer's approach (and to Panofsky's model of art historical explanation).

Part II works towards answering its question incrementally, while setting out the framework of issues and influences that formed Panofsky's early art theoretical writings, in which *Perspective as Symbolic Form* is situated. Only the last two chapters deal directly with *Perspective as Symbolic Form*; the other chapters lead up to these by supplying the contexts necessary for understanding it. In this regard the other chapters perform two tasks: they reveal the range of questions that Panofsky was exploring in his other early art theoretical writings up to, and including, the publication of *Perspective as Symbolic Form*; and they discuss concepts that were operative in art history at the time.

The body of secondary literature that has come to surround Panofsky's writings is now immense, and it is not my intention to try to provide a survey of Panofsky's reception in the current history of art history. Nevertheless, a significant portion of that literature will be discussed, but it will always be submitted to the development of the greater argument that runs from the beginning to the end of the dissertation. The same is true for the literature on perspective, which in any case can no longer be surveyed, as it has reached, in Kant's terms, the mathematically sublime.

The first chapter of Part II, Chapter VIII, has two principal aims: it introduces the milieu in which Panofsky began studying art history, and it examines Panofsky's earliest essay on art theory, which was a critique of Wölfflin's principles of art history and his doctrine of the double root of style. The comparison of Panofsky's and Wölfflin's theoretical concerns is instructive, for it brings out quite clearly the nature of Panofsky's Neo-Kantian orientation at this early stage. Following the discussion in Chapter VIII, and in preparation for the chapters to come, Chapter IX is an inquiry into the role and significance that the concept of style had in Panofsky's era. I examine various developments in the history of the concept of style as well as the special status it achieved as a medium for historical revelation. I also discuss, paying particular attention to

Panofsky, how style was used to order the material of art history and entrench cultural prejudices. Chapter X is devoted wholly to Riegl's approach to art history and to his concept of *Kunstwollen*, which was his replacement for the concept of style. This chapter not only provides further background for the practice of art history in Panofsky's era, it provides a general framework for the discussion in the next chapter of a series of essays in which Panofsky attempts to give art history a foundation in Neo-Kantian philosophy. The main goal then of Chapter XI is to furnish an account of what the concept of *Kunstwollen* meant for Panofsky, how he intended to give it a role in art history that was an equivalent to Kant's categories for empirical knowledge, and how that undertaking was developed and transformed in the movement between the essays "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*," "On the Relationship Between Art History and Art Theory," and "The History of the Theory of Human Proportions as a Reflection of the History of Styles." In conjunction with these discussions, I also indicate some of the ways in which Panofsky's purely theoretical works connect to his more straightforward art historical studies. The principal aim of the next chapter, Chapter XII, is to offer a critical exposition of "The Problem of Historical Time" and "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art and the Interpretation of Their Content." The questions addressed in both works complete the pattern of issues that serves as the background for *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. Examining these works also allows us to make further links between Panofsky's German and English language writings, and to discuss some contemporary evaluations of these links and the essays themselves. Chapter XIII is an exposition of the major ideas and main lines of argument in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, and, finally, Chapter XIV answers the question of what it means to call perspective a symbolic form by bringing together in a concluding synthesis the topics that have been presented in the chapters that have preceded it.

**PART I**

**THE PHILOSOPHY OF SYMBOLIC FORMS**

CHAPTER I  
THE BACKGROUND TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF SYMBOLIC FORMS

In his Preface to the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*,<sup>1</sup> Charles W. Hendel aptly remarks that one of the reasons why Cassirer's contributions to philosophy were overlooked in the English speaking world was that he has was taken to be primarily a philosopher of science and an historian of philosophy. In good part, the explanation of this has to do with the translation and dissemination of his works, for only a small number of them were translated and readily available during his lifetime, and all of those confirmed this characterization of him. In *Structuralism: The Art of the Intelligible*, Peter Caws offers an equally apt reason for why Cassirer's achievements have been passed over--his philosophical language suggested that he was too closely associated with yesterday's trends: "Had it not been, in fact, for an unfortunate terminological choice, Ernst Cassirer would certainly now be recognized as the founder of philosophical structuralism. . . . The title [*The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*] reflects perhaps too stubborn a fidelity to his Kantian origins; at all events it did not catch the philosophical imagination."<sup>2</sup> Even this sympathetic evaluation though is grounded in a characterization that would have irked Cassirer, for his fidelity to Kantianism was more formal than orthodox and doctrinaire. Another, related, reason for Cassirer's neglect has been suggested by Nelson Goodman; to most contemporary North American cultural historians, Cassirer's vocabulary and style

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<sup>1</sup> Charles W. Hendel, Preface for *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Caws, *Structuralism: The Art of the Intelligible* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1988), 16.

seems to emit suspicious echoes from unpopular, philosophical affiliations: "his emphasis on myth, his concern with the comparative study of cultures, and his talk of the human spirit have been mistakenly associated with current trends to mystical obscurantism, anti-intellectual intuitionism, or anti-scientific humanism. Actually these attitudes are as alien to Cassirer as to my own skeptical, analytic, constructionalist orientation."<sup>3</sup>

So there are a variety of reasons to disregard Cassirer's writings. Accepting them though would be a mistake; as I intend to show, Cassirer occupies quite a unique space in the history of Western philosophy, and his work points with equal strength to the interests of the present and to the debates of the past. In this first part of this dissertation I will present a more complete and adequate picture of Cassirer's philosophy, one that reveals not only his allegiance to classical German philosophy, but also one that makes clear his contributions to contemporary philosophical and cultural discussions. Without a full appreciation of the scope of Cassirer's philosophical vision the philosophy of symbolic forms is not comprehensible, and neither is Panofsky's claim that perspective is a symbolic form. Let us begin by situating Cassirer within his philosophical tradition.

The book that Cassirer was most noted for during his lifetime, on this continent at least, was *Substance and Function*,<sup>4</sup> a work that allowed for his ready identification as a philosopher of science associated with the Marburg school of Neo-Kantianism. That Cassirer "belonged" to the Marburg school is more than geographically true. During his early philosophical career Neo-Kantianism was a prominent if not the dominant philosophical force in Germany. As Lewis White Beck has said, "men entered and left the [Neo-Kantian] movement as if it were a church or a political party; members of one school blocked the appointments and promotions of members of the others; eminent Kant scholars

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<sup>3</sup> Nelson Goodman, "Words, Works, Worlds," in *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function and Einstein's Theory of Relativity*, trans. William Curtis Swabey and Marie Collins Swabey (New York: Dover Publications, 1953).

and philosophers who did not found their own schools or accommodate themselves to one of the established schools tended to be neglected as outsiders and condemned as amateurs."<sup>5</sup> It was within this contest of doctrines that Cassirer took up the study of philosophy. Like other puzzled students, Cassirer looked for an ariadnian thread to lead him to a clear appreciation of the significance of Kant's work, and he found it in a course given by Georg Simmel at the University of Berlin: "In one of the first hours [Simmel] gave a short bibliography of the literature on Kant and it was on that occasion that I first heard the name of Hermann Cohen. Simmel emphasized how much he himself owed to the study of Cohen's books, but he immediately added that those books suffered from a very grave defect. They were all written, he said, in such an obscure style that as yet there was probably no one who had succeeded in deciphering them."<sup>6</sup> Up for the challenge, Cassirer immersed himself in Cohen's writings, found what he wanted, and moved to Marburg to study with Cohen.

Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp were the leading figures associated with this current of Neo-Kantianism. Their main interest was the Idealistic foundations of mathematics and natural science, and, correspondingly, the central concern of the Marburg school was with the nature of the object of knowledge as construed by scientific inquiry. Cassirer always spoke highly of Cohen and defended his work, but it is clear to anyone who has studied even the basic tenets of the philosophy of symbolic forms that this is not the path that was ultimately followed by Cassirer. True, this is a characterization that fits his well-known and well-received *Substance and Function*, but this work only represents the inception of Cassirer's philosophical enterprise. What then is there in Cassirer's approach that ties him to Cohen and Natorp and allows him to be associated with this tradition of German Neo-Kantian philosophy? At the most general level, it is a question of

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Edwards, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Volume 5* (New York: MacMillan, 1967), S.V. "Neo-Kantianism," by Lewis White Beck.

<sup>6</sup> Ernst Cassirer, "Hermann Cohen: 1842-1918," *Social Research* 10 (1943): 220-21.



sharing a certain attitude toward how Kant's achievements should be taken. As William Werkmeister has remarked:

When critics of the Marburg School of neo-Kantianism argued that the theories of Cohen and Natorp had little in common with the original views of Kant, Paul Natorp replied that it had never been the intention of the Marburg School to revive orthodox Kantianism; that, on the contrary, the step back to Kant had been taken only in order to gain a more profound understanding of the genuine insights of the Sage of Königsberg, and to advance from his position in a direction more in conformity with the developments of modern science; that, finally, the spirit of Kant, rather than any one of his propositions, was to be preserved. A poor student of Kant is he, Natorp stated, who understands the meaning of "critical philosophy" in any other way.<sup>7</sup>

Cassirer voices essentially the same sentiment in this complaint from *Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Physics*: "When my essay 'Einstein's Theory of Relativity' appeared, there were many critics who agreed with the conclusions I had drawn from the development of the new physics but who supplemented their agreement with the question whether as a 'Neo-Kantian' I was permitted to draw such conclusions. This volume will probably be exposed in still greater degree to such questions and doubts."<sup>8</sup> A similar impatience lies behind Cassirer's rebuke of Heidegger during their famous debate in 1929 at Davos, Switzerland.<sup>9</sup> Heidegger had maintained that Cassirer's Neo-Kantianism was

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<sup>7</sup> William H. Werkmeister, "Cassirer's Advance Beyond Neo-Kantianism," in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Lasalle: Open Court, 1949), 759. The text by Natorp being referred to is "Kant und die Marburger Schule," *Kant-Studien*, vol. XVIII (1910). For those not familiar with philosophical nomenclature, Kant referred to his approach as 'Transcendental' or 'Critical Idealism,' and from this follows the more generally used phrase 'critical philosophy.' For other essays in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer* that discuss Cassirer's relation to the Marburg school, see: Hendrick J. Pos, "Recollections of Ernst Cassirer," 65; Susanne K. Langer, "On Cassirer's Theory of Language and Myth," 392; James Gutmann, "Cassirer's Humanism," 446, 457-464; Helmut Kuhn, "Ernst Cassirer's Philosophy of Culture," 567.

<sup>8</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Physics*, trans. O.T. Benfey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), xxiii.

<sup>9</sup> A record of the debate, "Davoser Disputation zwischen Ernst Cassirer und Martin Heidegger," is included in Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 4th ed. (Frankfort am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1973). An abridged version in French is available in *Débat sur le Kantisme et la Philosophie et autres Textes de 1929-1931*, trans. Pierre Aubenque, J.-M. Fataud, and P. Ouillet (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1972). In English, an abridged version, "A Discussion between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger," translated by Francis Slade, can be found in Nino Langiulli, ed., *The Existentialist Tradition* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Anchor Books, 1971).

basically a theory of knowledge, and, moreover, one that was principally concerned with the epistemology of science. Cassirer retorted: "What does Heidegger mean by 'Neo-Kantianism'? To whom does he actually address himself? One ought to think of Neo-Kantianism in functional terms and not as a substantial entity. What matters is not philosophy as a doctrinal system but as a certain way of asking philosophical questions."<sup>10</sup> What did he mean by this? The following passage from the debate with Heidegger offers a partial explanation, and reveals what Cassirer held in common with Cohen and on which points he broke away from the Marburg school:

I remain within Kant's basic methodological version of the transcendental as Cohen so often formulated it. He saw the essential feature of the transcendental method in that this method begins with a fact; but he [Cohen] narrowed his general definition: begin with a fact in order to ask about the possibility of this fact, by repeatedly putting forth mathematical natural science as that which is worth asking about [Cohen however limited the scope of inquiry]. Kant did not limit the question in this way. But I ask about the possibility of the fact of language [and other cultural forms]. How does it come about, how is it thinkable that we are able to communicate from one being to another in this medium? How is it possible that we can see a work of art as something objective and definite, as an objective being, as something meaningful in its wholeness?<sup>11</sup>

So, to see Neo-Kantianism as a non-doctrinaire way of asking questions is to accept Cohen's conception of the transcendental method; but to accept Cohen's vision of the transcendental method is at the same time to accept a vision that is too narrow. A further explanation of both of these points will provide a good introduction to the background of Cassirer's philosophy.

What is the 'transcendental method'? Kant himself does not use such a phrase, but the idea behind it seems to follow naturally from his writings. Without entering into the disputes of Kant scholars over the proper understanding of the word 'transcendental,' let

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<sup>10</sup> Quotation from Carl H. Hamburg, "A Cassirer-Heidegger Seminar," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* xxv (1964): 213.

<sup>11</sup> "Davoser Disputation zwischen Ernst Cassirer und Martin Heidegger," in Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 4th ed. (Frankfort am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1973), 266-67.

us consider three passages that are relevant to the question at hand. The first passage comes from the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic*, which was written after the *Critique of Pure Reason* and intended to correct misunderstandings that had arisen through the less than enlightened reviews that followed the publication of this difficult seminal work. One confusion that it was important to Kant to clear up concerned the conflation of the ideas of the 'transcendental' and the 'transcendent': Kant uses the term 'transcendent' to refer to that which is "beyond" experience or, as some might put it, that which belongs to a "higher" reality; Kant is eager to dissociate the two terms: "High towers and metaphysically great men resembling them, round both of which there is commonly much wind, are not for me. My place is the fruitful bathos of experience; and the word 'transcendental' . . . does not signify something passing beyond all experience but something that indeed precedes it *a priori*, but that is intended simply to make knowledge possible. If these conceptions overstep experience, their employment is termed 'transcendent,' which must be distinguished from the immanent use, that is, use restricted to experience."<sup>12</sup> The two other passages to be considered come from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and appear to differ from each other somewhat in meaning and intent; nevertheless, both indicate, like the passage above, that Kant means to turn inquiry away from the objects of knowledge and toward our cognitive faculty. The first states: "I entitle *transcendental* all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects insofar as this mode of knowledge is to be possible *a priori*. A system of such concepts might be entitled transcendental philosophy."<sup>13</sup> The other passage seems to make a somewhat narrower claim:

Not every kind of knowledge *a priori* should be called transcendental, but that only by which we know that--and how--certain representations (intuitions or concepts)

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<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic*, trans. Mahaffy-Carus, rev. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950), 122n.

<sup>13</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961), 59.

can be employed or are possible purely *a priori*. The term 'transcendental,' that is to say, signifies such knowledge as concerns the *a priori* possibility of knowledge, or its *a priori* employment. Neither space nor any *a priori* geometrical determination of it is a transcendental representation; what can alone be entitled transcendental is the knowledge that these representations are not of empirical origin, and the possibility that they can yet relate *a priori* to objects of experience. . . . The distinction between the transcendental and the empirical belongs therefore only to the critique of knowledge; it does not concern the relation of that knowledge to its objects.<sup>14</sup>

This passage is somewhat narrower in that it appears to confine the transcendental to our knowledge "that and how" certain features of our cognitive capacity are *a priori*; its expressed concern is with the possibility of the *a priori* conditions of empirical knowledge, and not with the setting out of "a system of such *a priori* concepts." Hermann Cohen's conception of the transcendental method seems to be derived from this understanding of the transcendental in Kant's philosophy, and Cohen's advance beyond traditional Kantianism was to turn this doctrine into a method; that is, Cohen saw the transcendental method as a way of inquiring into the conditions of possibility of the *fact* of scientific knowledge, i.e., as an inquiry into the non empirical conditions of scientific experience as these are revealed in that collection of theories and activities we have come to accept as science (unlike Kant, however, Cohen did not take the fact of science as a static "given" but as a historically specific construction that has been generated). For Cassirer, this was the "firm and secure ground" he had been seeking: "Cohen gave for the first time a critical interpretation of the entire Kantian system which, with all of its penetration into the specific detail of Kant's fundamental doctrines, sets, nevertheless, one single systematic idea into the centre of the investigation. This is the idea of the 'transcendental method.'"<sup>15</sup> In Cohen's philosophy,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>15</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th ed., S.V. "Neo-Kantianism," by Ernst Cassirer. This reading of Kant became canonical for Cassirer, as is evident in this well-expressed statement of what distinguishes Kant's approach: "Kant's 'idealism' is not 'subjective' idealism in the sense of Descartes. As Kant explicitly emphasizes, in order to distinguish it from every kind of subjective idealism, it is a 'formal idealism.' How does this 'formal' idealism proceed and how is it distinguished from mere subjective Idealism? It too begins with the 'work,' and it uses this work in order to find out, through retrospective 'reflection' on the structure of the work, what forms are invested in it. This is initially the case with natural science. It is first taken as a 'factum,' but it is not simply taken for what it is--an aggregate of truths and knowledge; rather, inquiry is made into its systematic 'form,' into the principles, basic rules, and axioms that 'constitute' it and the

then, the transcendental method was a way of asking questions, a way of proceeding in inquiring how the fact of science is possible; how Cassirer understood this approach and how he broadened it will become clear as my account of the philosophy of symbolic forms develops.

Werkmeister argues that in relation to the epistemological basis of the exact natural sciences Cassirer moved beyond the Marburg school in only a limited way, and that this was so only because he was in a position, unlike Paul Natorp for example, to take into account the revolutionary developments that followed from the work of scientists such as Einstein and Heisenberg. Cassirer then was able to provide more advanced accounts of space and time, the object of scientific knowledge, and causality, but, as Werkmeister says,

"Natorp . . . published his book, *Die logischen Grundlagen der exakten Wissenschaften*, five years before Einstein's general theory of relativity became known. Cassirer, on the other hand, published his monograph, *Zur Einsteinschen Relativitätstheorie*, six years after the general theory of relativity first appeared in print. This circumstance alone, I believe, is sufficient to account for whatever difference concerning the interpretation of space and time [etc.] there may be in the writings of these two men.<sup>16</sup>

Werkmeister goes on to add: "When Natorp's book was republished without revision in 1923, Cassirer's interpretation of relativity was well known, and Natorp, in the new preface to his book, referred his readers to Cassirer's monograph, saying that this monograph provided a substitute for Natorp's own interpretation, since it "contains much of what I myself might have said concerning this matter."<sup>17</sup>

However, there is no doubt that Cassirer did move beyond Marburg Neo-Kantianism in other very significant ways, and that he wanted this to be recognized;

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'conditions of its possibility.' In the same way the question is raised about the 'conditions of possibility' of morality, or art, and so on." Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, ed. John Michael Krois and Donald Phillip Verene, trans. John Michael Krois (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 188.

<sup>16</sup> Werkmeister, *Cassirer's Advance Beyond Neo-Kantianism*, 782.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 784.

apparently, in his later years he was provoked that he was still labeled a Kantian,<sup>18</sup> and as John Michael Krois relates: "When Paul Arthur Schilpp approached Cassirer to write an autobiographical statement for the Library of Living Philosophers volume on his thought, the thing foremost in Cassirer's mind was that this would finally provide him with the chance to clarify his relationship to Cohen. Cassirer said: 'Now I will be able to finally make clear for others my relationship to Cohen, and I'm glad to get to do this. My ties to him and my later separation from him--both are important.'" <sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, Cassirer's untimely death prevented this statement from being written.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that Cassirer's most striking departure from Cohen was his expansion of the range of application of the transcendental method, which was the founding insight for the philosophy of symbolic forms. The story, or perhaps by now we should say the legend, goes that in Berlin "in 1917, just as he entered a street car to ride home, the conception of the symbolic forms flashed upon him; a few minutes later, when he reached his home, the whole plan of his new voluminous work was ready in his mind, in essentially the form in which it was carried out in the course of the subsequent ten years."<sup>20</sup> What flashed upon him was the realization that science is not the only form of apprehending the world that can be investigated through the transcendental method; other human activities that give us a realm of experience--natural language, myth, and art, for example--can also be interrogated in terms of the constitutive, non empirical conditions that make them possible. Thus, to cite what is probably Cassirer's most well-known remark about his philosophy, the Kantian critique of reason became the critique of culture.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> John Herman Randall, Jr., "Cassirer's Theory of History as Illustrated in His Treatment of Renaissance Thought," in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (LaSalle: Open Court, 1949), 711.

<sup>19</sup> John Michael Krois, *Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 41-42. The quotation comes from Tomi Cassirer, *Mein Leben mit Ernst Cassirer*, 94. The English translation is Krois's.

<sup>20</sup> Dimitry Gawronsky, "Ernst Cassirer: His Life and Work," in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (LaSalle: Open Court, 1949), 25.

<sup>21</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, 80.

Recall that Cohen had developed the transcendental method only in relation to his investigation into the conditions of possibility of scientific knowledge. He and Natorp were, in this regard, essentially still in harmony with the spirit of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, for, like Kant, they too wanted to discover how it is possible that our empirical knowledge of the natural world can be stated in laws and principles that describe contingent phenomena in terms of necessary relations. Cohen and Natorp moved beyond Kant though in realizing that the principles that determine our cognitive relation to the world are not static. As Krois puts it, perhaps somewhat misleadingly, Cohen operationalized transcendental philosophy: "Cohen eliminates all the static givens in Kant's philosophy--sensitivity, the categories, the object of knowledge, the subject as the giver of the moral law; they are no longer taken as given (*gegeben*) but rather set as a task (*aufgegeben*). Philosophy starts by asking about a 'given' like the fact of science only to discover that this fact is a construction. Philosophy discovers in every given a generation."<sup>22</sup> What became evident to Cassirer was that Cohen's approach is itself based on a glaring limitation, which is shared by the entire idealist tradition of modern Western philosophy:

For Descartes, and for all the rationalists, the systems of spirit and reason coincide. They hold that philosophy can be said to encompass and permeate the *universitas*, the concrete totality of the spirit, only if it can be deduced from a *logical* principle. Thus the pure form of logic becomes again the prototype and model for every form of the human spirit. And just as in Descartes, with whom the systems of classical idealism began, so likewise in Hegel with whom they ended, this methodic relationship is still evident. More sharply than any thinker before him, Hegel stated that we must think of the human spirit as a *concrete* whole, that we must not stop at the simple concept but develop it in the totality of its manifestations. And yet in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, with which he endeavoured to fulfill this task, he intended merely to prepare the ground for *logic*.<sup>23</sup>

Cohen, whose approach is founded on the privileging of logic and scientific knowledge (especially in his *System der Philosophie*), fits squarely within this tradition, a tradition for

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<sup>22</sup> Krois, 40.

<sup>23</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, 83.

which Cassirer has an even stronger indictment: "Indeed, this ultimate reduction of all cultural forms to the *one* form of logic seems to be implied by the concept of philosophy itself and particularly by the fundamental principle of philosophical idealism."<sup>24</sup> In today's terms, what Cassirer realized on that street car in Berlin in 1917 was that modern Western philosophy was essentially logocentric.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 84.



CHAPTER II  
SYMBOLIC FORMS AS CULTURAL FORMS AND THE PROBLEM OF SYMBOLIC  
PREGNANCE

In parting ways with Cohen and the Marburg school of Neo-Kantianism, Cassirer was also effecting a transformation of philosophy itself. It is to this transformation that I would now like to turn, and begin my discussion of the central tenets of the philosophy of symbolic forms.

The founding insight has already been stated: to reduce all forms of human experience to the rule of logic and the concept is to fundamentally misrepresent their unique modes of apprehension and ways of unifying experience. Myth, language, art and other cultural forms must be investigated in such a way that their autonomy is recognized and preserved, and that investigation must proceed through an application of the transcendental method that reveals in each case the distinctive nonempirical conditions that make the symbolic form in question possible. The philosophy of symbolic forms "is not concerned exclusively or even primarily with the purely scientific, exact understanding of the world; it is concerned with all the forms assumed by man's understanding of the world,"<sup>1</sup> and no one form is to be granted priority over the others.

What exactly though is a symbolic form? This apparently straightforward question requires a very elaborate answer (which is why the question of how perspective could be a symbolic form has gone unanswered). Unavoidably, the answer will have to be given in

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<sup>1</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3. *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 13.

installments throughout the chapters of Part I. As a first installment, let us begin by examining how the term is employed in Cassirer's writings.

Carl Hamburg has pointed out that Cassirer uses 'symbolic form' in at least three distinct, though related, senses:

(1) It covers what is more frequently referred to as the "symbolic relation," the "symbol-concept," the "symbolic function," or, simply, the "symbolic" (*das Symbolische*).

(2) It denotes the variety of *cultural forms* which--as myth, art, religion, language, and science--exemplify the realms of application for the symbol-concept.

(3) It is applied to space, time, cause, number, etc. which--as the most pervasive *symbol-relations*--are said to constitute, with characteristic modifications, such domains of objectivity as listed under (2).<sup>2</sup>

It is usage (2) that is most common in Cassirer's writings and would most readily come to mind when asked to explain what the term 'symbolic form' means, but that does not indicate that it has theoretical priority over (1) and (3); in fact, very little of substance can be said about the cultural forms it denotes without a thorough treatment of the other two. Nevertheless, it is a good place to begin, for it is at this general and familiar level that it is easiest to set out the broad features of Cassirer's philosophy, and become acquainted with his language.

Let us start with a quotation that could serve as a short introduction to the idea of cultural forms as symbolic forms:

Every authentic function of the human spirit has this decisive characteristic in common with cognition: it does not merely copy but rather embodies an original, formative power. It does not express passively the mere fact that something is present but contains an independent energy of the human spirit through which the simple presence of the phenomenon assumes a definite "meaning," a particular ideational content. This is as true of art as it is of cognition; it is as true of myth as it is of religion. All live in particular image-worlds, which do not merely reflect the empirically given, but which rather produce it in accordance with an independent principle.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Carl H. Hamburg, "Cassirer's Conception of Philosophy," in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Lasalle: Open Court, 1949), 77. See also Carl H. Hamburg, *Symbol and Reality: Studies in the Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956).

<sup>3</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, 78.

As general as it is, we can glean from this passage most of the major elements that constitute the idea of cultural forms as symbolic forms. Perhaps the most fundamental feature is suggested in the last sentence: "All live in particular image-worlds, which do not merely reflect the empirically given, but which rather produce it in accordance with an independent principle." Such a statement has its roots in the decisive reorientation that philosophy was offered by Kant's "Copernican Revolution,"<sup>4</sup> but Cassirer has his own doctrine to propound, and this is how he would expand on the above statement:

The metaphysics that we combat is twofold, and its claims seem to derive from opposing presuppositions. The worldview of "Symbolic Idealism" is opposed both to the metaphysics of dogmatic Realism and to the metaphysics of so-called Positivism. It combats something which, despite all their apparent differences, is a common basic feature in both of them: that they see the source of intellectual life and its functions in some kind of "reproduction" and "mirroring" of some "reality" given independently of them. . . . In contrast to these views, the fundamental starting point of our way of looking at things is that no separation can be made between some positively given being and the intelligent [*geistig*] functions, which are presumed to apply subsequently to this material. We have access to no "Being" of any kind--be it metaphysical or psychological in nature--prior to and independent of intelligent action, but only in and through this action. Even the very idea of severing the two from each other, of contrasting in our imagination a purely passive "givenness" with intellectual [*geistig*] "activity" is deceptive. There is no form of "Being" for us outside of these different kinds of action (in language, myth, religion, art, science) because there is no other form of determinacy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In a famous passage at the beginning of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (B xvi) Kant says: "Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them *a priori*, by means of concepts, have on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge. . . . We should then be proceeding precisely on the lines of Copernicus' primary hypothesis. Failing of satisfactory progress in explaining the movements of the heavenly bodies on the supposition that they all revolved around the spectator, he tried whether he might not have better success if he made the spectator to revolve and the stars to remain at rest." It was perhaps misleading of Kant to describe his revolution as "Copernican," for there are obvious problems with the analogy; nevertheless, the main point is clear enough: we must fundamentally reorient our epistemological stance and see objects as conforming to knowledge, and not knowledge to objects.

<sup>5</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, 223. With the publication of this volume, apparently we now have a name for Cassirer's philosophical position, i.e., "Symbolic Idealism," for this is, as far as I am aware, the first time that he has applied such a label to his philosophy.

To borrow a phrase from Nelson Goodman, for Cassirer "there is no way the world is" apart from our forms of apprehending it;<sup>6</sup> there is no master discourse with privileged access to "Reality" in-itself. This also puts us in a better position to understand the first two sentences of the passage quoted earlier: "Every authentic function of the human spirit has this decisive characteristic in common with cognition: it does not merely copy but rather embodies an original, formative power. It does not express passively the mere fact that something is present but contains an independent energy of the human spirit through which the simple presence of the phenomenon assumes a definite 'meaning,' a particular ideational content." In other words, as Kant argued for a model of empirical cognition in which the structures of consciousness are partially constitutive of experience, so Cassirer is arguing for an understanding of the other cultural forms that does not see them as attempts to replicate (or distort) a previously given reality; symbolic forms are not mirrors but, to use one of his favorite metaphors, *organs* of reality that have their own principles of formation through which worlds of experience are constituted and reality is given.

The question of what reality is for the philosophy of symbolic forms will be answered through the cumulative installments that explain the concept of symbolic form. For the moment though let me at least furnish the skeleton of an explanation by saying that Cassirer's answer is a contemporary reformulation of the one offered by Hegel's phenomenology. "The True is the whole," as Hegel succinctly says (at the beginning of what is probably the longest and most obscure text in the Western philosophical tradition);<sup>7</sup> accordingly, the truth about reality for Cassirer is the totality of what has been presented

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<sup>6</sup> Nelson Goodman, "The Way the World Is," in *Problems and Projects* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1972), 24-32.

<sup>7</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 11. What Hegel means by 'phenomenology' is entirely different from the sense that the word was later given by Husserl, and, following him, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. While there is no short explanation for what Hegel means by phenomenology, the central idea at work here is that truth lies in appearance itself and truth is attainable by surveying the breakdown of each appearance, each stage of consciousness, into its successor (its proximate truth) until we reach "absolute knowledge," in which appearances and their intrinsic defects are sublated. More will be said about this in the upcoming chapter on Hegel and Cassirer.

through the formative principles of the diverse symbolic forms. It is this Hegelian conception that motivated Cassirer, as has been revealed in archival material published in the recently released fourth volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, to initially entitle his entire project the *Phenomenology of Knowledge*, a title which he later decided to use only for the third volume.<sup>8</sup>

This explanation will become more comprehensible within the larger picture of Cassirer's philosophy. To that end, I would like to return yet again to the passage on cultural forms as symbolic forms and give a fuller explication of what is being said in its second sentence. This will allow us to introduce other important features of Cassirer philosophy, and to deepen our understanding of them by considering an important objection that has been raised about the intelligibility of the philosophy of symbolic forms. Here again is the sentence: "It does not express passively the mere fact that something is present but contains an independent energy of the human spirit through which the simple presence of the phenomenon assumes a definite "meaning," a particular ideational content." What we need to make this sentence fully intelligible is some background in Cassirer's doctrine of "symbolic pregnance" (*symbolische Prägnanz*), which is a foundational idea for his philosophy. Very tersely stated, symbolic pregnance is "the way in which a perception as a sensory experience contains at the same time a certain nonintuitive meaning which it immediately and concretely represents."<sup>9</sup> This rather abstract explanation can be made more concrete by considering an example--that of an ordinary line apprehended in varying ways --that Cassirer often uses to explain symbolic pregnance. I will let him speak for himself:

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<sup>8</sup> "Introduction by John Michael Krois and Donald Phillip Verene," *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, xv-xix. There will be ample opportunity to discuss the Hegelian aspects of Cassirer thought at the appropriate junctures, but in order to forestall possible misunderstandings, I should stress that this Hegelian element in Cassirer's philosophy does not indicate that he is in general agreement with Hegel. As we will see, they are in many ways fundamentally opposed.

<sup>9</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 202. For those not familiar with the terminology of Kantian philosophy, 'intuition' refers to, roughly, bare sensation structured by space and time, which are the *a priori* forms of intuition.

We can consider an optical structure, a simple line, for example, according to its purely expressive meaning. As we immerse ourselves in the design and construct it for ourselves, we become aware of a distinct physiognomic character in it. A peculiar mood is expressed in the purely spatial determination . . . . And here we do not merely read our own inner states subjectively and arbitrarily into the spatial form; rather, the form gives itself to us as an animated totality, an independent manifestation of life. . . . But these qualities recede and vanish as soon as we take the line in another sense--as soon as we understand it as a mathematical structure, a geometrical figure. Now it becomes a mere schema, a means of representing a universal law. Whatever does not serve to represent this law, what merely appears as an individual factor in the line, now becomes utterly insignificant . . . . The spatial form is nothing but a paradigm for the formula; it remains the mere outward cloak of an essentially unintuitive mathematical idea. . . . And once again we stand in an entirely different sphere of vision when we take the line as a mythical symbol or as an aesthetic ornament. The mythical symbol as such embraces the fundamental mythical opposition between the sacred and the profane. . . . Viewed as an ornament, the drawing seems remote both from signification in the logical-conceptual sense and from the magical-mythical warning symbol. Its meaning lies in itself and discloses itself only to pure artistic vision, to the aesthetic eye.<sup>10</sup>

So, then, in relation to our sentence under consideration, the line is "the simple presence of the phenomenon," and each cultural form--science, myth, art, and so forth--is "an independent energy of the human spirit through which [the line] . . . assumes a definite 'meaning.'" This gives us as well a less abstract understanding of Cassirer's claim that symbolic pregnance is "the way in which a perception as a sensory experience contains at the same time a certain nonintuitive meaning which it immediately and concretely represents." But the example also raises a number of questions about the idea of symbolic pregnance itself. Perhaps the most important one is this: what is the status of the phenomenon, e.g., the line, that is supposed to be the "simple presence" taken up by the various cultural forms? How can Cassirer talk about it as though it were a stable, independently known element in the different contexts of apprehension? Cassirer is not, as he says, a realist or positivist. Heralding as he does from the Kantian tradition, he can't maintain that the world is populated by pre-existing objects that can be experienced in-themselves and apart from the epistemological structures through which they are conceived

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 200-1. This example regularly occurs in Cassirer's writings. See also the discussions in "The Problem of the Symbol and Its Place in the System of Philosophy," trans. John Michael Krois, *Man and World* 11 (1978), 414.

and constituted; as he himself has said, "a bare sensation preceding all formation, is an empty abstraction. The 'given' must always be taken in a definite aspect and so apprehended."<sup>11</sup> Isn't he thinking of the "simple presence" of the phenomenon, of the line, as a kind of bare sensation to which the determination of the different symbolic forms are subsequently added? Isn't he transgressing his own principle that the world of experience is entirely mediated by symbols? If he is grounding his philosophy on objects that somehow rest outside of the symbolic order of experience, then isn't his purportedly novel approach to the question of knowledge undermined at its foundations?

In order to understand the kind of response that Cassirer would give to this type of objection, and consequently achieve our larger view of the role of symbolic pregnance in the philosophy of symbolic forms, we have to turn our attention to Cassirer's conception of the symbol or sign (what was identified as the "symbol-concept" in usage (1) in the selection from Hamburg quoted earlier).<sup>12</sup>

In one of Cassirer's more explicit statements, the symbol is defined as covering "the totality of all phenomena which--in whatever form--exhibit 'sense in the senses' (*Sinnerfuellung im Sinnlichen*) and in which something 'sensuous' (*ein Sinnliches*) is represented as a particular embodiment of 'sense' (*Bedeutung*, meaning)."<sup>13</sup> What I want to draw attention to for present purposes is Cassirer's desire to set out in his definition a clear distinction between 'sense and the senses,' between the perceptual and conceptual moments of the sign relation, even though they are to be understood as inextricably interrelated. He has more to say about this a little further on in the same text, where he adds that "the symbolic function is composed of moments which are different in principle. No

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 134. See also *Substance and Function*, 143f.

<sup>12</sup> I should alert the reader that I am now going to begin using 'symbol' and 'sign' interchangeably--they were essentially coextensive for Cassirer. On those rare occasions when it would be better to distinguish them I will indicate that I am doing so.

<sup>13</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 93. The translation from the original German that I have chosen however is not Manheim's but Hamburg's. See Hamburg's "Cassirer's Conception of Philosophy," p. 78.

genuine meaning (*Sinn*) as such is simple, but it is one and double--and this polarity, which is intrinsic to it, does not tear it asunder and destroy it, but instead represents its proper function."<sup>14</sup> It should be noted though that this clear and fast distinction is also only a rational one that cannot readily be made in an actual meaning context.

The Swedish philosopher Konrad Marc-Wogau voiced a set of objections to this conception of the symbol that parallel the concern I raised about symbolic pregnance. Marc-Wogau's principal point, which is about what is more commonly called the 'signifier/signified' relation, is parallel to the one that I raised, which is about the 'sign/object' relation, in that they both ask whether the definitional relations posited in Cassirer's account of the symbol are tenable--in the first case, it is whether the conceptual moment can be related to the sensuous moment in the form suggested; in the second, it is whether the unit of meaning can be related to its object in the fashion described. I want to consider them together because the second is, in fact, a transcendental condition for the first (more on this later), and because I think that Cassirer would answer them by way of the same strategy.

Marc-Wogau argued that in Cassirer's definition of the symbol "two moments are distinguished which are related in a specific way. When Cassirer characterizes this relation by saying that "the symbol is not 'the one or the other,' but that it represents the 'one in the other' and the 'other in the one,'" the question seems to crop up how, under such circumstances, a possible distinction between the 'one' and the 'other' could even be made. By this definition is there not posited an identity between the two moments of the symbolic relation which would conflict with the insistence upon their polarity"?<sup>15</sup> Cassirer's response to Marc-Wogau was that recent work on "implicit definitions" in logic, mathematics, and geometry prove him wrong--implicit definitions can be said to denote anything at all, as long as what they denote conforms to the stated relations between

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<sup>14</sup> The translation is Hamburg's, p. 95.

<sup>15</sup> Konrad Marc-Wogau, see *Theoria* II (1936): 279-332. The translation is Hamburg's, op. cit., 103.



themselves as set out in the axiomatic system under consideration.<sup>16</sup> Cassirer refers to, among other works, Hilbert's influential *Grundlagen der Geometrie*, in which Hilbert argues that geometrical elements and relations should not be thought of as independent entities for which explicit definitions could be given, but as terms, i.e., symbols, whose meaning is specified by the relations that are axiomatically prescribed for them; it is pointless to inquire after their meaning independent of the system through which they are defined: "The axioms which they satisfy determine and exhaust their sense."<sup>17</sup> So, in response to Marc-Wogau's assertion that if the moments of the sign relation are mutually determined, then they must also be identical, Cassirer's reply is that implicit definitions show that it is possible to have a sign in which the signifier (for example the inscription 'point') and the signified (the concept "point" in a certain axiomatic system) can nevertheless be distinguished logically, and hence are not identical, even though they cannot be determined independently of each other.

This in itself is sufficient to put the issue to rest, but it is worth pursuing the matter further because the strategy of Cassirer's defense discloses an important feature of his approach. A reader new to Cassirer, and not yet completely at home with his way of doing philosophy, will frequently encounter a tactic in his work that at first is perplexing, if not exasperating. Often, when entertaining an objection to a concept crucial to his philosophy--for example, his use of the idea of structure, or function, or symbol--Cassirer will not respond to the objection by engaging in a logical or conceptual investigation that meets it on the same level of analysis; instead, what he will do is appeal to actual research being done in various sciences and fields of inquiry and argue that this research in fact depends upon his understanding of the concept. His response to Marc-Wogau is a perfect example of this: "In his criticism, Marc-Wogau seems to have overlooked this one point, namely that the

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<sup>16</sup> Cassirer's reply to Marc-Wogau comes in Ernst Cassirer, "Zur Logik des Symbolbegriffs," *Theoria*, IV (1938), 145-75.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 169. Hamburg's translation, *op. cit.*, 105. Cassirer had discussed this question at length earlier in *Substance and Function*, see Chapter III: "The Concept of Space and Geometry," especially section IV.

reflections to which he objects, are in no way founded on purely *speculative* considerations but they are *actually* related to specific, concrete problems and to concrete *matters of fact*.<sup>18</sup> So, when Marc-Wogau tells him that his theory of the symbol is logically impossible, Cassirer, rather than taking up the question at the conceptual level, refers Marc-Wogau to what is actually being done in the most advanced areas of contemporary mathematics and geometry, saying, in effect, that if you are right this shouldn't be possible; so, either you are wrong, or all of the practioners in these areas are deluded about what they think they have accomplished.

This is a *very* compelling strategy that Cassirer uses to great effect. This tactic, it is worth noting, derives from Cassirer's adherence to Kant's basic philosophical vision and the transcendental method that was developed from it: if researchers in a given field successfully use a certain concept to make their material intelligible, then it is not up to philosophers to "nay say" their efforts on purely speculative grounds; rather, philosophers should investigate why this is successful and how it leads us to a better understanding of the conditions of possibility of the "fact" of this human activity. Carl Hamburg, in commenting on another aspect of Cassirer's reply to Marc-Wogau, describes the approach in this way:

The thesis, accordingly, that the mind (*Bewusstsein, Geist*) is symbolically active in the construction of all its universes of perception and discourse is not suggested as a discovery to be made by or to be grounded upon specifically philosophical arguments. Instead of presupposing insights different from and requiring cognitive powers or technique superior to those accessible to empirical science, the thesis is developed as issuing from an impartial reading of the scientific evidence in all branches of investigation.<sup>19</sup>

Now that we understand both the response and the strategy Cassirer adopts in taking on a objection such as Marc-Wogau's, I would like to move towards considering

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>19</sup> Hamburg, *op. cit.*, 88-89.

what Cassirer would reply to my question about symbolic pregnance, which I will fashion by extrapolating from his rebuttal of Marc-Wogau. Before I start our investigation of this question, let us remind ourselves that Cassirer is making a very strong claim about the relation between symbols or signs and reality that, for his era, went considerably beyond traditional philosophical positions. Most philosophers would have granted that knowledge is to some extent mediate, but Cassirer was maintaining a more radical position in claiming that not only all knowledge but all *experience* is mediated by symbols. Hence, there is no stepping out of the universe of signs, and there can be no issue--at least in the traditional sense--about the relation of signs to "facts." And, furthermore, there can no longer be a controversy about which medium should be given pride of place on the grand tour to the "really real." So, if there is no experience outside symbolic forms, and there is no medium that gives us privileged access to what "really" exists, how can Cassirer talk about the "simple presence" of a phenomenon as if it were a stable, independently known fact for the different contexts of apprehension?

In responding to Marc-Wogau's objection Cassirer put forward arguments that can be turned to this parallel issue of whether and how a distinction can be made in his approach between the perceptual matter of experience and the meaning relations that form it. We know that he appears to want to make such a distinction, but, given the statement of his position, it doesn't seem that he can. What he has to show, as he did earlier, is that such a distinction is conceptually tenable. To this end, Cassirer could adopt the same strategy as before, but he could also to go farther, and show that this distinction is not only logically possible, it is achievable in actuality. And it does seem that Cassirer can make this argument, for he has already shown in another context how it has been done. In Part II of the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, "The Problem of Representation and the Building Up of the Intuitive World," he discusses psychological research on thing/attribute perception that bears on this question. For simplicity, I will only consider

what is said about colour perception. Let's start with a quote in which Cassirer poses (and partially answers) our question in his own terms:

If everything that is theoretically known to us gives itself to us only as imprinted form, how can we hope to gain a theoretical understanding, as it were, of the act of imprinting as such; how can we hope to derive it? We can never gain any immediate grasp of the function as it works here, because it gives itself to us only in its product. And yet there is a way of making it at least indirectly visible, for all the structures of the theoretical world do not show one and the same mode and stability of articulation. In the structures of consciousness the phenomena are always charged, so to speak, with definite purely representative characters; but the dynamic tension that here prevails is not everywhere the same. And precisely this inequality, this variability, shows us a way of differentiating the two factors which we know only in their interrelation--of differentiating them precisely in this interrelation.<sup>20</sup>

So, it is clear that Cassirer recognizes the problem, and he has a proposal for circumventing it: we can distinguish in the way required between the meaning generating functions of consciousness and the object of their activity because these functions operate in different modes and at different levels of articulation, and through these differences they disclose to us their formative principles and the matter which they form.<sup>21</sup> How though is Cassirer's claim to be demonstrated concretely? He suggests that we examine the psychological research of H. L. F. von Helmholtz, David Katz, and Ewald Hering. Although they did not share the same theoretical orientations, they came to similar conclusions about how there is more to colour perception than physiology and how different functions of consciousness lead to different ways of apprehending colour phenomena. The following passage provides a good point of entry to the case that Cassirer wants to make:

As to colors, the basic investigations of Hering, which were continued and amplified by Katz, disclose a threefold mode of manifestation. We may take them

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<sup>20</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 122.

<sup>21</sup> In the passage just quoted Cassirer is talking about the greater modalities of signification--which will be introduced later on as the functions of expression, representation, and pure signification--but his claim applies as well to differences between signifying relations within the same modality, e.g., to different modes of colour apprehension. In Cassirer's words: "We find the same relation within a more restricted area if, instead of comparing the different modalities of signification, we confine ourselves to a single one of them." *Ibid.*, 201. He then goes on to discuss colour perception.

as simple optical conditions, as light images of determinate brightness and tonality, which we apprehend purely as such. Or else we may take them as objective colors, which do not hover in the void but adhere to definite things and come to our consciousness as the attributes of these things. In the first case we have before us the phenomenon of plain colors, which are given to us as simple, flat *quale*, linked to no objective substrate: in the later case, color appears to us as a surface color, an inherent property of a definite object. From both these modes a third is differentiated: spatial colors, i.e., colors which seem to fill a definite three-dimensional space. . . . For us the crucial point, the factor of universal significance, is that with the change of viewpoint under which the phenomenon of color is considered, the phenomenon as a whole, as an intuitive datum, undergoes at once a characteristic shift. If by a change of inner attitude we take a phenomenon which we have hitherto taken as a surface color and as such related to a definite objective vehicle and transfer it into a phenomenon of mere plain color, the total picture is [transformed]--it stands before us in a different intuitive determinacy.<sup>22</sup>

To corroborate and further elaborate on this Cassirer goes on to quote Helmholtz at length on the effects of viewing landscapes from odd angles; I will do the same:

In the usual mode of observation we seek only to judge the objects correctly as such. We know that at a certain distance green surfaces appear in a somewhat modified color tone; we accustom ourselves to disregard this change and learn to identify the altered green of distant meadows and trees with the corresponding color of nearby objects. In the case of very distant objects, such as mountains, little of the object's color can be recognized, for it is largely covered by the color of the illuminated air. This indefinite blue-green color, on which border the light-blue field of the sky or the reddish-yellow sunset above and bright green of the meadows and woods below, is very much subject to changes by contrast. For us it is the indefinite and changing color of the distance; we know the change it undergoes at different times of day and in varying illuminations, but we do not define its true character, since we have no definite object to transfer it to: what we know is precisely its shifting character. But as soon as we place ourselves in unusual circumstances, for example, looking under our arm or between our legs, the landscape appears as a flat picture. . . . And thereby the colors also lose their relation to near or distant objects and confront us purely in their intrinsic differences.<sup>23</sup>

Any student of the visual arts is of course familiar with such phenomena, but what for our purposes can be inferred from them? After examining a host of other examples, Cassirer concludes that in order for a colour to appear in any of the three modes discussed by

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 130-31.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 131-32.

Hering and Katz, it must belong to a greater system (or, to make a weaker claim, arrangement) of representation that is ordered by its own principles and orients vision in one of these three directions—even in the experience of colour there is no simple "given," for "there is no seeing and nothing visible which does not stand in some mode of spiritual vision, of ideation."<sup>24</sup> This of course is not revolutionary news, and it is not as such an answer to our question (in fact, considered as an isolated statement, it reads rather as a kind of confirmation of the problem). Nevertheless, it does open the door to an answer.<sup>25</sup> In the passage that I quoted from Cassirer where he poses the question of how we can distinguish between the meaning generating functions of consciousness and the object of their activity, he replied that we can do this because the functions operate in different modes and at different levels of articulation, and these differences—at least from a formal point of view—allow us to cleave apart the otherwise unified elements of the symbol/object relation. We can see how this would work if we return to the example of colour perception. The fact that there are experiments (scientific or informal) that we can do that allow us to shift back and forth between different ways of taking colour phenomena permits us to isolate and articulate the formative principles that constitute and orient the different modes of apprehension. And this effectively addresses the "Marc-Wogauian" kind of objection about the logical separability of the two elements. But the example of colour perception can also be used to address the further question that I raised, and Cassirer's answer, though not explicit, would I think go like this: it is without doubt true that there is no perception of a bare, simple "given" that is reality itself, and the studies on the experience of colour support this; however, what these studies also make clear is that it is possible to shift back and forth from one mode of apprehension to another, thereby revealing that each of them

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to Hamburg's way of formulating this issue in Cassirer's philosophy, but we are not at one on the statement of the solution; Hamburg's failure to clearly distinguish between questions about the signifier/signified relation, the symbol/object relation, and the question of symbolic pregnancy preclude this.

can be distinguished as a *different* mode through which to experience the *same* phenomenon, i.e., that which is identified as colour across all of the modes. To see that this is not the facile solution that it might be taken to be, recall that the question was whether Cassirer's theory of the symbol is internally coherent: can he intelligibly claim that all experience is mediated symbolically and at the same time ground it in a doctrine of symbolic pregnance that appears to want to step out of the universe of signs? He can reconcile these two if he can find a way to sensibly talk about different modes of apprehension of the same thing. Now, to return to our example, all of the ways of perceiving colour are compatible with a physical description of colour phenomena derived from physics and physiology; true, that is not how colour would be described within those modes, but the important point is that from a meta-level the physical account of colour would provide a discourse for talking about how these different modes apprehend "the same thing" in different ways. Thus, if we go back to our original example of symbolic pregnance, i.e., the simple line that is taken differently by the divers symbolic forms, the same answer can be given. It is not necessary that a neutral, true-to-reality-as-it-really-is discourse be found to describe the phenomenon that is the object of the competing claims of the various symbolic forms, but only that one be found that allows for a description of what remains consistent in the transformations that attend the different modes of apprehension. In this instance as well the physical theory of vision could offer a mediating meta-discourse. It is my impression that this is in fact the strategy that Cassirer would be inclined to use, for he often speaks of the object of symbolic transformation as 'the matter of sensation,' or 'the sensory phenomenon,' or, when he is speaking specifically of seeing, as 'pure vision,' as in this passage: "We do not apprehend the real by attempting to attain it step by step over the painful detours of discursive thinking; we must rather place ourselves immediately at its center. Such immediacy is denied to thought; it belongs only to pure vision."<sup>26</sup> I referred to this answer as a "strategy" because I think that in the end these

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<sup>26</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 35. As well,

phrases are just *façons de parler* for an idea that cannot be efficiently, i.e., briefly and adequately, expressed in everyday language; it would be more accurate to say that "the material moment is *no psychological datum*, but rather a *liminal notion* . . . . What we call the 'matter' of perception is not a certain sum-total of impressions, a concrete substratum at the basis of artistic, mythical or theoretical representation. It is rather a *line towards which the various formal modes converge*."<sup>27</sup>

That ultimately this is how Cassirer wanted to conceive of such a distinction is confirmed by the new material released in the fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Cassirer turns to the question a number of times, emphatically stating in one instance that "If one wants to see this [distinction] as anything more than a methodological abstraction, if one believes that the elements which have here been separated in analysis must also be given as separable parts of the knowing process, then this conception has been progressively refuted in the course of the development of our theoretical knowledge since Kant."<sup>28</sup> Then there is this passage, which is worth quoting at length, as it also develops the idea of symbolic form:

We have so far tried to show how the individual symbolic forms--language, myth, theoretical knowledge--are aspects in the intelligent organization of reality. Each of them presented us with an independent, architectonic principle, an ideal "structure," or, better--since we are here never dealing with describing purely static

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recall that at the beginning of the quote on symbolic pregnance Cassirer says: "consider an optical structure, a simple line, for example."

<sup>27</sup> Cassirer, "Zur Logik des Symbolbegriffs," 155-56 (my emphases). Hamburg's translation, op. cit., 112-113. Cassirer's reference to liminal notions harkens back to Kant, who used the mathematical concept of the limit to express the distinction between *phenomenon* and *noumenon*: "The concept of noumenon is thus a merely limiting concept, the function of which is to curb the pretensions of sensibility; and it is therefore only of negative employment" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 272). Side-stepping the vexing philosophical problems that inhabit the *noumenon/phenomenon* distinction, readers unfamiliar with the Kantian approach can take it as indicating the distinction between things-in-themselves and the world of appearances, which is the world as we know it, the realm of possible experience. I should also add that the concept of limit is mathematically related to the idea of function, and, apart from the fact that Kant and Cassirer are in this instance not talking about the same question, what distinguishes their respective uses of these ideas is that in Kant's era there was no precise mathematical way of stating the concept of limit, whereas by Cassirer's time the connection was well formulated, which allowed him to advance his novel theory of concept formation in *Substance and Function*, about which I will have more to say in chapters that follow.

<sup>28</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, 21.



relationships, but rather with exposing dynamic processes--a characteristic way of "structuring" itself. In presenting this process we found ourselves confronted again and again with a particular methodological limitation. We could never succeed in exposing a level of "experience" or "immediate experiencing" on which the different form-giving forces come to bear and on which they can carry out their efforts as if it were a kind of raw matter. Instead, we again and again had to reject this interpretation--the interpretation that the process of "symbolic formation" only offers a reconfiguration of a given world of sensations or of perception that is finished and at hand--as if we merely added to this basic and original layer a kind of ideal "superstructure." We saw that instead the particular intellectual viewpoint itself already determined the content of perception as such--that neither can be separated or isolated from the other.<sup>29</sup>

Let us retire this issue and move on to considering the greater philosophical question from which it arose. As we will recall, the concept of symbolic pregnance was initially introduced and problematized in order to clarify the general characterization that Cassirer gave of cultural forms as symbolic forms. Both of these ideas are important to understanding how perspective could be a symbolic form. But there is more to be said, and in the next chapter we will take a closer look at the doctrine of symbolic pregnance and other foundational aspects of Cassirer's philosophy.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 50-51. Apropos the word 'superstructure,' the editors direct our attention to that most famous passage from Marx: "In the social production of their subsistence men enter into determined and necessary relations with each other that are independent of their wills--production-relations which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum of these production-relations forms the economic structure of society, the real basis upon which a juridical and political superstructure arises, and to which definite social forms of consciousness correspond." Karl Marx, "Towards a Critique of Political Economy," in *Capital and Other Writings*, ed. Max Eastman (New York: Modern Library, 1932), 10. Cassirer's passing reference to Marx provides a brief but trenchant critique of traditional Marxist cultural theory, that would have been useful to the social history of art in the 1970's.

CHAPTER III  
TRANSCENDENTAL CONDITIONS OF MEANING AND THE IDENTITY OF  
SYMBOLIC FORMS

In this chapter I would like deepen our understanding of the doctrine of symbolic pregnance, discuss Cassirer's reflections in the posthumous fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* on the ultimate basis of his philosophy, and address the important issue of how to identify and individuate symbolic forms.

In the preceding chapter I claimed that the concept of symbolic pregnance is a transcendental condition for Cassirer's conception of the symbol and the theory of meaning of which it is a part. It is accordingly a very important idea, for it is what grounds Cassirer's philosophical approach and gives it its distinctive stamp. To see how this is so, let us consider a passage from which an excerpt has already been quoted:

By symbolic pregnance we mean the way in which a perception as a sensory experience contains at the same time a certain nonintuitive meaning which it immediately and concretely represents. Here we are not dealing with bare perceptive data, on which some sort of apperceptive acts are later grafted, through which they are interpreted, judged, transformed. Rather, it is the perception itself which by virtue of its own immanent organization, takes on a kind of spiritual articulation--which being ordered in itself, also belongs to a determinate order of meaning. In its full actuality, its living totality, it is at the same time a life "in" meaning. It is not only subsequently received into this sphere but is, one might say, born into it. It is this ideal interwovenness, this relatedness of the single perceptive phenomenon, given here and now, to a characteristic total meaning that the term "pregnance" is meant to designate.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 202. For clarity's sake I would like to issue a terminological reminder: when Cassirer uses the word 'ideal,' as in "It is this ideal interwovenness, this relatedness of the single perceptive phenomenon, given here and now, to a characteristic total meaning that the term 'pregnance is meant to designate,'" or, to return to the previous quotation, when he says that each symbolic forms presents us "with an independent, architectonic principle, an ideal 'structure,'" he is using 'ideal' in a strictly philosophical sense. Unfortunately, it is not so easy to

Our previous discussions allow us to grasp a good part of the sense of this passage, but we need to look into it more closely if we want a fuller understanding of Cassirer's philosophy. Cassirer makes a distinction between conventional meaning and natural meaning. Natural meaning refers to the essential meaningfulness of perception itself (about which we will say more shortly). Artificial or conventional meaning depends upon the production of meaning through the giving of signs (*Zeichengebung*), as takes place in language, mathematics, art, and other cultural creations. But the creation of culture, Cassirer argues, does not create the phenomenon of meaning itself; from the transcendental perspective of Cassirer's philosophy, meaning is prior to such institutions as a condition of possibility for their existence--it is an *Urphänomen* that cannot be reduced to human conventions. In fact, from a philosophical point of view,

The force and effect of these [conventional] signs would remain a mystery if they were not ultimately rooted in an original spiritual process which belongs to the very essence of consciousness. We can understand how a sensuous particular, such as a spoken sound, can become the vehicle of a purely intellectual meaning only if we assume that the basic function of signification is present and active before the individual sign is produced, so that this producing does not create signification, but merely stabilizes it, applies it to a particular case.<sup>2</sup>

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delimit what this philosophical sense is. It will have to suffice to say--as good old-fashioned Marxists used to--that idealism is opposed to materialism in that the latter maintains that reality is primordially material and that the ultimate account of things depends upon their explanation in terms of discourses that privilege the physical constitution of the world. Idealism, then, is the position that any account of reality must give precedence to discourses that address the constitutive role played by human consciousness in the construction of the world. Even though Cassirer is a critic of the idealist tradition, it is nevertheless true that this is his philosophical home base. What he wants to stress, against materialist practice, is that it is impossible to give an account of meaning in materialist terms. This is made clear in his debates with Heidegger (though Heidegger is not a materialist in the above sense) over the relation of meaning to existence. Cassirer won't allow Heidegger's close identification of the two, and insists that "meaning is by no means exhausted by *Dasein*, rather 'there is' [*es gibt*] impersonal meaning which, of course, is only experienceable by an existing subject. Cf. mathematical meaning, there is objective meaning in the sense of significance (= "mind" [*Geist*]). There is, finally, a breaking away from the *merely* ontological, without actually tearing the bond with it," "'Mind' and 'Life': Heidegger." trans. John Michael Krois, *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 16 (1983): 160-163. The fact that meaning is only experienced by an existing subject does not restrict its intersubjective validity to the existence of finite experience.

<sup>2</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, 106.

We give meaning to our experience with signs, but the basic function of signification is already *in* our experience, and it is the basis for all other signification, whether natural or conventional; both rest on the *Urphänomen* of meaning, i.e., symbolic pregnance: the imprinting of sense in the senses, which is a condition of possibility for all experience.

Let us try to be more exact about this *Urphänomen* of symbolic pregnance. One of Cassirer's preferred routes for explaining it is via an attack on the sensationalism of empiricist philosophy and psychology:

By positing the sensory "impression" as the basic element of all psychology [sensationalism] negates the actual life of perception in a twofold sense. In the "upper" sense, in respect to the problems of thought and knowledge, the entire significative content of perception, insofar as it is recognized at all, must now be transported back into its sensuous "matter" and derived from it. Perception becomes an aggregate; it arises from the simple confluence and associative linking of impressions. . . . [Secondly, sensationalism doesn't realize that the roots of perception] consist not in the "elements" of sensation but in original and immediate characters of expression. Concrete perception does not wholly detach itself from these characters even when it resolutely and consciously takes the road of pure objectivization. It never dissolves into a complex of sensuous qualities--such as light or dark, cold or warm--but is always attuned to a specific expressive tone. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Though relevant to our discussion of meaning in general, Cassirer's second point is particularly germane to the question of natural symbols and meaning. True to their philosophical commitments and view of scientific procedure, empiricists have convinced themselves that ultimately and finally and in its truest characterization human perception should be seen as a stream of sensuous particulars. The objects and experiences that constitute our world, such as taking comfort in a warm *café au lait* on a cold winter's morning, must then somehow be reconstructed from simple elements of sensation by laws of association and combination. This, Cassirer argues, is a falsification that negates how we actually apprehend the world. Even in our most detached, "scientific" moments we don't see our environment as a bunch of isolated sensuous particulars; rather, the primary experience is one of meaning--meaning attuned to a specific expressive tone.

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<sup>3</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 66-67.

Sensationalism's vitiating weakness is that it reverses the order of the phenomenal data; it is only after we have developed a certain attitude to the world and the theoretical apparatus to go along with it that we come up with the idea of *mere* data of sensation--it is a stance that we take on in the pursuit of certain theoretical aims. The primacy of meaning is in fact inadvertently confirmed by empiricist theorists themselves as they attempt to find their way back from arrangements of sense data to the world of human experience; as Cassirer remarks about those who turn to empathy to help them cross the divide: "[they] must first kill perception by making it into a complex of mere sensory contents, before [they] can reanimate this dead matter of sensation by the act of empathy. But the life it acquires in this way is in the end a mere semblance of life--the product of a psychological illusion."<sup>4</sup> Cassirer adds to this that the empiricists' conjuring trick, of pulling meaning from the void and reintroducing it into the phenomena of perception, only appears to be convincing because they themselves have unwittingly presupposed the primacy of meaning in experience.

Human beings experience meaning, whether natural or conventional, through three different functions of meaning that operate within the world of human symbolization: expression, representation, and pure signification. The first is the function specific to mythological apprehension, the second characterizes natural language, and the third is best represented by scientific theory construction.<sup>5</sup> I will have more to say about all of these in a while, but for now we will only concern ourselves with the first. Expression is the most basic function of meaning, and the one most closely connected to the symbols of natural meaning, because "it does not admit of a difference between image and thing, the sign and what it designates." What this means is that an image has expressive meaning simply by

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

<sup>5</sup> The three volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* published during Cassirer's lifetime are then, from the most general point of view, attempts to explicate these three modalities of meaning: the first volume concerns myth, the second language, and the third culminates with account of the nature of scientific thought.

virtue of its appearance, its physiognomy. We have already encountered this idea in the excerpt on symbolic pregnance that employed the example of the line (for convenient reference I will quote it again):

We can consider an optical structure, a simple line, for example, according to its purely expressive meaning. As we immerse ourselves in the design and construct it for ourselves, we become aware of a distinct physiognomic character in it. A peculiar mood is expressed in the purely spatial determination: . . . And here we do not merely read our own inner states subjectively and arbitrarily into the spatial form; rather, the form gives itself to us as an animated totality, an independent manifestation of life.<sup>6</sup>

Even before the line is taken up into an articulated mythological order, or a geometrical system, or an aesthetic canon, it is experienced as a phenomenon with a meaning attuned to a specific expressive tone; it is never a mere cluster of sense data (though, as we have seen, it is possible to speak of it in this way to meet certain theoretical ends). The line so apprehended is a good example of a natural symbol governed by the expressive function of meaning. Natural symbols and expressive meanings are most evident in mythic thought, for myth, as already noted, "does not admit of a difference between image and thing, the sign and what it designates." This is how Cassirer explains it:

Here the phenomenon as it is given in any moment never has a character of mere representation, it is one of authentic presence: here a reality is not "actualized" through the mediation of the phenomenon but is present in full actuality in the phenomenon. When water is sprinkled in rain magic, it does not serve as a mere symbol or analogue of the "real" rain; it is attached to the real rain by the bond of an original sympathy. The demon of the rain is tangibly and corporeally alive and present in every drop of water.<sup>7</sup>

Mythic thought is accordingly a mode of apprehension that, unlike scientific thinking, does not clearly demarcate the animate and the inanimate; causal laws and the distinction between "things" and their properties do not determine the structure of appearance, there is not the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 200-1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 68.

distance for that. The world is instead an expressive community of presences in an unbroken stream of becoming; the world is not an "it" but a "thou": "Every single factor in intuitive reality has magical traits and connections; every occurrence, however ephemeral, has its magical-mythical 'meaning.' A whispering or rustling in the woods, a shadow darting over the ground, a light flickering on the water: all these are demonic in their nature and origin."<sup>8</sup>

As a modality of meaning, mythological thought is not of course confined to a particular era (anyone who talks to a car provides evidence for this). And neither is expressive meaning and natural symbolism confined to the world of myth; as Cassirer's example of the simple line was intended to show, this type of meaning pervades our lives (a point that he reinforces in the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* in a review of psychological research on animal behaviour and early childhood development).<sup>9</sup>

What Cassirer wants to refer to when he speaks of expressive meaning, natural symbolism, and symbolic pregnance as an *Urphänomen* should by now be clear. Let us expand our account then to include Cassirer's other functions of meaning. Once more, Cassirer's three, basic functions of symbolization or, as he sometimes refers to them, dimensions of meaning are expression (*Ausdruck*), representation (*Darstellung*), and pure signification (*reine Bedeutung*).<sup>10</sup> As a way of having the world, every symbolic form is founded, primarily but not wholly, on one of these functions of meaning.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 71-72. For a fuller treatment of these topics see Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*, and Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans. Susanne K. Langer (New York: Dover, 1946). For a somewhat wider treatment of Cassirer's work see Susanne K. Langer, "On Cassirer's Theory of Language and Myth," 381-400, and M.F. Ashley Montagu, "Cassirer on Mythological Thinking," in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, 361-77.

<sup>9</sup> Following the strategy mentioned earlier, Cassirer sets out to demonstrate that psychologists have had to accept these ideas in order to make adequate sense of the phenomena they have witnessed. See *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, Chapter 2.

<sup>10</sup> Although references to these are made throughout *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, the third volume in particular undertakes a full-scale, thorough explication of this division.

Representation, the second function of meaning, finds its paradigm in natural language; it is only with the development of language that a stable world of experience is achieved, and things come to have fixed identities that allow for their subsequent recognition: "Language first provides that possibility of 'finding-again' and of recognition by virtue of which totally different, spatially and temporally separate, phenomena can be understood as manifestations of one and the same subject."<sup>11</sup> But this achievement of concept formation is not realized at the level of words, "For," in Cassirer's philosophy of language, "not the word but the sentence is the basic structure of language, in which the form of linguistic statement is fulfilled. And every purely expressive sentence includes within it a certain postulation: it aims at a certain objective relationship which it strives to describe and arrest. The 'is' of the copula is the purest and most pregnant manifestation of the new dimension of language, of its pure representative function."<sup>12</sup> And, correspondingly, with it comes the capacity for assertion and denial; in philosophical terms, it is here that propositional content enters the world. But at the same time, as far as "language may progress in the direction of representation and purely logical signification, it never loses its connection with the primary expressive experience."<sup>13</sup> It is this that allows for the possibility of poetic speech, which itself is central to the modality of language, for "even where language is solely concerned with working out a logical meaning, which it simply seeks to set forth as such in its objectivity and universality, it cannot dispense with the possibilities of melodic and rhythmic expression, which prove to be not superfluous embellishments but genuine vehicles and constituents of signification itself."<sup>14</sup> Cassirer's non-logocentric conception of language's signifying powers derives from his view of language as a phenomenon that is ultimately and necessarily rooted in the expressive

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<sup>11</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 108.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 450.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



function of meaning, a thesis that he eloquently and persuasively argues for in *Language and Myth*.<sup>15</sup>

The third function of meaning, pure signification, differs from the first two in that it can actually effect an escape from the sensory and work at a wholly conceptual level. In a fashion directly opposite to that of myth, which "does not admit of a difference between image and thing, the sign and what it designates," pure signification distinctly acknowledges that this differentiation can be made: "For only now is the final break made with mere existence and its immediacy. . . . Now there develops a kind of detachment, of abstraction that was unknown to perception and intuition. Knowledge releases the pure relations from their involvement with the concrete and individually determined reality of things, in order to represent them purely as such in the universality of their form, in their relational character."<sup>16</sup> Contemporary work in geometry provides a good example of this, for many multidimensional geometries have no connection with anything that resembles experienced space, as they are axiomatic systems whose interest lies wholly in the fact that they have been generated.

Myth and pure signification then stand wholly at odds with each other as dimensions of meaning. Everything that mythic thought postulates about the relations between the things and agents of the world is incompatible with the explanatory framework of scientific thinking. Hence, Cassirer argues, there is no way in which science can develop from myth, such an elaboration is only possible through the mediating symbolic forms of language and technology. In this way Cassirer parts company with the standard philosophical approach to myth, and offers an account that is more akin to Lévi-Strauss's, or perhaps I should say, since Cassirer's studies preceded Lévi-Strauss's by a number of

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<sup>15</sup> See also *An Essay on Man*, Chapter VIII, and Suzanne K. Langer's "On Cassirer's Theory of Language and Myth."

<sup>16</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 284. Cassirer's reference to relations here derives from his theory of the concept, which is founded on the logic of relations, and in which a concept is understood as a function of the general form  $F(a, b, c, \dots)$ . See *Substance and Function*, 23.

decades, that Lévi-Strauss has a conception of myth that has a certain filial relation to Cassirer's.<sup>17</sup>

There is one last aspect of symbolic pregnance that should be discussed before we conclude our discussion of it. This is represented in the claim--if we return again to the passage at the beginning of the previous chapter that has been serving as our point of reference--that a symbol also belongs to a determinate order of meaning: "In its full actuality, its living totality, it is at the same time a life 'in' meaning. It is not only subsequently received into this sphere but is, one might say, born into it."<sup>18</sup> The basic idea is one familiar to contemporary thought: no symbol or sign is meaningful in itself; it always requires a larger signifying context in which it functions as an element and through which it is defined. The last sentence though gives this not uncommon idea a particularly Cassirerian cast in typically Cassirerian language. A befitting way to explain this is through the term *prägnanz* itself, which "derives from the German *Prägen* (to mint or coin and give a sharp contour) and the Latin *praegnans* (laden or ready to give birth). It embodies at once the ideas of giving form and fecundity."<sup>19</sup> This is a perfect word-image for what is behind

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<sup>17</sup> Both Lévi-Strauss and Cassirer propose structural approaches to myth that circumvent psychologicist explanations based on myth making faculties. Their intent is instead to show, as Lévi-Strauss says, "not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact" (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to the Science of Mythology*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman [New York: Harper & Row, 1981], 12). In broad outline, their understanding of structure is similar, but there are significant differences in the ideas that found their greater visions of the nature of myth. One basic one is that Lévi-Strauss, like most French structuralists, grants language a priority and fundamentality that Cassirer's philosophy won't allow it. Lévi-Strauss focuses on the structure of mythical narrative from the point of view of a linguistic model, and, from within that model, emphasizes the position of the listener. Cassirer, on the other hand, emphasizes the position of the agent: myth originates in active engagement with the world apprehended expressively; what becomes central for Cassirer then are the rites, rituals, and festivals that are mythic consciousness's reckonings with an animated world of presences. The narratives of mythology occupy a secondary place: "Taken in themselves the mythical stories of gods or heroes cannot reveal to us the secret of religion, because they are nothing but the *interpretations* of rites. They try to give an account of what is present, what is seen and done in these rites" (Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946], 28). So, whereas for Lévi-Strauss language comes before myth, for Cassirer it is the reverse, because, as he argues in *Language and Myth*, the kind of expressive meaning that underpins myth's possibility is in turn that which allows language to emerge. And the narrative renderings of the drama of mythic consciousness in the presence of an overwhelming world are a final product of its awe.

<sup>18</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 93.

<sup>19</sup> Krois, op. cit., 53. See endnote 58 for his source on this etymological derivation.

the phrase 'symbolic pregnance.' For Cassirer, symbols aren't simply posited, they are born, they emerge from the body of the symbolic order in which they have been conceived; they are not merely atomistic elements that are connected to or disconnected from others through rules of combination; they have a kinship with the symbols of the order to which they belong because they all have at heart the same formative principles that unite them organically; and it is in this way, as Cassirer would put it, that the individual symbol is not only a part of the whole but can be said as well to represent it.

A more developed account of the relation between individual signs and their symbolic orders will have to wait until the following chapters, which will provide us with the necessary background. At this juncture, I would like to consider a fundamental, but seemingly unresolved, question that occupied Cassirer, and his critics, at various points throughout his philosophical career, namely, what is the ultimate ground of the philosophy of symbolic forms? One might be somewhat surprised by this question, for the reflections of the past two chapters would seem to indicate that it has been addressed: the ground of Cassirer's philosophy is the doctrine of symbolic pregnance. Symbolic pregnance is after all an *Urphänomen*--the *Urphänomen*--upon which the human symbolic construction of reality rests; isn't it the case that to call something an *Urphänomen* is, effectively, to state that it is that at which explanation comes to an end?

This approach to the question of an ultimate ground does appear to be what is offered in the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. And it would have served, I think, as the core of Cassirer's response to Heidegger's review of the volume on mythic thought, in which Heidegger had stated that Cassirer's philosophy had yet to find its true basis.<sup>20</sup> But it is not a complete answer to Heidegger or to the other critics whose concerns were more with the metaphysical or ontological grounding of Cassirer's

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Heidegger, Review of *Das Mythische Denken* by Ernst Cassirer, *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* 21 (1928):1000-1012. For English translation see: "Review of *Mythic Thought*," in *The Piety of Thinking: Essays by Martin Heidegger*, trans. James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).

philosophy, for in the era of the publication of the first three volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* the orientation of Cassirer's approach was still determinedly epistemological, and Cassirer was almost silent about his philosophy's metaphysical foundations. The recently published fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, reveals that Cassirer's silence was only public. This volume though is neither a unified text nor a unified treatment of foundational questions but a compilation of writings in different states of completion and finish. Some of them were clearly labeled by Cassirer as destined for the fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, but there is one major text that has a more independent status. This text, which is entitled "On Basis Phenomena," is the one that I would like to provide an exposition of. As an attempt to ground his philosophy through a new *Urphänomen*, it represents an entirely new direction in Cassirer's thought, and it is worth discussing, even if it comes well after the era in which Panofsky wrote *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, because it offers us a more complete picture of Cassirer's philosophy, or at least a more complete picture of the direction in which he would have developed it.

"On Basis Phenomena" was composed around 1940, near the end of Cassirer's philosophical career (he died in 1945). Although one can only speculate about what precisely prompted him to take this direction at this time, he must have been partially motivated by the desire to address the question of the grounding of his philosophy, and, I would add, the desire to settle his increasing preoccupation with how his philosophical vision mediates the division between "Geist" and "Life," between *lebensphilosophie* and the traditional metaphysical concerns of Western thought. As the editors of the fourth volume have stated, for Cassirer "The expressive function is the most basic manifestation of mind or geist, but geist, Cassirer says, is a transformation of life. What, then, is life? Cassirer's attempt to understand the 'expressive function' apparently led him, in Sweden in 1940, to develop his doctrine of *Basisphänomen*, the foremost of which is life."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, xviii.

"On Basis Phenomena" is divided into two chapters. The first is a presentation of the problem and the second is on the basis phenomena themselves and their relation to fundamental philosophical divisions, e.g., 'Relation of Basis Phenomena to Metaphysics,' 'Significance of Basis Phenomena for Theory of Knowledge,' and so forth. Let me begin by briefly saying something about Cassirer's presentation of the problem.

This first chapter is comprised of two, related sections: 'The Objective Character of Perception' and 'The Objective Character of the Expressive Function.' The common concern here is with grounding the epistemological stance of the philosophy of symbolic forms. In typical fashion, Cassirer sets out his problem by surveying an array of the historically most common positions advanced on the question of the objective nature of perception. He begins, as one might expect, with the extreme challenge posed by Skepticism, the position that maintains that in fact there are no grounds on which the truth of perception can be secured (Descartes' methodological doubt). Cassirer concedes that this position is in principle irrefutable, if one wants *absolute* truth. However, "We do not need 'absolute' truth; rather, in fact, we need relative truth."<sup>22</sup> He continues:

We don't need "being-true" (= a mirror image of an absolute true being); we need "being truer," an expression of the *whole* of experience. This question--whether something is true or untrue--loses its meaning if it is applied to the *whole*. The *predicate* true or untrue is not applicable in this case because this *predicate* always applies only *in relation to this whole*. I can no more raise the question of truth in regard to the *whole* of experience than I can raise the question of "where?" for the whole of the universe--<sup>23</sup>

The traditional responses to Skepticism (Cassirer surveys representative replies by Reid, Fries, Jacobi, and Dilthey) all fall short because they want absolute truth. "But," Cassirer adds, "opposed to all these 'absolute' solutions stands the *critical solution*, as the 'relative' solution."<sup>24</sup> The critical solution "asks about the *place* of each particular perception

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 120.

("Wahrnehmung") within the whole, in the 'context of experience.' This *context*, the 'system,' does not need to have its truth demonstrated or 'tested'--it is the measure, not what is measured.<sup>25</sup> Cassirer ends this section with the remark that "Analogous considerations [apply] to the *expressive function*."<sup>26</sup> Now, we might ask, on our way to the heart of the matter, how do analogous considerations apply to the expressive function? How does this problem of "outer" experience find its counterpart in the organization of "inner" experience?

Some philosophies, for example, physicalism and behaviourism, deny outright the existence of what Cassirer calls the expressive function. So, for them, the existence of the affective lives of others is something that can be known, if known at all, only by analogy from one's own case. Hence, the reality of affect beyond the individual consciousness is something about which one can make no claims to truth. We have then a situation that parallels skepticism about the veracity of perception. This type of solipsism however is just as unconvincing and practically untenable as thoroughgoing skepticism.<sup>27</sup> Then there are philosophers (Scheler, Klages, and Bergson) who argue for exactly the opposite position, i.e., we do not need to infer by analogy the affective lives of others because we experience these things immediately. Thus we have a dichotomy that mirrors the one that plagued the question of the objectivity of perception, and Cassirer's response to it is the same: "Our standpoint [is] 'critical'; we uphold neither the falsity (skepticism) nor the truth (metaphysics) of the expressive function. Rather, we seek to limit critically and justify

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> At this point Cassirer alludes to Schopenhauer's witty critique of solipsism: "Theoretical egoism, of course, can never be refuted by proofs, yet in philosophy it has never been positively used otherwise than as a sceptical sophism, i.e., for the sake of appearance. As a serious conviction, on the other hand, it could be found only in a madhouse; as such it would then need not so much a refutation as a cure. Therefore we . . . shall regard this sceptical argument of theoretical egoism, which here confronts us, as a small frontier fortress. Admittedly, the fortress is impregnable, but the garrison can never sally forth from it, and therefore we can pass it by and leave it in our rear without danger." Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Books, 1969), vol. I. bk. 2, sec. 19, p.104.

critically its achievements in the construction of the 'cultural world.'<sup>28</sup> We are already well familiar with this approach, so it comes as little surprise that Cassirer will argue that the basis phenomena, which are rooted in the expressive function, are the new *Urphänomen*, the critically necessary presuppositions upon which rest the construction of the cultural world. Can a further characterization be given of them? Yes, but it appears that their further revelation is more poetic than analytical: the basis phenomena are that through which we "attain any access to 'reality,' and in which all that we call 'reality' originally is disclosed and opened up."<sup>29</sup> They are not inferred from but are prior to thought and inference as the basis of both; "it is they themselves that first 'open up,' that is, reveal, make manifest. They are the '*originär-gebenden*' [primordially giving] intentions in Husserl's sense."<sup>30</sup> They "are not something which is mediated for us; rather, they are the ways, the modes of mediation itself. . . . Basis phenomena do not give us access to external beings that we, with effort, have to 'draw into our circle.' They are the look that we cast on the world. They are the eye, so to speak, that we open up. In this first opening of the eye the phenomenon 'reality' discloses itself to us."<sup>31</sup>

The second chapter opens by setting out the three basis phenomena. As was so often the case, Cassirer's inspiration for a philosophical idea had its origins in the art of Goethe. The three basis phenomena find their more literary statement in Goethe's Maxims 391-93, which Cassirer restates philosophically to meet his own ends.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, 124.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>32</sup> The Maxims are:

391. The highest gift we have received from God and nature is life, the rotating movement of the monad about itself, knowing neither pause nor rest. The impulse to nurture this life is ineradicably implanted in each individual, although its specific nature remains a mystery to ourselves and to others.  
 392. The second benefit from active higher beings is the experienced, our becoming truly aware, the living-moving monad's intervention into the surroundings of the outer world. Through this it becomes truly aware of itself as internal lack of limits, and as externally limited. Although it requires a

Cassirer entitles the first basis phenomenon (Maxim 391) 'The Phenomenon of the "I," of the *Monas*, of "Life" Itself':

This cannot be inferred from something else, but instead lies at the basis of everything else. . . . [It] is not being (*ousia* as permanence), but rather a stream and motion, which knows neither rest nor quiet, is bound to no particular "state," to nothing stationary, but is something moving (something in transition from perception to perception) . . . . This "monadic" being therefore is not contained in the simple present. In fact, it is not even describable in terms of a present. It is not bound to a particular moment, but rather encompasses the totality of all aspects of life, the present, past, and future--"*chargé du passé et gros de l'avenir*." By experiencing "myself" as present, I do not experience myself as "being" (ontologically; fixed in different positions in time one after another and to this extent "enduring"). I experience myself as present, as past and as going to be.<sup>33</sup>

Of the second (Maxim 392), which is entitled 'The Basis Phenomenon of "Action,"

Cassirer says:

We not only experience ourselves in "perception" in transition from state to state, but we experience ourselves as having an influence and acting. This influence and acting is a second essential, constitutive aspect in all our "consciousness of reality." [There is] no consciousness of reality without this original, nondeducible consciousness of action. We do not "experience" ourselves, but rather we experience something that stands in opposition to us, that is different from us, and out of this opposition grows our consciousness of the "object."<sup>34</sup>

But it is not just "objecthood" that we here encounter, for "This 'standing in opposition,' this 'resistance,' is originally encountered in the experience of the will, but not merely in an

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predisposition, attention, and luck, we can become clear ourselves about what we experience; but to others it remains a mystery.

393. As the third there now arises what we direct toward the outer world as actions and deed, as speech and writing; these belong to it more than to us ourselves; this is why the outer world can more readily attain an understanding about it than we ourselves are able to. However, in the outer world one senses that in order to really be clear about this, it is necessary to learn as much as possible about what we have experienced. This is why people are so greatly interested in youthful beginnings, stages of education, biographical details, anecdotes, and the like.

Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, Schriften der Goethe-Gesellschaft, 21, ed. Max Hecker (Wiemar: Verlag der Goethe-Gesellschaft, 1907, 76-77. English translation by Krois.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 138-139. The phrase "*chargé du passé et gros de l'avenir*" is from Leibniz, "Nouveau Essais sur l'entendement par l'auteur du système de l'harmonie preestablie," in *Philosophische Schriften*, vol. 5, 48.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 139-140.



impersonal 'It'; rather, we find it originally as a 'You'.<sup>35</sup> In other words, it is the basis phenomenon for ethical consciousness: "In its regard for others, mankind observes the first clarification about itself. It can never, according to Goethe's basic conviction, attain a view of itself by means of mere self-study: by introspection never, but through action. Try to do your duty, and you know your mettle straightway. Mankind can only recognize itself in others."<sup>36</sup>

The third basis phenomenon (Maxim 393) is entitled 'The Sphere of the "Work".' Here, Cassirer tells us, "a strange turnabout [takes place]. These works no longer belong to us; they mark the first level of 'alienation.' They stand in an order of their own, which follows objective standards":<sup>37</sup>

These works now belong more to the outer world than to us. They are also no longer recognizable in full measure. For the being of the works outlives that of their creator. These works are in a certain sense more than their creator and so possess a peculiar kind of "transcendence". . . . This is [the work's] eternity which enables it to have continuing effects that the creative individual, the *monas*, could never foresee. . . . Here the "outer world" (which in this case is the historical world) can "come to a better understanding than we are able to ourselves." What Plato's work "is" does not lie enclosed in Plato's monadic "consciousness," because it extends over the centuries. It only becomes clear in the total course of its consequences and interpretations.<sup>38</sup>

In summary, "Here we have the three primary phenomena (basis phenomena) before us, for which we ourselves cannot give any further "explanation" and cannot want to:

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 129. It is striking how similar Cassirer's way of formulating his basis phenomena is to Peirce's way of formulating his fundamental categories. Cassirer even remarks that "All 'pragmatist' theories of 'knowledge' have here their justified root" (p. 140), i.e., in the second basis phenomena. The publication of the fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* opens new territory for comparative studies of their theories of semiotics.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 130-131.

- (1) the I-Phenomenon [*Ich-Phänomen*]
- (2) the Phenomenon of Action [*Wirkens-Phänomen*]
- (3) the Phenomenon of the Work [*Werk-Phänomen*]<sup>39</sup>

These three *Urphänomen* are then the critically necessary, irreducible presuppositions upon which rests the construction of the cultural world. But after having explicated them, Cassirer at once draws our attention to a conflict, an antinomy, that appears to set them against the very demands of philosophy itself. It is a conflict, he claims, to which all the well-known philosophical oppositions can be traced: the apparent antinomy mentioned earlier between *Leben* and *Geist*, between the immediacy of the lived and the mediation of thought that is said to destroy it. Knowing Cassirer's project as we now do, the question that he directs to this conflict can be readily anticipated:

How can both be brought together and reconciled? How can we do justice to the Goethean demand of "primary phenomena" and to the Cartesian-Kantian demand for "reflection" in knowledge and philosophy? How can we uphold that form of certainty and "immediateness," which Goethe attributes to primary phenomena and at the same time grant the no less unassailable right of "thought," which wants to bring everything before its bench for investigation and accreditation? Is there still some sort of synthesis possible here? Or must this remain an irreconcilable conflict?<sup>40</sup>

The short answer to these questions is that there is no radical antinomy, no irreconcilable conflict because *Geist* is a transformation of *Leben*. Going back to the fundamental insight of critical philosophy, there is no reality without the two of them, for there is no unmediated access to lived experience in itself, there is only articulated experience. This was the point well-established by the doctrine of symbolic pregnance, but now that Cassirer has discovered three further *Urphänomen* that ground even the *Urphänomen* of symbolic pregnance, he must consider how they relate to the previously established

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 138.

doctrines of his philosophy and to philosophy in general. Let us briefly consider this matter by looking at the final two sections of "On Basis Phenomena": 'Relation of Basis Phenomena to Metaphysics,' and 'Significance of Basis Phenomena for the Theory of Knowledge.'

Cassirer introduces the section on metaphysics by suggesting that ever since Kant metaphysics has, in effect, been defined as a form of reflection that goes beyond the bounds of possible experience. But, Cassirer argues, this is not really true if we look at the works of the great metaphysician: "What we find is, rather, that in each case a certain aspect of experience has been posited as absolute and then taken in isolation, whereupon this absolute positing is declared to be primordial, being in itself."<sup>41</sup> "Metaphysics errs here not by turning away from experience per se but by screening out certain basic aspects of it."<sup>42</sup> Cassirer goes on to note that "Characteristic of the method of metaphysics is the circumstance that it is not satisfied with making 'visible' the relevant primary phenomenon, basis phenomenon, that it rests upon; rather, it strives to unravel it, it wants to unveil the veiled image of Sais, it wants to find 'the clue' to the riddle of life, of nature, and so on."<sup>43</sup> In attempting to carry out this quest, all the other aspects of experience that have been screened out by the given metaphysical system are of course denigrated or dismissed as secondary or irrelevant. But as Cassirer rightly points out, the roles in this game can be easily reversed: "what for one thinker is the core of being is mere appearance for another and vice versa."<sup>44</sup> In the end, every metaphysical system is undermined, as Hegel would put it, by its own one-sidedness. Like Hegel, the goal for Cassirer is to evolve a system of thought that does not suffer from this one-sidedness, which would be the envisioned, but yet to be completed, philosophy of symbolic forms.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

One of the things, according to Cassirer, that follows from the above reflections is that past metaphysical systems can be divided up into three groups, according to which basis phenomenon they privilege as the key to the essence of reality. I won't recapitulate Cassirer's demonstration of this, but I would like to consider some remarks he makes about metaphysics and the third basis phenomenon that are revealing of his own position. While Cassirer's position is not to be counted with those that privilege the third basis phenomenon to the detriment of the other two (because the final version of the philosophy of symbolic forms would not suffer from this type of one-sidedness) it is nevertheless true that his approach has been oriented to the level of the "work," the cultural product, and it is about this level that his philosophy has most to say. It is with the third basis phenomenon, we recall, that "a strange turnabout [takes place]" and objects are created that "no longer belong to us," and it is with this possibility that "The stockpiling of 'works' as a persisting remainder of activity gives rise to that kind of being which we call culture or history,"<sup>45</sup> which is not a form of being that can be "opened up," made manifest, through the direction of the other two basis phenomena, though this was persistently attempted throughout the history of metaphysics up until the time of Hegel. A fundamental change was thus signaled by Dilthey, who was the first philosopher to fully realize that the "human world--as it is known and given empirically--should be investigated and principles of explanation found in it alone, in the history of mankind."<sup>46</sup> For Dilthey, the world of history can only be derived from and comprehended through a new understanding of lived experience:

The step from immediate "lived experience" to the work, put simply, is the great, general theme of Dilthey's philosophy of history. In this way, through this synthesis and through this correlation, Dilthey liberates the psychological concept of "lived experience" from its narrow limits, from its merely psychological subjectivity, from which there is no way to gain access to the objective world of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 161. For an important reevaluation of Dilthey's thought and significance, see Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

history . . . and, in addition, he keeps history as a fruitful bathos of experience, rejecting every merely conceptual metaphysics of history.<sup>47</sup>

Lived experience in Dilthey's philosophy is tied to the idea of creative activity, "the activity that gives birth to the 'work,' to what is deposited, manifested in works and is revealed in them--and *only* them."<sup>48</sup> One mustn't take this as a biographical approach however, for historical understanding is concerned with structure, the structures that the work's creation presuppose. In Cassirer's eyes, it is Dilthey's perception that the understanding of human history is only truly "opened up," disclosed, through an immanent analysis of the structures of lived experience that makes him the first philosopher to comprehend the unique ground of the third basis phenomenon.

It is interesting, but not so surprising, that after discussing Dilthey's contributions to the understanding of historical being, Cassirer says that "A concluding, fundamental way to try to understand the 'works' of culture--their peculiar kind of objectivity--is the method that Kant introduced into philosophy."<sup>49</sup> It is interesting because Cassirer is speaking of Kant almost as though he followed on the insights offered by Dilthey, whereas Kant (1724-1804) preceded Dilthey (1833-1911) by over a century. It is not that surprising though because, like the "Back to Kant!" movement, which was at its height in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Cassirer believed that the real lessons of Kant's philosophy had not yet been learned, a sentiment that was in complete harmony with Kant's prophecy that it would take a hundred years for his philosophy to be understood.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 161-162.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>50</sup> Regarding the "Back to Kant!" movement (probably the only philosophical movement with an exclamation point in its name), see T.E. Willey, *Back to Kant: The Revival of Kantianism in German Social and Historical Thought, 1860-1914* (Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1978). The name itself derived from Otto Liebmann's book *Kant und die Epigonen*, wherein each chapter ended with the exclamation "Back to Kant!" For a truly interesting discussion of German philosophy and, as the author says, its identity crisis after the collapse of Hegelian metaphysics, see Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany: 1831-1933*, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

So, what was it in Kant that had not yet been truly appreciated? The critical method, of course: "this is where the final way of inquiring into the 'structure' of works begins--the approach of the philosophy of symbolic forms. . . . All the 'works' of culture are to be investigated in regard to their conditions and presented in their general 'form.' This 'form' can be found only through immersion in the empirical material, but this is accessible to us--and here our analysis agrees with Dilthey--only in historical form."<sup>51</sup> Thus it is that the philosophy of symbolic forms, learning from the one-sidedness of its predecessors, gives us the most complete understanding of that form of being which is grounded in the third basis phenomenon, which is the realm of the "work," whether the work be a scientific theory or a system of perspective. This is Cassirer's answer to the metaphysical grounding of the philosophy of symbolic forms.

With one question answered, we can move now to the last section of the text, 'Significance of Basis Phenomena for the Theory of Knowledge,' and ask what effect the doctrine of basis phenomena has on our understanding of epistemology, and on the epistemology of the philosophy of symbolic forms. Cassirer begins the section with an admirably direct answer to the first half of this question:

The different dimensions of the basis phenomena are also valid in the organization of the theory of knowledge, for within each dimension the problem of knowledge acquires a different shape and meaning, that is, another teleological structure. Something different is understood by "knowledge" in each case because something different is "meant" or wanted in each case. The various "theories of knowledge" that have emerged in the history of philosophy explicate these different "meanings or opinions" concerning the concept of "knowledge". The theory of knowledge is basically nothing other than a hermeneutics of knowledge, but a hermeneutics that in each case takes up a particular "direction" of knowledge and makes it the foundation of interpretation. These different forms of exegesis take in each case a specific basis phenomenon to be the central, indeed the only one. They seek analytically to constitute and so to reduce everything that we call "knowledge" to it. This determines the various basic directions taken by the theory of knowledge.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, 165.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

As in the case of metaphysics, Cassirer says that a truly universal epistemology--the envisioned, but yet to be completed philosophy of symbolic forms--would unite these interpretations synthetically into one, which would do justice to our knowledge of reality.<sup>53</sup> Historically of course this has not happened; so, our investigation into the relation between epistemology and basis phenomena has to proceed by following the leads provided by one-sided theories of knowledge. Cassirer then makes the interesting assertion that in doing this we shouldn't follow the traditional divisions of theories of knowledge; we shouldn't, for example, occupy ourselves with oppositions such as the one between rationalism and empiricism, or idealism and realism. Such categories, he claims, "relate to the question of the 'origin' of knowledge, not in the genetic sense, but in the sense of their 'dignity'. . . . Is 'sense' or the 'understanding' the foundation of certainty and of validity, and to which does truth originally belong? The different schools in the theory of knowledge part company according to how they answer this question."<sup>54</sup> This question, which is a question of the *mode* of knowledge, is not though the same as the question of the *basis* of knowledge, because each basis phenomena can itself be interpreted in terms of a different mode of knowledge. It is only by keeping these two questions distinct--and by addressing ourselves to the latter--that we can properly obtain an overview of the possible forms of the theory of knowledge.

The distinction that Cassirer is making becomes clearer if it is put in more concrete terms. Of the first basis phenomenon, which he here refers to as the I-Aspect or the Monadic Aspect, he asks: "What kind of knowledge is [it] that opens up the world of the I as a whole to us and that makes it possible for us to distinguish different structures within it? To this we can at first give only a negative answer: the mode of knowledge that alone comes in question here is specifically different from the kind that is valid in the objectifying

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<sup>53</sup> I suggest that because Cassirer uses the conditional tense he believes that the philosophy of symbolic forms has not yet accomplished this. Perhaps I should say that I take his remark in this way because I do not see that he has accomplished this.

<sup>54</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, 167.

sciences, and this includes both the sciences of 'outer' and 'inner' experience. Objectifying knowledge--knowledge of objects--is directed toward 'data' or 'states of affairs', toward 'matters of fact' or 'relations of ideas'.<sup>55</sup> Such an approach is the Humean approach to the I-Aspect and, as is well-known, under this empiricist gaze the "I" evaporates. But then the same is true for certain rationalist approaches that try to chase the I-Aspect into visibility with metaphysical demonstrations and logical deductions. In the end, the nature of this primordial phenomenon escapes them both. At the same time, however, there is another group of philosophers who adopt the opposite approach and base their theories of knowledge on the phenomenon of the I. Even though Descartes, Bergson, and Husserl would be assigned to different philosophical categories, in their individual ways they all believed that intuition offers a source of knowledge specific to the I, one that is closed off in principle to scientific objectification. But even though their philosophies were similarly *based*, they each interpreted that base through a different *mode*: for Descartes it is *cogitatio*, for Bergson it is *durée vécue*, for Husserl it is *noesea*. For each of them intuition became the centre of their doctrine, the locus for certainty and immediate knowledge, the centre to which all other knowledge is beholden. This is an example of how reorienting epistemology through basis phenomena changes our overview of the possible forms of the theory of knowledge.

No theory of knowledge can limit itself to the dimension of being offered by one basis phenomenon; it also has to attempt to do justice to the dimensions grounded in the others. The question is which relational system should be chosen, where should one set "the middle point of the coordinates toward which all knowledge is directed and oriented, what therefore is to count as 'immediate' (self-certain, *per se notum*, evident) and what as mediated. The 'monadic' interpretations possess this coordinate center in the 'pure intuition' of the I from which everything else (the 'You,' the 'It') must then be deduced in order to attain its mediate evidence. This explains the methodology of the particular

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 167-168.



epistemological systems, which represents a truly universal feature in them--a genuine structural form which extends beyond all the 'material' differences, no matter how great."<sup>56</sup>

What is the coordinate middle point for the dimension rooted in the second basis phenomenon? It is "a radical turn outward away from the monadic turn inward (introspection). Expressed in the language of consciousness, this turn outside is most evident and unmistakable in the phenomenon of the will, in will as unlimited by mere 'possibility' but pressing forward toward effectiveness, reality, 'energy'."<sup>57</sup> Like I-Aspect theories, theories of knowledge which make what Cassirer calls the "Action and Will-Aspect" their basis come in different varieties, depending on whether they focus on "elementary" or "higher" forms of the will. The Pragmatism of William James and John Dewey offers one example: "Just as there is no intellect independent of the will, so too there is no truth independent from it, no being or validity sitting on a throne above it which it must respect and act in accordance with. Such 'truth' is mere illusion. Truth is not objective; it has a merely instrumental character. It stands in the service of the will, it is a *tool* that the will [has] created in order for it to serve its ends."<sup>58</sup> Other philosophers who, in markedly different ways, share this epistemological alignment are Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Fichte, and Heidegger.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 171-172.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 178. As the following passage implies, Cassirer's doctrine of basis phenomenon offers an explanation for why a certain contemporary theoretical tendency defines itself around certain historical figures: "This reduction of truth to effectiveness is characteristic therefore of all theories that make the "Will to Power" their highest principle, of fascist as well as the Marxist theory of superstructure. What we call truth is really nothing but the superstructure, that is, it is fundamentally an alibi for a particular 'interest' that is 'behind it' and that we need to debunk. The theory of knowledge is nothing but this debunking, not the uncovering of a truth that exists 'in itself,' but the discovery of an original force that is *hidden* behind this supposed truth . . . . Turned toward the viewpoint of the subject, this process of discovery, of exposing or unmasking, is the guiding principle of psychoanalysis. . . . [Another] marked example of this is the turn that phenomenology has taken from Husserl to Heidegger." *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, 180. Cassirer then quotes Leibniz: "Et de dire 'stat pro ratione voluntas,' ma volonté me tient lieu de raison, c'est proprement la devise d'un tyran." See Leibniz, "Méditation sur la notion commune de la justice," *Mittheilungen aus Leibnizens ungedruckten Schriften*, ed. Georg Mollat (Leipzig: H. Haessel, 1893), 41.

What of the third dimension, what Cassirer calls the "The Starting Point of the 'Work'"? "The borderline between this and the earlier dimension," he notes, "appears at first glance to be difficult to draw. For is not every work also something willed and actuated? . . . Yet there is a sharper distinction to be drawn here. There are 'works' whose content, whose meaning, whose 'sense' does not consist exclusively in their bringing about a specific 'effect' . . . . Rather, in addition to the many particular changing effects they have . . . , they also possess a particular content of their own, an enduring 'being.'<sup>59</sup> This "being" is their being as cultural, historical works. They are productions, as Kant would say, that are "without interest."<sup>60</sup> They are productions that are meant to live past the immediate moment of action; they are intended contributions to knowledge. But in putting the matter in this way Cassirer does not want to institute a distinction between action and theory: this opposition must be denied and overcome, "raising it in a synthesis to a new level."<sup>61</sup> We must discover a new view of such production, "a view that never occurs to us as long as we consider productive action merely in terms of its immediate, 'unconscious' performance, but only when we 'turn back' to it from what has been produced, the work, and grasp it in this turning back in this 'reflection.' The reflection of productive activity in the work is what creates the new sphere that is characteristically to be distinguished from

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 182-183.

<sup>60</sup> In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant entitles section 2 of Book 1 (Part I, Division I) "The Liking That Determines a Judgment of Taste Is Devoid of All Interest." In it he says that "Interest is what we call the liking we connect with the presentation of an object's existence. Hence such a liking always refers at once to our power of desire, either as the basis that determines it, or at any rate as necessarily connected with that determining basis. But if the question is whether something is beautiful, what we want to know is not whether we or anyone cares, or so much as might care, in any way, about the thing's existence, but rather how we judge it in our mere contemplation of it (intuition or reflection)" *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 45. Kant's point is *not* that personal interests are not involved in the production or appreciation of art—that is patently and obviously false—but rather that when something is judged as art, when it is a question of how the object is determined in judgment by the form of judgment necessary for its apprehension as art, then the question of interest is beside the point. Questions about interest are germane to political and sociological analyses of art, but not to the issue of the analysis of forms of judgment. Whether this position is defensible is of course another matter.

<sup>61</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, 185.

that of mere 'theory' and from that of mere 'praxis'.<sup>62</sup> This new sphere is the sphere of form, for it is only by understanding their unique constituting forms that we can grasp what is specific to works of historical culture. Socrates was the first philosopher to ground his theory of knowledge on this third basis phenomenon, Leibniz was another, but the full consequences of this orientation were only fully articulated in Kant's era. Obviously Cassirer sees his attempt to expand the critical enterprise as a further effort to advance this epistemological approach, wherein the work sets "the middle point of the coordinates toward which all knowledge is directed and oriented." The three volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* do address how the metaphysical and epistemological claims of the first two basis phenomena are directed to this middle point, but, to my understanding, they have not yet been fully drawn into the coordinate system of Cassirer's orientation. Thus, the philosophy of symbolic forms stands incomplete. Had he lived longer, no doubt Cassirer would have fully incorporated the doctrine of basis phenomena into the statement of his philosophical project. What the end result would have been though is of course an unanswerable question. So, let us return then to what can be answered, and continue setting out the doctrines of Cassirer's philosophy that bear most directly on Panofsky's text.

One important aspect of the claim that perspective is a symbolic form, and it is a question that has been hovering on the horizon since the beginning of the last chapter, is how do we determine the identity of the symbolic orders to which symbols belong? Or, to rephrase it in more Cassirerian terms, how do we identify and individuate symbolic forms? What counts as one and how do we determine how many there are? If we hold in abeyance for the moment the question of whether a symbolic order is the same thing as a symbolic form, there does seem to be a ready answer for at least part of the question, for we know that Cassirer typically uses the term 'symbolic form' to refer to greater cultural constructions such as myth, science, religion, art, language and so forth. If for the moment

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 185.

we accept this usage as definitive, it appears to imply that there are a limited number of symbolic forms. The more pressing question then becomes is there a formal criterion through which one can individuate them? Cassirer seems to offer an answer in *The Myth of the State*: "It is a common characteristic of all symbolic forms that they are applicable to any object whatsoever. There is nothing that is inaccessible or impermeable to them: the particular character of an object does not affect their activity."<sup>63</sup> Krois takes this passage as indicating that the criterion for being a symbolic form is universal applicability: "A cultural symbolic form opens up an understanding of everything; it is a way of having a world. The number of such symbolic forms is limited by the criterion of universal applicability."<sup>64</sup> On the face of it, this does seem to fit Cassirer's project. But yet the subject can not be closed quite so easily; there are two issues here that require some further comment: the first has to do with the idea of universal applicability; the second with the "everything" to which a symbolic form applies. Let us start with the second, as we are already familiar with it under another guise. In the discussion of symbolic pregnance it became clear that when Cassirer used the example of a line taken as a simple optical phenomenon he was not appealing to an *actual* level of sense experience that can be isolated and investigated--such an idea is a useful fiction, *une façon de parler*. It is, we will recall, "*no psychological datum*, but rather a *liminal notion* . . . . What we call the 'matter' of perception is not a certain sum-total of impressions, a concrete substratum at the basis of artistic, mythical or theoretical representation. It is rather a *line towards which the various formal modes converge*."<sup>65</sup> But

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<sup>63</sup> Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 34.

<sup>64</sup> Krois, *op. cit.*, 51.

<sup>65</sup> That the distinction between structures of meaning and sensory phenomena is formal and heuristic, and not one that can be made in actuality, is inescapable for this philosophical position. Referring to the physical theory of vision in order to try and capture the common, sensuous ground of the different symbolic forms is only going to get one so far, for the simple reason that the position that Cassirer himself is committed to is not going to endorse such a distinction: it is, after all, only a formal one that cannot be found in practical experience--one comes full circle here very quickly. Also, remember that the experiments by Helmholtz and others that Cassirer refers to don't enact this distinction and isolate a level of pure sense experience; the point that he wants to make is only that they indicate that such a differentiation is conceptually tenable.

if this is so, then the idea of the "everything" to which Krois refers the various structures of meaning is itself problematic as a criterion for what a symbolic form is, for its scope and nature are incapable of precise determination, in that this "everything" cannot be predetermined.

This leads naturally to the issue of universal applicability. It is difficult to understand what exactly this means: are not myth, language, science, and art different modes of meaning that apprehend different objects? Is it not the case, for instance, that myth does not address the objects of scientific inquiry, and science has nothing to say about the defining concerns of religion? In what sense do they all apply to everything? Perhaps someone who holds Krois' position would bring to our attention the sentence in the quote from Cassirer that says that "there is nothing that is inaccessible or impermeable to them: the particular character of an object does not affect their activity." It is not so much a question, one might argue, of *actually* applying to everything as it is of being *capable* of being applied to everything. For example, artists do not have to be interested in the genetic code, but there is no reason why they cannot take it on as a subject (as they have); or, myth doesn't have to concern itself with research in astronomy, but obviously it can, as when a doomsday cult turns to studying the activities of meteorites in order to divine how near the end is.

I think that this is all true, but it only partially answers my primary question, which was, aren't these symbolic forms different modes of meaning that apprehend different objects? Consider science and myth. Cassirer says on many occasions that science and myth have fundamentally different attitudes towards the world, which can be summed up by saying that science sees the world as an "it" and myth as a "thou." Myth doesn't have science's conception of law-governed causal connections, it doesn't share science's understanding of things and their properties, it doesn't experience time and space in any way that is comparable, and so on. True, a man can have deep mythological or religious

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attachments and still be a man of science, but he can't be under the orientation of myth while he is doing science, because that would undermine the structure of experience necessary for doing it. Furthermore, I don't see how, with such mutually incompatible structures for understanding the world, we can say that he is apprehending the same range of objects in both modes of meaning. Invoking universal applicability seems to create more unclarity than it removes.

Perhaps in the end though this is not a pressing issue for Cassirer's philosophy. Perhaps his suggestion of universal applicability should not be taken as a strict criterion for individuating symbolic forms, but only as an informal way of conveying to readers a general idea in his philosophy. Cassirer did after all make this suggestion in *The Myth of the State*, which was a book intended for a general audience. There is as well some evidence in Cassirer's more academic writings that he saw matters more openly than we have been allowing: "The 'Philosophy of Symbolic Forms' cannot and does not try to be a philosophical system in the traditional sense of this word. All that it attempted to furnish were the 'Prolegomena' to a future philosophy of culture. . . . Only from a continued collaboration between philosophy and the special disciplines of the 'Humanities' (*Geisteswissenschaften*) may one hope for a solution of this task."<sup>66</sup> If Cassirer's studies are themselves only preliminary, only "prolegomena," and if the philosophy of symbolic forms has no set structure as a system, then perhaps the question of what is a symbolic form can remain open, leaving it up to those who study the cultural world in accordance with the orientation of Cassirer's doctrines to make the case that a given realm of activity is a symbolic form.

As a final word on this subject, and as a way of making our preceding discussion more concrete, let us consider how an example of how the concept of symbolic form can be extended to an activity not mentioned by Cassirer. It has become increasingly evident over the course of the last two decades that a new way of having a world is emerging. Let us call

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<sup>66</sup> Ernst Cassirer, "Zur Logik des Symbolbegriffs," *Theoria* Vol. IV (1938): 173. Hamburg's translation, op. cit., 119.

this the symbolic form of "business." While it is true that Europe and North America have for centuries been under the sway of capitalism, the mercantile attitude was never extended to cover every aspect of human experience--as it was for example in science, where now every object and occurrence can in some fashion be deemed a subject for scientific understanding. Why business has been capable of extending its symbolic range so dramatically is not a question that I will address; my interest is only in what the world looks like when it has been extended. Like every other symbolic form business has its own fundamental, formative principles that underpin its symbolic comprehension of the world. Let us note only two that seem to be definitional for this activity: the first is that every human engagement with the social or natural world should be seen as an economic transaction; the second is that every such transaction should be conducted according to market forces to achieve a profitable return for those who invest in it. The attempted symbolic construction of reality in terms of these principles can be easily charted through newspaper columns by writers such as Andrew Coyne and Terrance Corcoran in the *Globe & Mail*, and Diane Francis in the *Financial Post*. All of these writers believe that they are capable of discussing any issue that has become topical, and they have this assurance because--like artists who have perfected a representational technique--they have obtained a level of symbolic expertise that permits them to reframe any question in terms of the principles that now govern their acquaintance with the world; in this way they are like soothsayers in Classical Greece or medieval theologians. Hence, people who were formerly citizens of a society become consumers; health and education become service industries, where the interactions between doctor and patient or teacher and student are "rationalized" in conformity with production models taken from industry, which then determine which programmes are most efficient and provide an adequate return on investment; and, in a similar fashion, the arts are no longer publicly funded because the only actual remaining value for determining the worth of an activity is consumer demand. When every human concern can be subject to such a reformulation, the vehicle through

which the reformulation is affected is, in Cassirer's standard use of the term as outlined above, a symbolic form. And as is often the case with symbolic forms, those who have defined themselves through its meanings become imperialists of the sign, fighting for the overthrow of all other values while failing to recognize the contingency of their own representational order, which in this case is primarily realized through natural language. This is what business has achieved for itself.

We conclude then having attained the three principal aims of this chapter: we now have a more complete account of symbolic pregnance as a transcendental condition of meaning; from the posthumous volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* we have some insight into how Cassirer might have gone on to further ground his philosophy; and we have clarified the issues that pertain to how symbolic forms are identified and individuated. The next chapter begins a more in-depth investigation of Cassirer's conception of the symbol.



CHAPTER IV  
CASSIRER'S CONCEPT OF THE SYMBOL AND ITS PHILOSOPHICAL  
PROVENANCE

Even though Cassirer employs the term 'symbolic form' to refer mainly to cultural forms, it is true, as Carl Hamburg points out in the passage I quoted at the beginning of Chapter I, that on occasion he uses it to cover "what is more frequently referred to as the 'symbolic relation,' the 'symbol-concept, the 'symbolic function,' or, simply, the 'symbolic (*das Symbolische*)." Although these terms do not have the same meaning, their common ground is the concept of the symbol, and it is to the symbol, or sign, and its role in Cassirer's philosophy that the next two chapters will be mainly devoted. To fully understand Cassirer's conception of the symbol and its relation to the idea of symbolic form, however, we need to acquaint ourselves with its philosophical provenance, and for that we have to go back to Kant.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant tried to put an end to the fruitless, dogmatic controversies of traditional metaphysics by determining the nature and limits of our cognitive powers (or 'reason,' in the widest sense that he gave to the term). Once the boundaries of what we can know are established, we can determine in what fashion and to what extent, if at all, metaphysical investigations are possible. For Kant though metaphysics is not the discipline that it was for his predecessors; its focus is not the ultimate nature of Being, but the disclosure of true propositions about the world that are not empirical (that is, not contingent, on dependent of experience) but rather necessary and *a priori* (in other words, knowable independent of experience); in short, metaphysics

concerns itself with synthetic *a priori* propositions that are constitutive of experience. That such propositions are possible (and, thus, that metaphysics is possible) Kant claimed is evident from the success of Newtonian natural science, for it appeared that Newton had discovered basic laws of nature that were not analytic (i.e., derived from the analysis of concepts) but were synthetic (i.e., derived from experiential connections) and which nevertheless were necessary and *a priori*. The case for the existence of such propositions, Kant continued, is even stronger in mathematics and geometry, for both of these disciplines provide us with synthetic judgments that describe our world of experience, and yet are clearly known to us *a priori*. Kant's explanation of how this is possible hinged on his claim that space and time are forms of intuition; that is, space and time are brought to experience by us, and we structure our world through them--it is because we contribute space and time to the constitution of sense experience that the principles of geometry, for instance, can apply *a priori* and with necessity to the spatial relations in our lived environment.

Following a similar line of reasoning, Kant argued that there are as well "categories," *a priori* concepts, that are forms of thought that are comparable in function to the forms of intuition; they are "in" our understanding and are also brought to experience to structure and constitute it. According to Kant there are a total of twelve categories, the two most familiar being "causality" and "substance and attribute," and like the forms of intuition they allow us to make synthetic *a priori* judgments; they allow us to know *a priori* and with necessity such universal principles as "every event has a cause," because through them our understanding forms the phenomenal world, the world as it appears to us, and makes it so (all we can ever have knowledge of is the phenomenal world; the world of things as they are in themselves, the noumenal world, is unavailable to cognition and is only thinkable--or better, it is only a limiting concept).

For Kant, empirical knowledge always involves intuition (sensibility shaped by space and time) and the determinations of the understanding (the application of concepts to intuition). When I make a judgment about what is the case, such as when I attribute the

colour blue to a stone, I use the empirical concepts "stone" and "blue" by matching what is given to me in intuition with concepts previously formed (which, Kant says, are created through abstraction from sensation); I am, so to speak, returning to experience what has been formerly abstracted from it. My application of these concepts becomes an objective statement about the way things are when it is structured in a judgment embodying a category, e.g., 'the stone is blue,' which in this case involves the category of substance and attribute.

The question subsequently arises as to how concepts match intuitions; after all, not only is one very general and one very particular, they are also of different orders. Kant's answer is that, besides the involvement of intuition and understanding, there must as well be an active power or capacity that forms the specific intuition to fit the structure of the concept, and, thus, make specific sensations of a stone match our concept "stone"; this power Kant calls "imagination." There is still something further though that is required to explain how a *judgment* such as 'the stone is blue' connects with and matches the phenomenal world; more precisely, we have to clarify how the category involved in the judgment matches (or rather forms) what is given in intuition, for it must be remembered that the *a priori* concepts that Kant calls the categories are even more general than empirical concepts because they are universal and abstract from all experience. What does the mediating work here are "schemata;" a schema is like a rule that stipulates the conditions a manifold of intuition must meet so that it can fit a category. In all instances the schemata relate to the categories through temporality (time is the mediating factor because it is the only form of intuition that applies to any possible intuition). Hence, in our sample judgment where the category of substance and attribute is involved, the schema concerns the thought of something that endures in time. If we were to speak more carefully, we would have to say that categories such as substance and attribute and causality are "schematized" categories, given that temporality is already embedded in the statement of

them. It is the notion of schema that will be foundational for Cassirer's conception of the symbol or sign, but we have some distance to go before we can fruitfully take up that topic.

Kant was moved to investigate the questions of how to define the bounds of human knowledge and how to determine the proper subject of metaphysics by two, related philosophical forces: the first was the tradition of German rationalism in which he received his philosophical apprenticeship; the second was the empiricism of Hume, which threw the first into question for him. Many German rationalists in Kant's era, under the predominant influence of philosophers such as Christian Wolff, held that the world was in principle knowable *a priori*, and that all *a priori* truths must be truths of reason, that is, derivable from logic. This facilitated a kind of unfettered metaphysical speculation whereby competing philosophical systems made grandiose and contradictory claims about the nature of reality. Unfortunately, having left, as Kant would say, "the fruitful bathos of experience," these positions no longer had anything to appeal to in order to adjudicate their competing claims. This curious situation resulted in what Kant called antinomies of pure reason, i.e., pairs of propositions that seemed to contradict one another and yet were both "provable"; for example, one could prove that the world is limited in time and space and that it is not.

German rationalism's failure to provide secure foundations for metaphysics was made absolutely clear to Kant when he read David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Hume agreed that *a priori* truths must be derivable from logic, but logic, in Hume's terminology, is only concerned with relations of ideas (the analysis of concepts), and thus can tell us nothing about the way the world is. Our knowledge of the world must be *a posteriori*; it must be empirical knowledge derived from experience. But *a posteriori* judgments are only contingent, not necessary, and hence cannot even furnish us with such seemingly canonical metaphysical propositions such as 'every event has a cause.' It was this conclusion that prompted Kant into action, for it seemed evident to him that we are in

fact in possession of such propositions; as I said above, mathematics, geometry, and the success of Newtonian natural science seemed to him to demonstrate this.

The entire transcendental project of the *Critique of Pure Reason* was devised to answer Hume's skepticism while avoiding the speculative faults of German rationalism. And it is to this end that the *a priori* concepts known as the categories were introduced as conditions of possibility for our knowledge of the empirical world. The categories ensure that thought connects with the world because they provide the framework for our comprehension of the world; they constitute the way the world is structured for us in experience. It is in this way that it is possible to know *a priori* the synthetic judgment that 'every event has a cause,' and it is in this way that Hume's skepticism about necessity in the realm of empirical knowledge is rebutted.

One of the standard criticisms of Kant's philosophy is that he saw the theoretical framework of science as an accomplishment that was essentially complete: he assumed that Euclidean geometry was the only correct description of space; he believed that Newtonian mechanics was the true physics; and he thought that Aristotelian logic represented logic in its finished state. From the point of view of the sociology of knowledge, this was not an unreasonable conclusion to have held in his day. But as we know, by Cassirer's era, it was as clear as it could be that this was not a supportable vision; all of the disciplines that Kant had taken as stable had undergone profound, foundational upheavals, and if Kantianism wanted to survive as a philosophical approach, its foundations as well would have to be thrown into reconsideration. Hermann Cohen's rethinking of Kant and the transcendental method was one result of this; Cassirer's philosophy is a further extension of it.

As I have described it, a transcendental or critical approach to philosophy concerns itself with the "conditions of possibility" of a form of knowledge, with, in more traditional Kantian terms, the *a priori* concepts, the categories, that constitute experience. However, how does one reformulate the critical approach without Kant's reassuring belief in the stability of the Aristotelian logic and the Newtonian mechanics from which his categories

were drawn? Cassirer's initial answer comes in *Substance and Function*, where he argues that even though the concepts, laws, and principles of science are constantly changing, it is nevertheless true that scientific knowledge aims at discovering permanent elements in the flux of experience that can serve as the basis for theoretical construction. As scientific theories change, no concept, hypothesis or principle is ever immediately expunged from science's theoretical memory; rather, they are taken up into the new forms that have replaced them, because the new forms must at least explain all that the previous forms explain. This is what guarantees continuity in science--it also, Cassirer maintains, "points to a common forum of judgment to which both are subjected"<sup>1</sup>:

The transformation must leave a certain body of principles unaffected. . . . Since we never compare the system of hypotheses in itself with the naked facts in themselves, but always can only oppose one hypothetical system of principles to another more inclusive, more radical system, we need for this progressive comparison an ultimate constant standard of measurement of supreme principles of experience in general. Thought demands the identity of the logical standard of measurement amid all the change of what is measured. In this sense, the critical theory of experience would constitute the *universal invariant theory of experience*. . . . The procedure of the "transcendental philosophy" can be directly compared at this point with that of geometry. Just as the geometrician selects for investigation those relations of a definite figure, which remain unchanged by certain transformations, so here the attempt is made to discover those universal elements of form, that persist through all change in the particular material content of experience. The "categories" of space and time, of magnitude and the functional dependency of magnitude, etc., are established as such elements of form, which cannot be lacking in any empirical judgment or system of judgments.<sup>2</sup>

So, the postulated end goal of critical philosophy, its *focus imaginarius*, becomes the statement of these supreme principles, these universal elements of form which are the *a priori* concepts that underlie and underpin scientific knowledge in its transformations. The spirit of Kant's doctrine has been preserved, but its body has been sacrificed. (Cassirer

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<sup>1</sup> Cassirer, *Substance and Function*, 268.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. In anticipation of what is to come in later chapters, I would like to note that the geometrical idea of invariance under transformation is one of the ideas at the heart of the philosophy of symbolic forms. It is crucial to the development of a structural model of analysis, especially when it is a non-static one, such as Cassirer's.

says of these universal elements of form that, in the strict sense of the term, only these "ultimate logical invariants can be called *a priori*."<sup>3</sup> I presume that in saying this he is allowing that there are "weaker" *a priori* concepts that perform constitutive functions at lesser theoretical levels; for instance, two chronologically successive theories in physics will, of necessity, share the universal, constitutive elements of space and time, but it will also be the case that each theory will have its own *a priori* concepts that are constitutive for it as a theoretical construction).

It must be remembered that the characterization so far given was Cassirer's initial answer to the problem; it was formulated in *Substance and Function* and was only meant to apply to scientific discourse. Cassirer's final answer derives from the insight that led to the creation of the philosophy of symbolic forms, i.e., that other ways of having a world should as well be open to investigation by the transcendental method.<sup>4</sup> So, if such *a priori* concepts are the necessary condition for all meaningful experience, then they must be present wherever there is meaningful experience, and revealing them now becomes the end goal of an expanded critical philosophy. This programme is further outlined in the following important passage:

a new task arises: to gather the various branches of [natural and human] science with their diverse methodologies--with all their recognized specificity and independence--into one system, whose separate parts precisely through their necessary diversity will complement and further one another. This postulate of a purely functional unity replaces the postulate of a unity of substance and origin, which lay at the core of the ancient concept of being.

And this creates a new task for the philosophical critique of knowledge. It must follow the special sciences and survey them as a whole. It must ask whether the intellectual symbols by means of which the specialized disciplines reflect on and describe reality exist merely side by side or whether they are not diverse manifestations of the same basic human function. And if the latter hypothesis should be confirmed, a philosophical critique must formulate the universal conditions of this function and define the principle underlying it.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>4</sup> Cassirer's account in *Substance and Function* was not discarded for an entirely different view in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, but rather, as he would say about theory succession in science, taken up (*aufgehoben* in the Hegelian sense) into the second formulation.

<sup>5</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, 77.

There are four points in this passage that I would like to draw attention to, even though I will not fully address them until later. The first is that Cassirer sees knowledge, or perhaps it would be better to say experience, as a unity. The second is that this unity is to be understood functionally and not as unity in substance. The third is that the functional unity of experience is hypothesized as deriving from a common, basic function. And the fourth is that if the last point is true, then critical philosophy should devote itself to the transcendental investigation of this function. The common, basic function grounding the unity of experience that Cassirer is referring to is the symbolic function (it was Cassirer who suggested that "instead of defining man as an *animal rationale*, we should define him as an *animal symbolicum*").<sup>6</sup> So, in harmony with what I argued in Chapter III, critical philosophy becomes a kind of transcendently directed meta-semiotics, and the *a priori* concepts or elements that it now tries to uncover are those of the sign function, those that make the process of signification possible in general, as well as those that constitute particular sign situations in their individuality.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 26.

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that there are striking similarities in the philosophical orientations of Foucault and Cassirer (I realize that I'm not the first person to note this--Foucault himself commented on it). The projects of both thinkers were prompted by reflections on what can and should be retained of the traditional Kantian perspective. Foucault, in fact, often reverts to Kantian language when he describes the archaeological method behind *The Order of Things*; he repeatedly, for example, refers to his work as an attempt to set out the conditions of possibility for the "epistemes" and the corresponding positivities of the classical, Renaissance, and modern eras. What he is after, he says, are "historical *a priori*," the assumptions that determine the nature of knowing and knowledge in these eras. Foucault even entertains the thought of a general science of archaeology that would embody a new critique of reason that would make available to us an understanding of what regulates such fundamental shifts in the grounds of knowledge. That said, it is nevertheless true that archaeology and transcendental philosophy are two quite different things, and the clearest indication of this is that Foucault considers Kant as, so to speak, part of the problem for the current analysis of knowledge. It was Kant who ushered in what Foucault calls the analytic of finitude and set up the dynamic for the irresolvable oscillations between the empirical and the transcendental, the "cogitio" and the unthought, and the retreat and the return of the origin; it was Kant who set the stage for the appearance of "Man," the enslaved sovereign heralding the age of modernity. (Whether or not we accept Foucault's analysis, the central place that he assigns to Kant confirms for me the impression I often have when reading the *Critique of Pure Reason* of getting to peek behind the curtains and watch the operation of the machinery that sustains modernity--somewhat like the way in which early cosmologists entertained the idea of catching a glimpse of the empyrean beyond the celestial sphere of the night sky.) As for Cassirer, he is most sharply distinguished from Foucault by his belief in "Man" (though it is not Kant's "Man"), his conviction that knowledge is a unity, and his Neo-Hegelian conception of the development of the structures of knowledge. All of this would obviously be an anathema for Foucault.



If I am right about this, we can further enrich our understanding of what a symbolic form is. If we refer back to our discussion of cultural forms as symbolic forms, we can now extend the characterization that was given by adding that symbolic pregnance, as a transcendental condition for meaning, is *the* ultimate *a priori* element in Cassirer's account of human experience. Any theory of the sign that is offered will have to be in consonance with it. But as the doctrine of symbolic pregnance obviously cannot by itself be a theory of the sign, there will be other *a priori* elements that specify the relation of signification, and these will be the transcendental conditions for any and every symbolic relation (given that the symbolic is the universal element of form that provides for the functional unity of experience). Returning to the level of symbolic form, what we will find is that each symbolic form instantiates the relation of signification according to the *a priori* elements that are its unique formative principles. But further, and here we return to Cassirer's analysis in *Substance and Function*, though now expanded to cover all ways of having a world, each symbolic form embodies and reconceives through its formative principles certain general forms of perception that are common to all modes of apprehension, and which as an ensemble constitute the unity of consciousness as such. Here is how Cassirer states the matter in a representative passage concerning myth and science:

we find an unmistakable analogy between the growth of the mythical objective world and the growth of the empirical objective world. In both the isolation of the immediate datum is overcome; in both we must seek to understand how particulars are woven into a whole. And in both cases the concrete expressions of this wholeness, its intuitive schemata, prove to be the fundamental forms of space, time, and finally of number . . . . Any relationship into which the contents of mythical as of empirical consciousness gradually enter is attainable only in and through these forms of space, time, and number. But the *mode* of this grouping again shows the fundamental difference between logical and mythical synthesis.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*, 80. We should note that these fundamental forms of perception are the referents for Hamburg's usage (3) of the term 'symbolic form,' which was mentioned at the beginning of Chapter II: "It is [also] applied to space, time, cause, number, etc. which--as the most pervasive *symbol-relations*--are said to constitute, with characteristic modifications, such domains of objectivity as listed under (2)," i.e., the domains of objectivity that corresponds to cultural forms such as myth, science, and so on.

Besides taking its own view on signification and the fundamental forms of perception, each symbolic form will also organize experience around *a priori* concepts that are unique to it. For example, "The mere phenomenology of mythical thinking seemed to suggest that mana represented not a mere *content* of the mythical consciousness but one of its typical *forms*, perhaps indeed its most fundamental form."<sup>9</sup> "Thus the content of the notions of mana and taboo can never be fully apprehended purely through inquiry into their objects. They do not serve to designate specific classes of objects, but represent the characteristic accent which the magical-mythical consciousness places on objects."<sup>10</sup>

Each symbolic form, then (and to a lesser extent each instance of that symbolic form, e.g., each mythology), "makes use of different instruments, each one presupposes and applies entirely different standards and criteria; and the result is also different."<sup>11</sup> To this Cassirer adds the interesting remark that symbolic forms are not "simple *structures* which we can insert into a given world, we must understand them as *functions* by means of which a particular form is given to reality and in each of which specific distinctions are effected."<sup>12</sup>

Now that I have outlined the role of *a priori* concepts in Cassirer's philosophy, I would like to address some objections that have been advanced against his position, which will also help us to further clarify it. These objections were raised by I. K. Stephens in "Cassirer's Doctrine of the *A Priori*,"<sup>13</sup> but the stance that he takes is not unique to him.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>11</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, 91.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. The opposition between structure and function is something that I will return to when I discuss Cassirer's particular brand of structuralism. At that point I will also be able to unify my account of what a symbolic form is.

<sup>13</sup> I. K. Stephens, "Cassirer's Doctrine of the *A Priori*," in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Lasalle: Open Court, 1949), 151-181.

Stephens begins somewhat prejudicially by stating that: "To [Cassirer's] claim that the *a priori* is of the mind and is the basis of all certainty in knowledge, I readily agree."<sup>14</sup> That however is apparently where his agreement ends: "My first reaction to the whole delineation of his doctrine of the *a priori* is simply to regard it as an extremely thorough, meticulously painstaking attempt on the part of another brilliant philosopher to elaborate and defend a theory of the *a priori* which is, from the beginning, palpably indefensible."<sup>15</sup> Stephen's critique goes on at some length, but, if the repetitions and rants are removed, it seems to me that his major arguments can be stated and disposed of with relative economy. This is what it all comes to:

An analysis of knowledge does not reveal any set of *invariant* principles which are necessarily common to all thinking minds and which, by some inherent logical power which they possess, are operative in any of the mind's categories and concepts in such a fashion as to force their character of logical necessity upon the given in experience. The *a priori* character of any concept or category of the mind is not derived from any logical connection which it may have with any fundamental set of "basic functions;" but from the definitive attitude of the mind which gives rise to this conceptual order and determines the characteristics which the given *must* exhibit, *if* it is to be classified under the category or concept determined by that definitive attitude.<sup>16</sup>

It is interesting that Stephens claims that Cassirer's approach is "untenable from . . . the standpoint of what is revealed in a critical analysis of knowledge,"<sup>17</sup> for the characterization he has just given of it indicates to me that he does not understand what critical philosophy is; or, more accurately, his view of it is based on a long-standing, common, and uncharitable reading of Kant's project. But more importantly, he does not seem to appreciate the transformation that critical philosophy undergoes in Cassirer's work.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 171. I say 'prejudicially' because to speak of them as being "in the mind" is hardly the most felicitous way of describing Cassirer's position, as will become clear shortly.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

To begin with, Cassirer does not set out to "reveal" a set of invariant principles that are "in" all "minds" (this sounds more like seventeenth century rationalism). The whole point of Cassirer's approach is to track down the presuppositions that stand as the conditions of possibility for the existence of certain ways of apprehending the world--it is not a question of pulling off some metaphysical magician's act, of revealing a collection of mental entities that are deemed to be the common property of all minds. What is maintained, rather, is that if we examine the various ways in which a world is had, we will discover that there are certain very general concepts through which, in each case, experience is organized. And this is so because each mode of apprehension *presupposes* such concepts for the formation of its characteristic structures of experience: science is not possible without a certain conception of time, neither is myth, and nor is language. This has nothing to do with invariant principles embedded in the minds of humanity. If a society is without a scientific tradition that only indicates that, for whatever reason, they are without a scientific tradition; nothing follows from this about the success or failure of Cassirer's transcendental method. However, if they do have one, then that mode of thinking will of necessity be based on a certain conceptions of space, time, number, and so forth, or else it won't be science. Concepts and principles become necessary not because of metaphysical fiat, but because of conceptual presupposition. This is what critical philosophy in Cassirer's version of it is concerned with.

Next point. In what sense are these principles "invariant"? Stephens' position appears to be that Cassirer believes that they comprise a fixed and immutable set:

Even those most fundamental categories of the mind, those which formulate the mind's definitive attitudes that determine the different types of the real, are not invariant, at least not in the sense that they must remain the same regardless of any change in the complexity of the given which the mind must encounter; or regardless of any possible change in the dominant interests and purposes of society. In fact, it seems to be carrying the defense of a claim to the point of absurdity to insist that those "rational functions" which Cassirer designates as "the ultimate invariants of experience itself" have remained invariant throughout the history of culture.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 173-74.

What we are being presented with here is nothing more than a straw man (trailing a red herring). This characterization *might*, with reservations, be applied to Kant, but it cannot in good faith be pinned on Cassirer--his entire philosophical enterprise militates against it. I could quote a variety of passages that demonstrate that such an idea is at odds with the spirit of Cassirer's philosophy, but there is a much more efficient, and convincing, way of sinking it, for Stephens himself provides the material for a rapid *reductio ad absurdum* of his position. The following sentence sets it up:

Furthermore, if invariance and antiquity of origin be sure marks of the *a priori*, then I see no grounds on which to exclude the category of substance, against which Cassirer so vigorously inveighs throughout his entire system; for certainly this category has as ancient and as honorable a history as can be claimed for any of those "functional relations" to which he attributes the *a priori* character.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the concept of substance does have a long and honourable history, and it was an *a priori* concept for the domain of the empirical in Kant's Newtonian world. However, as Cassirer argued in *Substance and Function*, it has ceased to play this role for modern science, for it has been supplanted by the concept of function. But doesn't the fact that Cassirer advanced this argument prove that he doesn't hold the position that Stephens attributes to him? Isn't it the case that one of the conclusions that can be drawn from *Substance and Function* is that the nonempirical conditions of a mode of knowledge can change? Wouldn't it be more accurate (not to mention charitable) to say that for Cassirer certain concepts are invariant in the sense that the structures of knowledge, *as we presently find them*, presuppose these concepts as their conditions of possibility? I have not encountered in Cassirer's work an argument for immutability and antiquity of origin as marks of the *a priori*, though I have often come across passages such as this one: "In the construction of this universe of culture the single forms do not follow a preconceived and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 175.

predetermined scheme, a scheme that may be once and for all described in an *a priori* way of thought. All we can do is follow up the slow development that manifests itself in the history of the various forms and mark, as it were, the milestones along the way."<sup>20</sup> These two passages are even more revealing:

The final "invariants" are not given, they must be *searched* out, and "established." Yet this "establishing" is never something "absolute," but rather depends upon the continuing course of science.

The "invariants" shift "from place to place," such as in the general theory of relativity. *This* [is] the significance of "subjectification"--but this subjectification can never apply to "experience as a whole." Hence, an "invariant" "framework" always remains. But this framework itself is not fixed, but can change. Analogous considerations [apply] to the expressive function.<sup>21</sup>

Stephens takes the word 'invariant' in a strict sense which is distinctly at odds with the tone of Cassirer's philosophy. But by doing so, he creates a straw man that is so weak that it is toppled by the very prop that is brought out to support it.

Let us conclude by briefly evaluating the other half of Stephens' suspect characterization of Cassirer's doctrine of the *a priori*, which we will recall claims that these concepts and principles "by some inherent logical power which they possess, are operative in . . . the mind's categories and concepts in such a fashion as to force their character of logical necessity upon the given in experience." There is another issue that serves as the background to this depiction, and it worth our while to take a look at it if we want to fully understand what Stephens is after. It is nicely summarized in this statement:

The "original motive" which lies behind this "constructive activity" [of the mind], however, is not a "will to logic," but a "will to live," a will to satisfy certain vital and emotional interests of the organism. And it is the "will to live" rather than a

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<sup>20</sup> Ernst Cassirer, "Critical Idealism as a Philosophy of Culture," in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer, 1935-1945*, ed. Donald Phillip Verene, 73.

<sup>21</sup> *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, 120. While it is true that these passages come from the posthumous volume, it is also true that the works that were available to Stephens contain equivalent passages, as the preceding quotation indicates.

"will to logic" which tends to determine those definitive attitudes of the mind and, thus, the nature and meaning of its categories and concepts. . . . The ability to think is, I take it, an evolutionary product, and has developed in the human species as a result of its survival value. The tendency to regard man as primarily a "thinking being" rather than as an "acting being" has led to many misinterpretations of the function of the mind. Mind's function is not that of "harmonizing thought and Being," but rather that of adjusting the organism to the chaotic flux of experience in ways that will preserve and promote certain vital and emotional interests which the organism has.<sup>22</sup>

Stephens' position on these matters is, as I would describe it, a kind of Darwinian pragmatism. Thus, his enemy of choice is philosophical idealism. But the idealism of Stephens' characterization bears little resemblance to the type of revamped critical philosophy that is offered by Cassirer, and once again it seems that we have a straw man who owes his existence to an uncharitable construal of certain ideas. Let us first examine Stephens' suggestion that Cassirer's philosophy conceives of humans as idealistic "thinking beings" whose reality is divorced from and independent of the exigencies of the world. There is plenty of evidence that indicates that this is fundamentally wrong and, again, contrary to the spirit of Cassirer's work. Here is a sampling of that evidence:

We do not deny that the arguments that may be advanced in favor of a system of philosophical idealism are very strong and very subtle ones, but we are far from really consenting and yielding ourselves to these arguments. Idealism seems to remain a merely speculative view--an airy system that has no power to enforce itself on our true being, to influence our belief and to determine our conduct. Supposing this view to be true, we cannot speak of idealism as a philosophy of culture. For culture is not a merely speculative thing and cannot be based on merely speculative grounds. It does not only consist of a system of theoretical suppositions; it demands a system of actions. Culture means a whole of verbal and moral activities --of such activities as are not only conceived in an abstract way, but have the constant tendency and the energy of realization.<sup>23</sup>

We cannot define man by any inherent principle which constitutes his metaphysical essence--nor can we define him by any inborn faculty or instinct that may be ascertained by empirical observation. Man's outstanding characteristic, his distinguishing mark, is not his metaphysical or physical nature--but his work. It is

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

this work, it is the system of human activities, which defines and determines the circle of "humanity."<sup>24</sup>

These passages make it as plain as it could possibly be that Cassirer does not locate himself within the tradition of idealism that Stephens is suggesting that he belongs to, i.e., one that sees us as essentially thinking beings, reality as something that is determined by the categories of the mind, and the totality of human culture as organized by and moving under the impetus of the "will to logic" (in fact, and Stephens should have noticed it, this form of philosophical idealism is roundly denounced in the "Introduction" to the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*).<sup>25</sup> Though Cassirer's emphasis on human activity and work is far from aligning him with, say, Marx, it nevertheless blocks any attempt to characterize his philosophy in the fashion that Stephens suggests.

If Cassirer can't be fit into this idealist mold, it is even more difficult to pin on him the corresponding position that *a priori* elements "by some inherent logical power which they possess, are operative in . . . the mind's categories and concepts in such a fashion as to force their character of logical necessity upon the given in experience." To return to a point made earlier, Cassirer never maintained that *a priori* elements are "in" a place called the "mind" from which they exercise a power to force necessity on certain relations in experience; the *a priori* that Cassirer is interested in--as a non empirical condition for experience--is not a thing-like agent that has its own inherent logical power enabling it to act on experience. This is a willful misreading that lacks a textual basis, and the onus is on

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<sup>24</sup> Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 68.

<sup>25</sup> Think of the passage from the "Introduction" that I quoted in Chapter I: "For Descartes, and for all the rationalists, the systems of spirit and reason coincide. They hold that philosophy can be said to encompass and permeate the *universitas*, the concrete totality of the spirit, only if it can be deduced from a *logical* principle. Thus the pure form of logic becomes again the prototype and model for every form of the human spirit. And just as in Descartes, with whom the systems of classical idealism began, so likewise in Hegel with whom they ended, this methodic relationship is still evident. More sharply than any thinker before him, Hegel stated that we must think of the human spirit as a *concrete* whole, that we must not stop at the simple concept but develop it in the totality of its manifestations. And yet in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, with which he endeavoured to fulfill this task, he intended merely to prepare the ground for *logic*."



Stephens to produce material from Cassirer's writings which would justify such an interpretation.

All the same, Stephens' objections have provided me with an opportunity to further develop my account of the role of *a priori* elements in Cassirer's philosophy. This account is now essentially complete, but I would like to touch on a few, related issues before I bring the discussion to an end, and return to the question of the nature of the Cassirerian sign or symbol.

An important issue that so far I haven't addressed is what happens in Cassirer's philosophy to the distinction that Kant makes in the *Critique of Pure Reason* between "pure concepts of the understanding," which are constitutive, and "pure concepts of reason," which are regulative. Kant considered his distinction between the two to be one of the most significant achievements of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, because with it he could clearly demarcate what the realm of metaphysics can be, and explain why previous philosophical disputes had been futile debates that ended in irresolvable antinomies. Essentially, the difference is this: the pure concepts of the understanding (or what we earlier referred to as the "categories") relate to possible objects of experience, while the pure concepts of reason (or what are also referred to as the "ideas of reason" or "transcendental ideas") relate to the absolute totality of all possible experience, which, as Kant says, is not itself an experience. Both are *a priori*. Let me further delineate the difference between them.

From our earlier discussions we know that the categories or pure concepts of the understanding are the forms according to which objects of experience are structured and ordered. As such, they are "constitutive" of experience. In Kant's terminology, they are *a priori* because they are known independently of experience, that is, not derived from experience as *a posteriori* knowledge is, and they are conditions for experience itself. Kant cites two main criteria for *a priority*--purity, and universality and necessity--which we can further explain by looking into how he employs them in his treatment of the categories and the pure forms of intuition space and time.

The "purity" or absolute fundamentality of these *apriori* elements is revealed through a process of abstraction. Space and time, as the pure forms of sensible intuition, are discovered by abstracting from experience "everything which the understanding thinks through its concepts," thus isolating sensibility and separating off "everything which belongs to sensation, so that nothing may remain save pure intuition and the mere form of appearances, which is all that sensibility can supply *apriori*."<sup>26</sup> The same procedure is enacted for the categories, "the *apriori* conditions upon which the possibility of experience rests, and which remain as the underlying grounds when everything empirical is abstracted from appearances."<sup>27</sup>

The second criterion for the *apriori*, universality and necessity, serves as well as a measure for determining when the first criterion has been fulfilled, for there has to be some standard by which one knows when the appropriate level of abstraction has been reached. So, if a concept necessarily holds for all experience, then it can be deemed *apriori*: "Necessity and strict universality are thus sure criteria of *apriori* knowledge, and are inseparable from one another."<sup>28</sup>

The pure concepts of reason or "ideas of reason" are quite different in nature from the categories. They are ideas whose object can be met nowhere in experience; that is, they do not stand in any relation to particular objects of experience but refer to the absolute totality of all possible experience. They are, as already stated, not constitutive of experience but only regulative of it; they are maxims for the orientation of the understanding with respect to the totality of knowledge, based not on the characteristics of particular objects but on the interest of reason in conferring a certain order on our knowledge of objects. The maxims that express the regulative function of the ideas of reason are rules that enable us to

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<sup>26</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 67 (A 22 / B 36).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 129 (A 96).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 44 (B 4).

progress towards an increasingly systematic unification of our empirical judgments.<sup>29</sup> They are like ideal standards or limiting concepts that are not realizable but nevertheless very useful in the pursuit of knowledge; for example, though ultimately there may not be a unity in the totality of our knowledge of the natural world, it may be of great heuristic value to adopt--from the idea of reason that concerns the totality of all things--the maxim that our experience is ordered *as if* it were a unified totality.

In summary, the understanding secures "the unity of appearances by means of rules," while reason "secures the unity of the rules of understanding under principles."<sup>30</sup> Each unifies in its appropriate way; the understanding unifies the manifold in intuition, and reason applies itself "to understanding, in order to give to the manifold knowledge of the latter an *a priori* unity by means of concepts, a unity which may be called the unity of reason, and which is quite different in kind from any unity that can be accomplished by the understanding."<sup>31</sup>

How does this relate to Cassirer? Cassirer saw very clearly that the traditional Kantian distinction between constitutive and regulative ideas could not be maintained in his era, for Kant's doctrines, which had been founded on a belief in the enduring adequacy of Aristotelian logic, Euclidean geometry, and Newtonian mechanics, could not escape the consequences of the extraordinary upheavals that were shaking the foundations of logic, geometry, and physics at the beginning of the twentieth century. These developments led Cassirer to realize that the distinction between constitutive and regulative ideas could no longer be sustained, and, if it wasn't quite yet true that the two should be collapsed, it was at least evident that they could not be rigidly distinguished from each other.

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<sup>29</sup> I should note that I am only referring to what Kant calls theoretical ideas, which are to be distinguished from the ideas of practical reason and from aesthetic ideas.

<sup>30</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, 303 (A 302 / B 359).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

Causality provides a good example. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* causality has of course its status as an *a priori* constitutive concept, a category. Kant saw it as essential that the categories be "schematized," i.e., united with the pure form of intuition time, because "an application of the category to appearances becomes possible by means of the transcendental determination of time, which, as the schema of the concepts of the understanding, mediates the subsumption of the appearances under the category."<sup>32</sup> For causality, the connection with time is based on continuity as succession of appearances in a manifold. This became problematic for Cassirer when he realized that this form of schematization is too strong, and would limit causality to one particular view of the world. So, in *Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Physics*, Cassirer distinguishes the concept of causality from the concept of continuity. What results is that causality ceases to be a constitutive *a priori* element and becomes instead a regulative one; it becomes a methodological postulate that states that "the phenomena of nature are not such as to elude or withstand in principle the possibility of being ordered."<sup>33</sup> This allows for the principle of causality, according to Cassirer, while also not excluding discontinuities.

A similar makeover is given to the concept of substance. In one way though we could say that this transformation, which was first presented in *Substance and Function*, is more revolutionary because it strikes directly at the heart of the classical conception of the object of scientific knowledge, i.e., that physically a thing's characteristics define it as a reality. Cassirer's examination of contemporary physics, especially quantum mechanics, led him to the conclusion that the traditional conception of substance was no longer tenable,

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 181 (A 139/B 178).

<sup>33</sup> Cassirer, *Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Physics*, 60. It is perhaps somewhat misleading (or at least not accurate) to say that "what results is that causality ceases to be a constitutive *a priori* element and becomes instead a regulative one," for this implies that in Cassirer's reworking of Kant constitutive concepts are "demoted" to regulative status. It is not a question of one type being reduced to another; as I have already suggested, it would be more fitting to say that the distinction between the two is weakened, though not yet erased, for it is still useful to speak of constitutive elements in Cassirer's philosophy, and it is still informative (*vis-à-vis* Cassirer's relation to Kant) to say of this or that element that it assumes a more regulative than constitutive status, or vice-versa. As I will have recourse to this distinction in the following chapters, I would ask the reader to keep this qualification in mind.

tioned as it was to the conventional idea of things in the world of perceived objects. Physics has left the realm of things comprehended sensuously: "physics no longer deals directly with the existent as the materially real; it deals with its structure, its formal content."<sup>34</sup> Here too then a Kantian category has to be reformulated; substance and attribute too has to be weakened by severing it from its temporal schematization, with the result that it as well now only serves as a regulative idea. Most other features of the Kantian edifice receive a similar refurbishing under the corresponding demands of contemporary developments; however, it is neither necessary nor germane to my interests to go through them all.

What I wanted to show in this discussion of constitutive and regulative ideas is that in Cassirer's philosophy the distinction between them is no longer what it is in Kant's. Some ideas that are constitutive in Kant become merely regulative for Cassirer, but at the same time the notion of a constitutive idea is not eliminated; it is transformed, weakened if you will, so that it no longer connotes immutable necessity. It becomes, as I hope I made clear in my remarks about I. K. Stephens and the *apriori*, a postulated nonempirical condition for a symbolic order.

We now have at hand most of the fundamental Kantian ideas that serve as the background to Cassirer's conception of the symbolic; let us go on to further develop this background and at the same time examine how Cassirer's concept of the symbol is derived from it.

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<sup>34</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 467.

## CHAPTER V

### CASSIRER'S CONCEPT OF THE SYMBOL: FORM, FUNCTION, AND STRUCTURE

I argued in Chapter I that for Cassirer the heart of the Kantian critical philosophy, that which deserves to be preserved in moving beyond Kant, is the transcendental method. By way of introduction to the main themes of this chapter, let us have Cassirer recapitulate the central idea involved in this claim:

His transcendental method has to assume "the fact of the sciences" as given, and seeks only to understand the possibility of this fact, its logical conditions and principles. But even so, Kant does not stand merely in a position of dependence on the factual stuff of knowledge, the material offered by the various sciences. Kant's basic conviction and presupposition consists rather of this, that there is a universal and essential *form* of knowledge, and that philosophy is called upon and qualified to discover this form and establish it with certainty. The critique of reason achieves this by reflective thought upon the function of knowledge instead of upon its content.<sup>1</sup>

It is the last half of this passage that is most relevant to the concerns of this chapter, for it is through Cassirer's development of Kant's notions of form and function that we can best understand his theory of the symbol. The reorientation that Kant offered philosophy, his Copernican revolution, is in a way encapsulated in his ideas of form and function; Kant's realization that we cannot have direct knowledge of an ultimate reality, but only knowledge mediated by our forms of understanding, led him to shift the focus of philosophy to those forms and their function in the production of knowledge. There is no doubt that

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Problem of Knowledge*, trans. William H. Woglom and Charles W. Hendel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 14-15.

science does give us empirical knowledge--that must be taken as a given--but what must come up for reexamination is the character of the relation between the knower and the known, a reexamination that would explain how such knowledge is possible. For instance, how is it possible (contrary to Hume) that we can experience a conjunction of appearances and take it as a causal connection embodying a law for the relation of the things conjoined? The answer is, we now know, that such an apprehension of natural necessity is possible because our understanding partially constitutes experience by bringing to it the *a priori* category of causality, through which experience is ordered and *formed* in our judgments about the world. It is to this function of thought in judgment that Kant turns our attention. As Cassirer stated in the quote above, Kant tells us that there is a universal and essential form of knowledge, and philosophy is called upon and qualified to discover this form and establish it with certainty by critical reflection upon the function of knowledge--the function of judgment--instead of upon its content. The philosopher's new task then is to investigate the *a priori* underpinnings of the forms of judgment through which we gain knowledge of empirical reality. It is this functional aspect of form in its constitutive role that will provide us with the clearest path from Kant's philosophy to Cassirer's theory of the symbol.

In the previous chapter I mentioned that the key to understanding Cassirer's theory of the symbol is the Kantian notion of schemata. Schemata, we recall, are those mediating representations that match intuitions and concepts in connecting understanding and sensation.<sup>2</sup> Thus, for an empirical or *a posteriori* concept such as 'cat,' the schema is that

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<sup>2</sup> The centrality of the doctrine of schemata for Cassirer's theory of the symbol was first suggested by Charles W. Hendel in his "Introduction" to *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol.1, *Language*, 12-15. A considerable literature has built up around the question of the role of schemata in Kant's philosophy, and while it would be too much of a digression to take this matter on in a substantial way, I would like to at least sketch the position I am most in accord with. Stephan Körner suggests an analysis (or, more accurately, a partial analysis) of the schemata for empirical or *a posteriori* concepts in terms of rules governing concept use. He distinguishes between referential and non-referential rules. Referential rules link concepts to perception and assure their correct application. Non-referential rules, in essence, link concepts to other concepts and explicate their logical grammar. Körner claims that whatever else "the addition of its schema to a concept may be for Kant . . . it is at least the addition of the referential rules of a concept to its non-referential ones -- an addition which makes the concept applicable," [*Kant*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972), 71]. Robert Butts offers an analysis with a related but wider orientation that conceives of *a priori* concepts, i.e., the categories, as syntactical structures and the schemata as semantical rules: "Categories are grammatical forms; to supply meanings that will take these forms something else is required, namely rules that tell us to what the forms shall be applied . . . . The schemata specify in general terms what kinds of

which allows the general concept to be applied to a particular appearance of a cat; it is, in Kant's words, "a rule for the synthesis of the imagination," "the presentation of a general procedure of the imagination in procuring an image for a concept"<sup>3</sup> (Kant warns against thinking of this as akin to a visual image). In the case of an *a priori* concept, such as the category of causality, the situation is somewhat different, as categories are even more general than empirical class concepts, given that they abstract from all appearance and apply to any object whatsoever. The schemata of categories then must be capable of relating highly general concepts not derived from experience to anything that is given to us in intuition. The only thing with sufficient generality to apply to any object that can be given in intuition is time; accordingly, the schema of categories determine the specific temporal conditions under which they are applicable to objects of experience in general. So, for instance, for causality the schema is that which determines succession in a manifold of intuition, in so far as it is subject to a rule.

In criticizing both pre-Kantian idealism and empiricism, Cassirer argues that they both fail in addressing the question of how a sensuous particular, such as a spoken sound, can convey a purely intellectual meaning because they have in their own ways instituted a dualism that divides the intelligible from the sensuous. But even Kant, he says, "in a passage which constitutes the purely methodological climax of the *Critique of Judgment*,

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observation predicates are permitted given the epistemic form of the system." ["Kant's Schemata as Semantical Rules," in *Kant Studies Today*, ed. Lewis White Beck (LaSalle: Open Court, 1969), 294]. Although Butts' analysis offers promising possibilities, it is essentially an approach that has been designed with an orientation towards natural and scientific languages; which is fine, considering that the realm of empirical experience is what Kant set out to circumscribe in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. However, if one adopts this position and with it attempts to extend Kant's approach to other areas of human experience (for example, art and myth), then one seems unavoidably committed to analyzing these realms of experience and the phenomena that they encompass within a framework that does not fit their constitution. This is the kind of reservation that Cassirer would have about such an approach. Further on the question of schemata, see also: L. Chipman, "Kant's Categories and Their Schematism," *Kant-Studien* vol. 63, no. 1 (1972); Stephan Körner, "The Impossibility of Transcendental Deductions," in *Kant Studies Today*, ed. Lewis White Beck (LaSalle: Open Court, 1969), 230-244; G. Praus, "Time, Space, and Schematism," *The Philosophical Forum* XIII, no. 1 (1981); Richard Rorty, "Transcendental Arguments and Science," in *Transcendental Arguments and Science*, ed. P. Bieri (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979); Eva Schaper, "Arguing Transcendentally," *Kant-Studien* vol. 63, no. 1 (1972).

<sup>3</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 182 (B 180, 181). Remember that here 'imagination' refers to the "faculty" that mediates understanding and sensation.



once again sharply develops the antithesis between the *intellectus archetypus* and the *intellectus ectypus*, between the intuitive, archetypal intellect and the discursive intellect 'which depends on images.'<sup>4</sup> Indeed, one could say that Kant needs the notion of schemata just because he insists on such a division, and something has to bridge the gap, which is of course what schemata do, because they come to be defined as mediating forms that are both sensuous and intellectual. The crucial step for Cassirer then is to overcome the misleading and inhibiting dualism that separates the intelligible and the sensuous.

Kant's separation of understanding and sensibility was made to facilitate the exposition of his transcendental analysis; he did not believe that the activities of these "faculties" could be isolated and studied in the ordinary workings of consciousness--they always work in unity with the other constituents isolated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*; the distinction between them is a purely formal one. Nevertheless, Kant's well-known remark, that the schematization of the concepts of the understanding "is an art concealed in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover,"<sup>5</sup> seems to me to indicate that he did not see how to overcome the gap that he had instituted between understanding and sensibility. It was Cassirer's insight that these elements could find their natural reunification through a reformulation of the doctrine of schemata, which in the end is articulated in his theory of the symbol. Kant himself however prepared the groundwork for this reunification when he said that "The schema is, properly, only the phenomenon, or sensible concept, of an object in agreement with the category"<sup>6</sup>; here we have a suggestion of what, apart from the formal/transcendental role it plays in Kant's architectonic of knowledge, a schema might be: it is actually identified as a *phenomenon*, a *sensible concept*; a suggestion that leads naturally to the kind of account that Cassirer would eventually propose.

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<sup>4</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, 113.

<sup>5</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 183 (B 180-181).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 186 (B 186).

That Cassirer saw the importance of schemata is evident in his writings that predate *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. In *Kant's Life and Work*,<sup>7</sup> Cassirer offers a sustained argument in support of the claim that the doctrine of schemata is central to the development of Kant's thought in its passage from the *Critique of Pure Reason* to the *Critique of Judgment*; indeed, he maintains that the third *Critique* owes both its content and form to the extension and systematic development of the doctrine of schemata; it is in fact "a consequence of the elaboration of the transcendental schematism . . ."<sup>8</sup> The same kind of evaluation is found in the "Introduction" to the third volume of *The Problem of Knowledge*, where he speaks of the *Critique of Judgment* as moving beyond the abstract schematism of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, an advance that is both fitting and necessary, according to Cassirer, for the proper consideration of art, given that art, as he often says, provides the most striking example of a type of symbolic creation that completely and concretely unites sense and understanding in singular symbols. To adequately comprehend what happens to the idea of schemata in Cassirer's philosophy, we will have to give ourselves a fuller picture of what Cassirer thought of the *Critique of Judgment*, which is very important to his philosophical vision in general, and which is the source of his structuralist principles in particular.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*, trans. James Haden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981). See especially Chapter VI.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>9</sup> Thierry de Duve's *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996) is an important contemporary reflection on the *Critique of Judgment* and the possible modification of its doctrines in the face of modern artistic practice. However, as de Duve's concerns never really cross paths with my own, they do not find a place in my discussions. Even so, I would like to make a few remarks about his central argument. Taking Duchamp's readymades as his point of departure, de Duve evolves a nominalist theory of art that is nevertheless conceptually dependent upon the history of aesthetics. This allows him to provide an account of the development of modernism in terms of the artist's choices in relation to a set of institutionalized aesthetic possibilities. From within this framework, de Duve argues that Duchamp's readymades suggest a reinterpretation of Kant's doctrine of aesthetic judgment that fits and makes sense of modernist artistic practice. He proposes that Kant's doctrine, which is founded on the judgment, "this is beautiful," be replaced by the judgment "this is art." While the further details of his account are important, what bothers me about it can already be stated: Kant's discussion of beauty is oriented to judgments about nature; art requires a different treatment, which is in fact provided in the *Critique of Judgment*. It seems to me that de Duve does not do enough to justify (and support) lifting aesthetic judgment out of its conceptual context and retooling it to serve his own ends. Admittedly, there is an aptness to what he is proposing, but any change to the idea

Cassirer's estimation of the third *Critique* was markedly different from the common opinion of his time (which is still echoed today): "It was not out of an immediate interest in the problems of art and artistic creation--so it is said--that Kant's aesthetic grew, nor does it have an intregal connection with the problem of natural purposiveness that is by a necessity rooted in the subject matter itself. In both instances, Kant's predilection for the subtle and artistic architectonic of his systems, for divisions and subdivision of concepts, and for the coordination of the faculties of knowledge into particular families is [what directed his investigations]."<sup>10</sup> Cassirer will have nothing to do with this opinion. His view, which is in fundamental agreement with Kant's assessment of what he had accomplished, is that the *Critique of Judgment* completes and unifies the projects undertaken in the first two *Critiques*. It is not a forced and artificial effort by someone in love with system building to impose the appearance of unity on his disparate interests, but a study that achieves a new and more fundamental insight into the foundations of the Kantian understanding of consciousness's relation to the world.

Though the *Critique of Judgment* directed the development of Cassirer's thought in myriad ways, I will only comment on those that are most immediately related to our concerns about form and function. The first pertains to unity in structures of knowledge. Why, it is often asked, do our theories about the world advance in a way that suggests a progression of knowledge and a further integration of that knowledge into a comprehensive explanation of the order of experience? The preferred pre-Kantian answer was that this occurred because our successful theories in fact map the structure of reality itself. Hume effectively undermined the blithe confidence of this reply, and that, as we know, prompted Kant to search for an entirely new kind of answer, one that shifted attention from the structure of Being to the structure of our knowledge. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant

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of aesthetic judgment involves more than just modifying its formulation, for there is an entire conceptual apparatus connected to it.

<sup>10</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*, 272.

responded to this question with the postulate of regulative Ideas: lacking access to how things are in themselves, we can only say that there is systematic integration *in our knowledge*; we pursue it *as if* the system were guaranteed from the outset, and this is a regulative principle implicit in our approach to the seeking of knowledge.

This insight was deepened and given a new orientation in the *Critique of Judgment*, within a greater discussion of teleological judgments and judgments about purposiveness in nature. In Part II Kant argued that nature cannot be understood on the basis of mechanical principles alone, but must be supplemented by the principles of teleological judgment; teleological judgments may supplement determinative judgments as regulative principles for reflective judgments, and so extend "natural science in terms of a different principle, that of final causes, yet without detracting from the principle of mechanism in the causality of nature."<sup>11</sup> Thus employed, teleological judgments do not ascribe human purposes to nature, but only serve as a means of achieving the systematic completeness of our knowledge, a completeness that now has a more organic conception of the relation the parts to the whole.

Cassirer first began building on Kant's insights into the question of the systematicity of our knowledge of nature in *Substance and Function*. The foundational act of Cassirer's advance was his theory of concept formation, which rejected the traditional account that empirical concepts are constructed through a process of abstracting a common feature from a range of similar individuals. Cassirer argued that such an account actually presupposes a more fundamental model, one that see concepts as forms that embody ordering principles by which individuals are set up in law-like relation to each other as members of a series (I will have more to say about this shortly). The development and

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<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 259. Kant's distinction between reflective and determinative judgments comes to this: judgment in general is described as "the ability to think the particular as contained under the universal," and if the universal is already given "then judgment, which subsumes the particular under it, is *determinative*"(Ibid., 18). "But if only the particular is given and judgment has to find the universal for it, then this power is merely *reflective*" (Ibid., 18-19).

systematization of modern scientific knowledge, and the dynamic unity that Kant would argue should be inherent to it, can be explained, Cassirer tells us, by an analogous shift of focus, i.e., from a static to a functional understanding of the structure of our knowledge. Science doesn't continue to progress towards greater systematic unity because it is approaching the "true facts" about the world and the "ultimate laws" that connect them; such a notion is a misleading abstraction that rests on a reified conception of reality. If, in the spirit of Kant's critical philosophy, we turn our attention away from speculations about the nature of Being, and examine instead the structure of our knowledge, quite a different account will present itself to us:

The "fundamental laws" of natural science seem at first to represent the final "form" of all empirical processes, but regarded from another point of view, they serve only as the material for further consideration. In the further process of knowledge, these "constants of the second level" are resolved into variables. They are only valid relatively to a certain sphere of experience, and must be ready, when this sphere is extended, to change their import. Thus we stand before a ceaseless progress, in which the fixed form of being and process that we believed we had gained, seems to escape us. All scientific thought is dominated by the demand for unchanging elements, while on the other hand, the empirically given constantly renders this demand fruitless. We grasp permanent being only to lose it again. From this standpoint, what we call science appears not as an approximation to any "abiding and permanent" reality, but only as a continually renewed illusion, as a phantasmagoria, in which each new picture displaces all the earlier ones, only itself to disappear and be annihilated by another.<sup>12</sup>

Scientific knowledge *does* progress, and in that development there is further systematization, and this does give the philosophically unwary the impression that we are continually approaching the true state of how things are in themselves, but this is an illusion: what we are in reality witnessing is our ever-developing capacity to integrate our increasingly sophisticated efforts at reckoning with and theorizing our experience. Accordingly, while the need for constants itself remains constant, the ones that are appealed to are ultimate only for the theoretical arrangement of the moment.<sup>13</sup> The plausibility of the

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<sup>12</sup> Cassirer, *Substance and Function*, 266.

<sup>13</sup> This extends our discussion in the previous chapter of how the question of *a priori* elements as constants in the constitution of experience is addressed in Cassirer's philosophy.

older view, as I've already said, rests upon a reified conception of "nature," which overlooks, and this is the point to which we have been heading, that the objects studied through theories are not things existing independently of them, *but constructs that get their meaning and objective reality through their functional relation to the other constructs with which they form an organic whole*. This is the first basic principle of Cassirer's structuralism.

A further consideration of the place of the *Critique of Judgment* in Cassirer's thought discloses other principles. Kant's rethinking of teleological judgment brought with it a new evaluation of the role of the idea of organic form in our comprehension of nature. Kant was not of course the first thinker to argue for the necessity of a less rigid conception of organic form, or for an idea of the whole that is not reducible to the sum of its parts, but his new approach to the tasks of philosophy gave this idea a deeper significance, by casting it as that which "is presupposed by its parts and constitutes the condition of the possibility of their nature and being."<sup>14</sup>

Kant's reflections in the *Critique of Judgment* mark a break with the vision set forth in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he had maintained, as Cassirer puts it, "that in any particular theory there was only as much real science as there was mathematics."<sup>15</sup> However, developments in the sciences of life had made it clear to Kant that a non-mechanistic, purposive concept of the whole was unavoidable and essential to biological thought, and that his earlier characterization of science would have to be revised. Cassirer summarizes the changes in this aspect of Kant's philosophy as follows:

So the problem is reduced to that of the relation between the mode of causal knowledge and that of the knowledge of purpose. The issue which had divided metaphysics from earliest times, whether purposeful or "intelligent" causes govern

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<sup>14</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 31. Cassirer attributes to Leibniz the recognition of the philosophical significance of this idea.

<sup>15</sup> Cassirer, *The Problem of Knowledge*, 118.

things, or whether everything follows a blind necessity, had therefore lost all meaning for Kant. He asked simply whether it was possible and rational, at one and the same time, to conceive of phenomena as obedient to natural law, that is, to refer them to the universal dynamic principle of causality, and to regard them also from the point of view of purpose and organize and arrange them accordingly.

The *Critique of Judgment* aims to prove that there is no antinomy whatsoever between these two *forms of order* in knowledge. They cannot contradict one another because they relate to problems in distinct fields that must be carefully kept apart. Causality has to do with knowledge of the objective temporal succession of events, the order in change, whereas the concept of purpose has to do with the *structure* of those empirical objects that are called living organisms. To appreciate this structure as such in its characteristic and specific form does not mean that we must desert the general domain of causality . . . . [Biology] considers nature under the aspect of a whole so formed that it determines the properties of its various parts. Then nature ceases to be a mere aggregate and becomes a system.<sup>16</sup>

The principle of formal purposiveness that governs the organic conception of the whole is then another *a priori* principle that we bring to the study of nature and our comprehension of the world. However, as has already been discussed, for Kant this principle is not constitutive of appearances but merely regulative for our investigation of them. Cassirer believes, though, given the development of the modern sciences of life since the time of Kant, that this principle of formal purposiveness must now be granted constitutive status. But more than this, and here we have our second basic principle of Cassirer's structuralism, *he believes that this "presupposition that nature as a whole not only behaves according to law, but also discloses a thoroughgoing organization in all details as well"*<sup>17</sup> *can be extended from objects of nature and objects of art to the study of cultural forms themselves.*

There is another principle that arises from reflection on the connection between judgments about form in art and judgments about form in the natural world. The objects of nature and the objects of art also provide particularly good examples of how the universal and the particular, the intellectual and the sensible are united in singular forms. As was so often the case, Cassirer's own appreciation of this was influenced by Goethe:

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-126.

There prevails in [Goethe's] writings a relationship of the "particular" to the "universal" such as can hardly be found elsewhere in the history of philosophy or of natural science. It was his firm conviction that the particular and the universal are not only intimately connected but that they interpenetrate one another. The "factual" and the "theoretical" were not opposites poles to him, but only two expressions and factors of a unified and irreducible relation. . . . 'The highest thing would be,' he said, 'to realize everything factual as being itself theoretical.'<sup>18</sup>

This intimate connection and irreducible relation that holds between the factual and the theoretical, the sensible and the intellectual, is central not just to Cassirer's understanding of the objects of nature and of art, but it applies as well to his concept of the symbol and its role in signifying structures. It also gives us the third basic principle of Cassirer's structuralism: *all symbols in all symbolic orders are irreducible unities of this nature*. And this nicely brings us full circle to our original topic, for the question of the relation between the sensible and the intellectual is none other than the question of schemata, the sensuous-intellectual forms that underlie Cassirer's concept of the symbol. So, having extracted three basic structural principles from our consideration of the influence that Kant's third *Critique* had on Cassirer's thinking, and having found our way back to the question of schemata, we are now set to turn to Cassirer's theory of the symbol, and further develop both it and the structural approach on which it depends into a complete doctrine.

In the quotation from *The Problem of Knowledge* with which I opened this chapter, Cassirer said of Kant that he believed that there is a universal and essential form of knowledge, and that philosophy is called upon and qualified to discover this form and establish it with certainty by critical reflection upon the function of knowledge--the function of judgment--instead of upon its content, and that the philosopher's new task would hence be to investigate the *a priori* underpinnings of the forms of judgment through which we gain empirical knowledge. It is by now abundantly clear that one of the main tasks of Cassirer's philosophical project is to extend this critique of reason to all the other ways in

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<sup>18</sup> Cassirer, *The Problem of Knowledge*, 145.



which we shape the world into recognizable realms of experience with their own laws of formation. But critics might well wonder whether this is still an obtainable goal for a philosophy that casts its net as widely as does Cassirer's: won't this extension of the Kantian ideal end in a fragmented world of independently articulated symbolic forms? Not so, says Cassirer, for what is required is that the demand for a universal form of knowledge be reconceived in order to discover what unity could exist amongst such disparate forms of apprehension. Cassirer believed that the diverse symbolic forms are manifestations of the same basic human function and that "a philosophical critique must formulate the universal conditions of this function and define the principle underlying it."<sup>19</sup> This function Cassirer tells us is the symbolic function, for "all these spheres produce freely their own *world of symbols* which is the true vehicle of their immanent development,"<sup>20</sup> all thought, not just scientific thought, "is sustained by the *symbolics* and *semiotics* on which it is based."<sup>21</sup> Thus, the symbolic function is that which mediates the various symbolic forms, revealing and respecting their individual differences, and at the same time disclosing the more general principles of symbolic formation that unite them and fulfill the demand for a universal form of knowledge.

A figure to whom Cassirer often refers in explaining his vision of humankind as *animal symbolicum* is Johannes von Uexküll, a strikingly original biological theorist with a Kantian bent.<sup>22</sup> Uexküll believed, as Cassirer tells us, that

it would be a naïve sort of dogmatism to assume that there exists an absolute reality of things which is the same for all living beings. Reality is not a unique and homogeneous thing; it is immensely diversified, having as many different schemes and patterns as there are different organisms. Every organism is, so to speak, a monadic being. It has a world of its own because it has an experience of its own.

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<sup>19</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, 77.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> See Johannes von Uexküll, *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere*, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1921); *Theoretische Biologie*, (Berlin, 1909), trans. Doris L. Mackinnon (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1926).

The phenomena that we find in the life of a certain biological species are not transferable to any other species. The experiences--and therefore the realities--of two different organisms are incommensurable with one another. In the world of a fly, says Uexküll, there are only "fly things"; in the world of the sea urchin we find only "sea urchin things."<sup>23</sup>

In this limited context it is not possible to do justice to Uexküll's innovative approach, but this is what is central for Cassirer:

Every organism, even the lowest, is not only in a vague sense adapted to (*angepasst*) but entirely fitted into (*eingepasst*) its environment. According to its anatomical structure it possesses a certain *Merknetz* and a certain *Wirknetz*--a receptor system and an effector system. Without the coöperation and equilibrium of these two systems the organism could not survive. . . . They are links in one and the same chain which is described by Uexküll as the *functional circle* (*Funktionskreis*) of the animal. . . . Is it possible to make use of the scheme proposed by Uexküll for a description and characterization of the *human world*? Obviously this world forms no exception to those biological rules which govern the life of all the other organisms. Yet in the human world we find a new characteristic which appears to be the distinctive mark of human life. The functional circle of man is not only quantitatively enlarged; it has also undergone a qualitative change. Man has, as it were, discovered a new method of adapting himself to his environment. Between the receptor system and the effector system, which are to be found in all animal species, we find in man a third link which we may describe as the *symbolic system*.<sup>24</sup>

Let us begin our fuller examination of this symbolic system by reintroducing Cassirer's concept of the symbol or sign, which he encapsulates in the following passage: "In it we have attempted to encompass the totality of those phenomena in which the sensuous is in any way filled with meaning, in which a sensuous content, while preserving the mode of its existence and facticity, represents a particularization and embodiment, a

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<sup>23</sup> Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 24. It is interesting to note that in what was to be the concluding section of the fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* the final subsection is entitled "Uexküll's *Gegenwelt*--'schema'." That Uexküll himself saw the appropriateness of the notion of schemata to his approach is evident in his writings: in *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere*, he says that "In the *Gegenwelt* [of the animal] the objects in the environment are represented through Schemata, which, according to the organizational plan of the animal, can be very general and can encompass very many kinds of objects" (Johannes von Uexküll, *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere*, 168, translation by Krois). The editors of the fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* also refer the reader to Uexküll's *Theoretical Biology*, 92-97.

manifestation and incarnation of a meaning."<sup>25</sup> Or, in Carl Hamburg's terser translation, the symbol is said to encompass "the totality of all phenomena which -- in whatever form -- exhibit 'sense in the senses' and in which something 'sensuous' is *represented* as a particular embodiment of a 'sense'."<sup>26</sup> We can see from the language that Cassirer uses that he is intent on formulating a definition that requires the interpenetration of 'sense and the senses,' how he makes his case for this is the topic we shall pursue shortly; however, the first thing that probably strikes anyone who is familiar with more recent work in semiotics is the unusual generality and apparent vagueness of Cassirer's definition. This though is deliberate, and it speaks to his desire to begin with a conception that does not force a specific, potentially constrictive model of the symbol or sign (for instance, one appropriate to linguistics) on all the other signifying practices engaged in by human beings.<sup>27</sup> If the various symbolic forms are to be analyzed immanently, then the hope is that investigations into their unique conditions of possibility will reveal both the distinctive features of their symbolizing capacities and the structural commonalities that unite them with other symbolizing activities.

Cassirer has provided one such essentially complete analysis of the concept of the symbol in *Substance and Function*, which is his treatment of scientific signs.<sup>28</sup> *Substance and Function* predates the volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, but it sets out many of the features that will define Cassirer's theory of symbolization and that will provide the structural commonalities that underlie other signifying practices. Most

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<sup>25</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 93.

<sup>26</sup> Carl H. Hamburg, "Cassirer's Conception of Philosophy," in Schilpp, op. cit., 78.

<sup>27</sup> If he could have joined modern debates about whether linguistics should provide the general model for semiotic studies, Cassirer would have argued vehemently against such an approach. In a passage on expression and the expressive function, just before the quote on the concept of the symbol, he says that "if we define the concept of symbolism in such a way as to limit it to those cases in which precisely this differentiation between mere image and the thing itself stands out clearly [e.g., as in natural languages] and in which this differentiation is emphasized and elaborated, we shall find ourselves beyond any doubt in a region [e.g., expressive phenomena] to which this concept can have no application."

<sup>28</sup> This analysis is then reconceived in the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.

important perhaps is the idea of *function*, which is central to Cassirer's attempt to unite understanding and sensation in his treatment of scientific symbols. Cassirer uses the idea of function to overcome the inadequacies he perceives in the Aristotelian account of concept formation that we have inherited, which is based on a metaphysics that privileges the concept of substance and a logic that is directed to the substance-attribute relation. According to Cassirer, the central problem with the Aristotelian account, an account that he claims has been entrenched in the history of Western philosophy up until the publication of his book, is that it presupposes that which it is suppose to explain. The prinicipal idea, which I sketched earlier in this chapter, is that a general concept is created by abstraction; amidst the diverse properties assigned to objects, likenesses are noticed over time and abstracted from the differences to form a general concept. To this type of account Cassirer replies, and this instance he is specifically referring to the kind psychological statement of the doctrine one would get from a figure such as Mill, that the "similarity of things, however, can manifestly only be effective and fruitful, if it is understood and judged *as such*. That the 'unconscious' traces left in us by an earlier perception ~~are~~ like a new impression in point of fact, is irrelevant to the process implied here as long as the elements are not *recognized* as similar."<sup>29</sup> The traditional account has an initial plausibility because it presupposes a function, a logical operation for identification, that groups together phenomena according to a principle of similarity; that is, it presupposes an account (which is Cassirer's account) that views concepts as forms that embody ordering principles by which individuals are set up in law-like relation to each other as members of a series.

Cassirer's conception of function is indebted to the development of non-Aristotelian logic at the beginning of this century, as for instance in Bertrand Russell's work on the logic of relations. Relations can be stated as propositional functions, i.e., in the logical form  $f(x,y)$  where  $f$  stands for the relation under consideration and  $(x,y)$  stand for the elements to be related. A propositional function is not itself a proposition but "only sets up

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<sup>29</sup> Cassirer, *Substance and Function*, 15.

a general schema which must be filled with definite values before it can achieve the character of a particular statement."<sup>30</sup> Cassirer holds that scientific class concepts, such as 'electron, 'polyhedron,' and so forth, should all be analyzed as relations stated as propositional functions. In other words, "What holds the class together, according to the theory developed here, is the circumstance that all the members united in it are thought of as variables of a determinate propositional function: it is therefore the propositional function and not the mere idea of a quantity as a pure collective that becomes the core of the concept."<sup>31</sup> Concepts understood as propositional functions are then for Cassirer rules that determine how phenomena are related in experience and how, accordingly, experience is constituted.

We can see as well now that the propositional function is a perfect example of a sensuous-intellectual form, for it combines in an unbreakable unity a rule or principle  $f$  with potential elements in sensation  $(x,y)$  which have no determinate identity apart from that given to them in the relation. Propositional functions then stand at the centre of Cassirer's theory of the concept as he states it for scientific symbols or signs. But what about other symbolic forms? Cassirer would want to argue that this is as well a perfectly good approach for signs in natural language, for understanding ordinary class concepts such as "stone" or "blue"; however, in keeping with his desire to analyze the various symbolic forms immanently and not impose a particular model on their unique principles of formation, he would not try to force such an account on, for instance, myth or art. Nevertheless, he does believe that the general idea can be carried over to other symbolic activities, for in Cassirer's vision any mode of apprehending the world involves intellectual determinateness, all experience has unity, and though it may not come from the unity of the scientific concept, it is still the unity of a "relation by which a manifold is determined as

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<sup>30</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 295.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

inwardly belonging together."<sup>32</sup> It is this general idea of functional relation that is the heart of Cassirer's theory of the symbol, and it is central to what he has in mind when he speaks of form.

In this chapter we have further advanced our understanding of Cassirer's theory of the symbol in relation to the fundamental concepts of Kant's philosophy, particularly in relation to the concept of schemata. We have seen how the principles of Cassirer's structuralism are derived from the *Critique of Judgment*, and how those principles and Cassirer's conception of form meet in the idea of a proposition function. The next chapter will develop the larger semiotic context into which Cassirer's theory of the symbol fits by comparing it to the theories of his contemporaries Saussure and Peirce.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

CHAPTER VI  
CASSIRER'S SEMIOTICS: THE GREATER CONTEXT OF HIS THEORY OF THE  
SYMBOL

To see how we can relate our account of Cassirer's theory of the symbol and our reflections on cultural forms as symbolic forms, we need to enlarge our understanding of Cassirer's semiotics. An effective way to do this is through a comparison of his theories to those that were put forth by two of his particularly influential contemporaries: Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. Let us begin by comparing Cassirer's model of the sign or symbol to theirs. The most familiar modern analysis of the linguistic sign is Saussure's; as most everyone knows, Saussure's basic model is dyadic and can be set out in the equation: Sign=signifier/signified, where the relation between signifier and signified is deemed to be arbitrary. A signifier is not a name, and a signified is not a thing (such a conception has stood refuted since at least Plato); as Saussure says: "The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image. . . . The linguistic sign is then a two-sided psychological entity."<sup>1</sup> If we think back to the definition by Cassirer cited earlier, this does not seem to be in dramatic disagreement with what he says; however, when Cassirer's definition is placed in the proper context of his philosophy, the impression of agreement is considerably weakened. For example, Cassirer would have strong misgivings about Saussure's claim that the signifier/signified relation is inherently arbitrary. Cassirer would agree that such relations are for the most part arbitrary--there is

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<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye with Albert Riedlinger, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 66.

no reason to believe that 'room,' 'salle,' or 'Zimmer' are designations somehow compelled by nature—nevertheless, he would also argue that there are whole tracts of language where this appears not to be the case. From our discussions in Chapter II, we know that Cassirer sets out three "ideal" or formal stages through which each symbolic form passes in its development: in the "mimetic" stage comprehension holds fast to immediate sensory awareness; in the "analogical" stage it builds its understanding in relation to the activity of the subject; and in the "pure symbolic" stage the true autonomy of the symbolizing activity is fully realized. We will also recall that Cassirer distinguishes three, basic functions of symbolization or, as he sometimes refers to them, dimensions of meaning: expression (*Ausdruck*), representation (*Darstellung*), and pure signification (*reine Bedeutung*). The first is typified by myth, the second finds its paradigm in natural language, and the third is best represented by mathematical and formal languages. Each symbolic form is grounded in one of these functions of meaning, and, as was just said, passes through three stages in its formal development. The only situation in which there would be a wholly arbitrary relation between signifier and signified would be the one in which a symbolic form is based on the function of pure signification, and is in the third stage of its development. Thus, natural language, which is rooted in the function of representation, cannot be conceived of as wholly arbitrary. Cassirer maintains that this is supported by research in historical linguistics; consider, he would say, the state of languages at the mimetic stage:

Here language clings to the concrete phenomenon and its sensory image, attempting as it were to exhaust it in sound; it does not content itself with general designations but accompanies every particular nuance of the phenomenon with a particular phonetic nuance, devised especially for this case. In Ewe and certain related languages, for example, there are adverbs which describe only *one* activity, *one* state or *one* attribute, and which consequently can be combined only with *one* verb. Many verbs possess a number of such qualifying adverbs pertaining to them alone, and most of them are phonetic reproductions of sensory impressions. . . . Although this type of sound painting recedes as language develops, there is no language, however advanced, that has not preserved numerous examples of it. Certain onomatopoeic expressions, occur with striking uniformity in all the languages of



the globe. They demonstrate extraordinary vitality, resisting phonetic changes which are otherwise almost universal.<sup>2</sup>

Cassirer's belief that sign relations are not always wholly arbitrary rests partially on his doctrine of natural signs and symbolic pregnance. This doctrine puts Cassirer at odds with many contemporary writers who claim that because sign relations are for the most part arbitrary or conventional, one is then licensed to conclude that there is nothing in the structure of language that is not conventional, and that language as such in its origins is a convention.<sup>3</sup> Cassirer was alert to the potential circularity inherent in accounts based on conventionality: "Language is said to be a convention, 'something agreed upon,' which the individuals simply encounter; political and social life is traced back to a 'social contract.' The circular nature of such arguments is obvious. For agreement is possible only in the medium of speech and, similarly, a contract has meaning and force only within a state and a medium of laws."<sup>4</sup>

Another feature of Saussure's characterization of the signifier/signified relation that Cassirer would have been unhappy with is his claim that the relation is a psychological one; Cassirer after all is a philosopher in the Kantian critical tradition, and a psychological treatment of the structures of sense and significance is completely antithetical to a

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<sup>2</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, 190-191. Jakobson has also provided a series of very strong arguments for why the signifier/signified relation cannot be completely arbitrary (see Roman Jakobson, "Sign and System of Language: A Reassessment of Saussure's Doctrine," in *Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time*, eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephan Rudy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985). My impression is that there is a certain harmony of intent on this and other matters between Cassirer and Jakobson. When they were both trying to escape the Nazis, they fortuitously found themselves on the same boat to the United States. Apparently, they spent the voyage discussing language. This seems to have had an effect on Cassirer's conception of structuralism (see especially Cassirer's "Structuralism in Modern Linguistics"). Cassirer later suggested that Jakobson be invited to contribute a paper on Cassirer's philosophy of language to the *Library of Living Philosophers* volume that was being prepared on him. It isn't known why Jakobson wasn't included.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Jacques Derrida, "Science, Structure, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, eds., *The Structuralist Controversy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 247-265.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Logic of the Humanities*, trans. Clarence Howe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 108.

transcendental approach--indeed, anything akin to psychologism would be an anathema. In this respect Cassirer is closer to Peirce, who also saw his work as an attempt to remake Kantianism in the image of semiotics.<sup>5</sup> Cassirer's basic model of the sign is in fact more like Peirce's than Saussure's. Consider the following well-known passage from Peirce:

"A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the *representamen*."<sup>6</sup>

Peirce, Cassirer, and Saussure all agree that the basic linguistic sign relation consists of an association between an acoustic image or inscription, e.g., 'triangle,' and a concept, e.g., "triangle," but for Peirce this relation is only intelligible and signifying when it is capable of determining a third relation to another element, to an interpretant. In this regard, let us take another look at Cassirer's definition, which states that the idea of the symbol encompasses "the totality of all phenomena which--in whatever form--exhibit 'sense in the senses' and in which something 'sensuous' is *represented* as a particular embodiment of a 'sense'." This seems to indicate that Cassirer as well is working with a tripartite model of the sign: there is something sensuous, a particular sense, and a relation in which the former is taken as representing the latter. This relation of taking, of representing, is akin in its role to that played by Peirce's interpretant. All I mean by this is that Cassirer's model of the sign is, as

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<sup>5</sup> See Charles Sanders Peirce, "On a New List of the Categories," in *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 23-33. "On a New List of the Categories" was published in 1867, before Peirce's era of intensive research into logic (approximately 1870 to 1885), which means that it predates his discoveries in quantification and the logic of relations. These discoveries--and I suppose this almost goes without saying--dramatically changed his conception of how the idea of the categories should be understood. These changes clearly inform his writings on semiotics, as is evident for instance in "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs." A keen and astute appreciation of the consequences of the logic of relations for a theory of the sign is one of the intellectual ties that link Peirce and Cassirer.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 99.

Peirce would say, "genuinely triadic," because it based on the recognition that the core dyadic relation is not one of signification unless it is apprehended as representational. Let me try to explain this without invoking the labyrinthine complexities of Peirce's system. Peirce's work in the logic of relations led him, like Cassirer, to the conclusion that triadic relations are irreducible, because any analysis that tried to reduce them to some complex of dyadic relations would never capture the sense of the combinational relation uniting the two (in this case, the relation of representation).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, like Cassirer, Peirce concluded that because triadic relations are irreducible, the things that can only be described in terms of triadic relations are themselves irreducible phenomena or existents in the world-- thoughts and signifieds are as real as rocks, and one of the characteristics of their existence is that their nature can only be explained in terms of triadic relations. This is the only point that I wanted to make in claiming that Cassirer's relation of representation is, in its function, akin to Peirce's interpretant. I do *not* mean to imply by this that the relation of representation of which Cassirer speaks is theoretically equivalent to Peirce's notion of the interpretant, for in the end Cassirer's semiotic is not Peirce's--not at all. But this is an issue that I will not go into, as I have no need for a detailed comparative study of their systems of semiotics.

Before we go on to examine some of the differences that give Cassirer's account its distinctive stamp, let us visually summarize for future reference the three models that we have been working with:

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<sup>7</sup> See Charles Sanders Peirce, "One, Two, Three: Fundamental Categories of Thought and Nature," in *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 180-185.

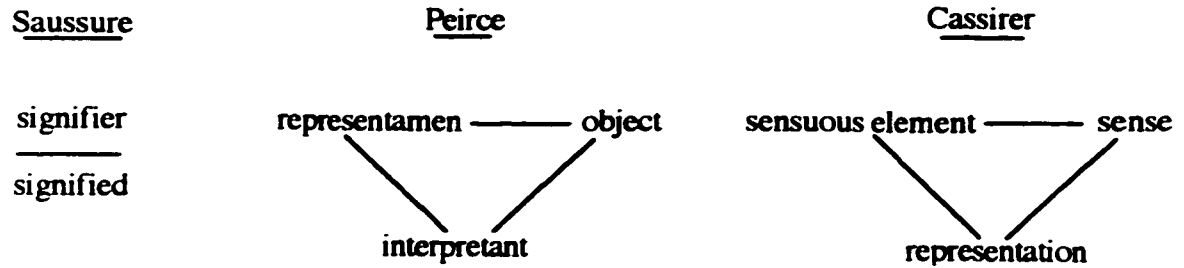


FIGURE 1. Comparison of Saussure's, Peirce's, and Cassirer's model of the sign.

The designations 'signified,' 'object,' and 'sense' are, formally speaking, roughly equivalent; their contents however are markedly different. We know already that Saussure sees the signified as a psychological entity, whereas Peirce and Cassirer don't, which is not to say that they agree on the content of this formal element, or even that it plays the same role in their accounts. In Cassirer's philosophy the element that I have identified as 'sense' is a concept, and it is Cassirer's theory of the concept and of concept formation that separates Cassirer from his two fellow semioticians (to my knowledge, neither Saussure nor Peirce have a theory of concept formation). Cassirer's theory was developed in relation to discursive symbolizing activities, particularly those of the natural sciences, and it is in his discussions of these that one most readily finds explicit statements of the theory. Here is one from the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* that gives us a more definite idea of this important facet of his account:

We have above compared the "concept" with the "universal member" of a series, which designates the rule of the succession of its individual members. This law of the series restricts the individual elements belonging to it to definite conditions; but it does not itself constitute a member of the series. If an arithmetical series of the form  $\frac{1}{2}, \frac{2}{3}, \frac{3}{4}, \frac{4}{5}$  etc. is designated by the formula  $\frac{n}{n+1}$  this  $\frac{u}{n+1}$  [where 'u' stands for the "universal member"] no longer designates an individual magnitude; it stands rather for the whole of the series, insofar as this series is taken not as a mere sum of parts but as a characteristic relational structure.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, 312.

Because Cassirer's explanation is based on the mathematical idea of the universal member, we shouldn't assume that his theory is directed principally towards the concepts of this kind of symbolic order. In fact, he says in a passage immediately following this one that "the same is true in principle of the simplest intuitive concepts. They never form a mere conglomerate of sense impressions and remembered images but contain a peculiar articulation of these impressions and images, a form of organization. In them the separate is 'seen together'--not in the sense that its components are mingled but in the sense that their connection in regard to some linking factor is retained."<sup>9</sup> Whatever the concept, if it can indeed be spoken of as a concept, it is ultimately based on a relational function, a logical operation for identification, that groups together phenomena according to a principle of similarity:

For the building of a "world"--whether it is taken as an aggregate of sensuous or logical, of real or ideal objects--is possible only in accordance with definite principles of articulation and formation. And the concept does nothing other than to separate out these formative factors and fixate them for thought. It sets up a definite direction and norm of *discursus*: it indicates the point of view under which a manifold of contents, whether belonging to the field of perception, intuition or pure thought, are apprehended and "seen together."<sup>10</sup>

Although, as I have maintained, Cassirer's relation of representation is not the same kind of relation as the one presented in Peirce's idea of the interpretant, they are akin in that both concern the way in which, to use Saussure's terms, the signifier/signified relation comes to be meaningful by taking its place within a wider set of relations. Let me develop this further. In Peirce's semiotics, it is not only true that every representamen refers to a previous object and is interpreted by a subsequent sign relation, but it is also the case that a representamen can only stand for its object by being bound in this relationship, which entails, and this is often overlooked, that there is a *ground* for the representamen. The role

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 298-299.

of the ground is central to Peirce's account. Think again of the definition referred to earlier: "The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen." The notion of a ground can I think be understood as a signifying context, something similar in intent to Wittgenstein's notion of a language game. Our three semioticians are united then in recognizing in their own ways that meaning is dependent upon a greater structure of relations, for Cassirer this is symbolic form, for Saussure it is language, and of course for Peirce it is the ground of the representamen. If we leave Saussure out of the picture for the moment, the visual presentation of the Peircean and Cassirerian models now looks like this:

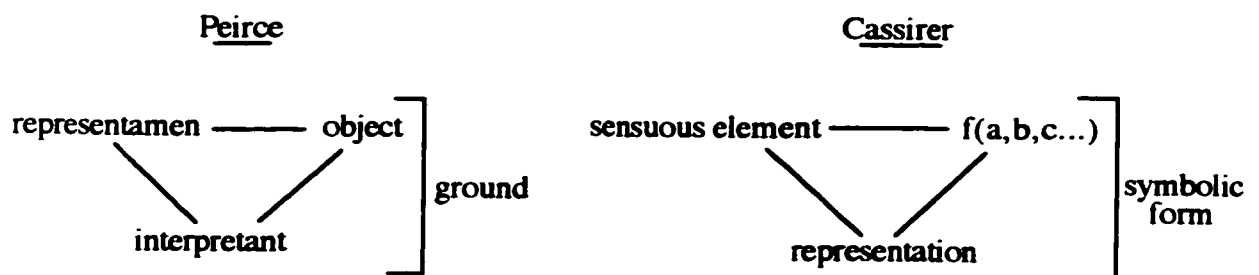


FIGURE 2: Peirce's and Cassirer's expanded model of the sign.

Peirce's idea of a ground might seem to be a more useful notion, as it appears more flexible and capable of referring to more limited signifying contexts than Cassirer's idea of symbolic form, at least in its canonical usage. But then it could be argued that such an idea is already implicitly acknowledged in Cassirer's work, for he clearly recognizes that there are subsystems of signification within the greater cultural forms that he identifies as symbolic forms. This is probably most evident in a book such as *Substance and Function*, where he investigates the concepts that are fundamental to the sciences of space, number, and nature. Indeed, given his approach it is hard to imagine how he could, or would want to, avoid concentrating on delimited symbolic contexts, which is perhaps why Panofsky felt comfortable in using the term 'symbolic form' to denote perspective.

A further feature that is of note in Peirce's and Cassirer's comparative definitions of the sign is the generality with which they both endow it. Unlike Saussure, who is concerned principally with the linguistic sign, both Cassirer and Peirce want to put forward a definition that is as general as possible; their motives are similar if not identical: Cassirer doesn't want a definition that will preclude non discursive symbolizing activities, and Peirce needed a definition that would warrant almost anything (probably everything) to enter into a sign relation (Peirce said that he could imagine a system which would recognize some 50,000 distinct sign situations!).

Not surprisingly, then, Cassirer often criticizes Saussure for the place of privilege that he gives to language:

"Apart from language," says a distinguished modern linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, in his *Cours de linguistique générale*, "our thought is only an amorphous mass. . . . Taken in itself, thought is like a misty veil. There are no pre-established ideas and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language."

I do by no means wish to contradict this statement that is in perfect accord with my own position. But I do not think that from a comprehensive philosophical point of view we can accept it without any restriction. . . . When giving such a judgment we should [not] forget that beside the world of language there is another human world which has a meaning and a structure of its own. There is, as it were, another symbolic universe beyond the universe of speech, of verbal symbols. This universe is the world of arts--of music and poetry, of painting, of sculpture or architecture.<sup>11</sup>

This is not a remark specific to art, for Cassirer makes essentially the same point in relation to myth--his greater concern is that a particular symbolic form (probably science or language) will be given primacy and that all other forms of sense making will be reduced to a single model of meaning.

Nevertheless, there is much that converges in their structural conceptions of linguistics (though Saussure never employed the term 'structuralism' and Cassirer did so

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<sup>11</sup> Ernst Cassirer, "Language and Art II," in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer, 1935-1945*, ed. Donald Philip Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 183.

only belatedly). For instance, Cassirer holds to a threefold division that matches Saussure's distinctions between *parole*, *langue*, and *langage*, though Cassirer appears to derive his divisions from the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt, whose writings in fact predate Saussure's by a century. Like Saussure, Humboldt distinguishes between language as a formal system, *ergon*, and as a living, formative force, *energia*.<sup>12</sup> *Langage*, for Saussure, is the general phenomenon of language itself, encompassing both *langue* and *parole* as its complementary aspects. This idea finds its counterpart in Cassirer in the claim that language is a symbolic form. Let me explain this. When Cassirer analyzes language as a symbolic form, he examines it from the point of view both of *ergon* (*langue*) and *energia* (*parole*), and for him the two studies are always intertwined. We have become somewhat acquainted with how Cassirer conceives of *energia* through earlier discussions of what a symbolic form is (the next chapter, which is on Hegel's influence on Cassirer's philosophy, will supply another dimension). When Cassirer considers language as *ergon*, on the other hand, he adopts a view that is in essential harmony with the major tenets of structural linguistics, as is revealed in the following long quotation in which he discusses the interpenetration of formal and factual considerations that typify structural approaches:

If the adherents and defenders of the program of linguistic structuralism are right, then we must say that in the realm of language there is no opposition between what is "formal" and what is merely "factual."

"Dans un état de langue donné," says Viggo Bröndal, "tout est systématique; une langue quelconque est constituée par des ensembles où tout se tient: systèmes des sons (ou phonèmes), systèmes de formes et de mots (morphèmes et sémantèmes). Qui dit système dit ensemble cohérent: si tout se tient, chaque terme doit dépendre de l'autre. Or on voudrait connaître les modalités de cette cohérence, les degrés possibles et variables de cette dépendance mutuelle, en d'autres termes, il faudrait étudier les conditions de la structure linguistique, distinguer dans les systèmes phonologiques et morphologiques ce qui est possible de ce qui est impossible, le contingent du nécessaire."

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<sup>12</sup> See Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Linguistic Variability and Intellectual Development," *Miami Linguistics Series no. 9*, trans. George C. Guck and Frithoj A. Raven (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971).



The same conviction appears in Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (2d ed., Geneva, 1922), in the works of Trubetzkoy, of Roman Jakobson, and the other members of the "Cercle Linguistique de Prague." Obviously the necessity claimed here for a linguistic system has no metaphysical connotation. It is no absolute but a relative or hypothetical necessity. Roman Jakobson has expressed the character of this necessity by the formulae:

1. si a existe, b existe aussi

2. si a existe, b manque

3. si a manque, b manque aussi

"Ces rapports," he says, "qui ont infailliblement valeur de loi constituent un des facteurs les plus importants des changements phonologiques."<sup>13</sup>

Cassirer's acceptance of these kinds of principles in his approach to language as *ergon* indicates that his account is structuralist. But what distinguishes his approach from static structuralist accounts is that, when he considers language as a formative force, or *energia*, his Neo-Hegelian vision becomes preeminent and the structural analysis is historicized and set into motion. Of course for Cassirer the distinction between *ergon* and *energia* could only ever be a methodological one, for in actually they are a dialectical unity that must be conceived of in terms fitting an organic whole. This is quite clear from the three basic structural principles that we set out earlier, for even though they are logically compatible with the principles we commonly associate with structuralism (such as the ones quoted above), they have their origin in the vision of the *Critique of Judgment*, and their final form from the way in which that work was taken up in Cassirer's thought.<sup>14</sup>

This is the basic approach that Cassirer takes to all cultural phenomena, i.e., all symbolic forms are considered as *ergon* and *energia*: structural configurations under the pressures of historical transformation. I should mention that the kind of analysis that I have outlined in this chapter and the previous one can be deepened and strengthened by

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<sup>13</sup> Ernst Cassirer, "Structuralism in Modern Linguistics," *Word* 1, no. 2 (August 1945): 105-6.

<sup>14</sup> Once again the principles were that all symbols in all symbolic orders are irreducible unities of the sensible and the intellectual, that symbolic orders disclose a thoroughgoing organization according to law, and that the objects studied through theories are not things existing independently of them, but constructs that get their meaning and objective reality through their functional relation to the other constructs with which they form an organic whole.

considering it in relation to group theory and the idea of invariance under transformations, especially in the field of projective geometry (which has close kinship relations to linear perspective). Group theory and its extension to non-mathematical topics is the subject of Cassirer's paper "Reflections on the Concept of Group and the Theory of Perception"; this subject, as Cassirer tells us, was one of the first questions to arouse his philosophical interest, and it was one that he thought about for the entire course of his career--he was working on this paper the day he died.<sup>15</sup> It is a paper that has obvious and important consequences for Cassirer's philosophy and for my topic. However, I will postpone this discussion until the last chapters of Part II, where it will be an important element in addressing how perspective could be a symbolic form.

In this chapter have tried to place Cassirer's theory of the symbol in its larger semiotic context. I have also aimed at making the general, structuralist orientation of Cassirer's philosophy more apparent. The next chapter, which will be the last chapter of Part I, will be devoted to Hegel and the influence that his philosophy had on shaping the philosophy of symbolic forms.

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<sup>15</sup> Ernst Cassirer, "Reflections on the Concept of Group and the Theory of Perception, in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture*, ed. Donald Philip Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 271-91.

## CHAPTER VII

### HEGEL'S INFLUENCE ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF SYMBOLIC FORMS

I have talked about the centrality of Kant in Cassirer's philosophy, but Hegel is another figure who is of considerable importance to the overall conception of the philosophy of symbolic forms. The principal issue bearing on Cassirer's connection to Hegelianism has to do with how he conceives of the relations that hold between different symbolic forms and between the different ideal stages that mark the development of individual symbolic forms. I have argued in the preceding chapters that the general idea of a symbolic form is something that can be understood in essentially Kantian terms. The kinds of relations that the various symbolic forms have with each other and within their individual, developmental stages is however more Hegelian than Kantian.<sup>1</sup> Like Hegel, Cassirer sees himself as undertaking a "phenomenological" investigation of the forms through which we constitute the world; indeed, as already noted, Cassirer initially planned to entitle the entire philosophy of symbolic forms *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, which is a direct reference to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*. What in general 'phenomenology' means for Cassirer is distilled in this excerpt:

In speaking of a phenomenology of knowledge I am using the word 'phenomenology' not in its modern sense but with its fundamental signification as established and systematically grounded by Hegel. For Hegel, phenomenology became the basis of all philosophical knowledge, since he insisted that philosophical knowledge must encompass the totality of cultural forms and since in his view this totality can be made visible only in the transitions from one form to

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<sup>1</sup> With some important qualifications; for instance, we have seen that Cassirer criticizes Hegel for trying to reduce all forms of experience to the form of logic, noting in comparison that Kant's critique of reason allows autonomy for moral reflection and aesthetic judgment.

another. The truth is the whole--yet this whole cannot be presented all at once but must be unfolded progressively by thought in its own autonomous movement and rhythm.<sup>2</sup>

To fully appreciate what Cassirer is maintaining here we have to give Hegel's philosophy itself an historical placement.

Although Hegel considered Kant to be "the basis and point of departure of modern German philosophy," and a philosopher surpassed only by Plato and Aristotle, he had some grave misgivings about Kant's achievements. One of Kant's central concerns had been the mutual defense and reconciliation of scientific knowledge and the "practical" values of morality and religion within a single, systematic view of the world. Science and religion had been warring since the Renaissance, with each claiming universal validity at the expense of the other. Kant wanted to reconcile these warring opposites and make it possible for human beings to be committed scientists and responsible Christian citizens; but, because of Hume's attacks on the foundational principles of both of these realms, he saw that this reconciliation now also required a justification. Hegel appreciated the power and scope of Kant's new, critical philosophy and the approach that it took to justifying claims in these two realms; however, in line with Fichte and his one-time friend Schelling, Hegel was not wholly comfortable with what Kant seemed to be offering. Particularly troublesome was the apparent duality of worlds, or duality of selves, that seems to arise within the Kantian framework in the division between the *sensible* world of empirical knowledge, where the categories of the understanding and the forms of intuition constitute experience, and the *intelligible* world of God, freedom, and immortality, which lies beyond the reaches of scientific determinism and the demands of its rules of evidence. Bound up with this, and equally troublesome for Hegel, was Kant's distinction between the world of our experience (or the "phenomenal" world) and the world as it is in-itself (or the "noumenal" world). What Hegel, and Fichte and Schelling, found unsatisfactory about

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<sup>2</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, xiv.

Kant's notion of the noumenal world--the world of "things-in-themselves"--was that it appeared to subvert the accomplishments of Kant's Copernican Revolution: the supposed final answer to skepticism seemed to open up a new territory for skepticism by creating what looked like an unbreachable gap between empirical knowledge, which has to do with the objects constituted in experience, and the things-in-themselves, which we cannot know at all; hence, there is again the potential to raise the question of whether we know things as they are. Whether or not Hegel was right, this apparent two worlds view was unacceptable to him; philosophy had to be the quest for overall unity and comprehensibility, and truth had to be a comprehensive world-view in which the order and intelligibility of the various forms of human experience could be established. The only resolution of the two worlds view was the elimination of the noumenal world and all that went with it; knowledge and practice had to be part of one and the same "system." Hegel eliminated the things-in-themselves, not by denying that we can know them, but by insisting that the objects of our experience *are* the things-in-themselves. The question then is not whether our knowledge conforms to things-in-themselves, but whether our knowledge is an adequate set of "determinations" and a comprehensible view of what it is we know.

The stated aim of Hegel's philosophy--which he makes plain on the very first page of the first section of the "Preface" to *The Phenomenology of Mind*--is truth, or the True.<sup>3</sup> But what does Hegel mean by "Truth"? The True for Hegel consists not of the details of life but of a single, all-embracing, self-reflective, philosophical vision in which all is comprehended. Robert Solomon explains it in this way:

What Hegel's system is about, its goal or purpose, has little to do with the details of the empirical sciences--in fact, it has only tangentially to do with "science," in our sense, at all. What Hegel means by "Science" or *Wissenschaft* is the general, disciplined study and understanding of the various forms of human knowledge, including science (that is, empirical sciences such as physics, chemistry, and biology) as well as art, religion, ethics, and philosophy. It is an attempt to be clear about the whole of life, and to determine the place of these various endeavours in

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<sup>3</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, "Preface" to *The Phenomenology of Mind*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *Hegel: Texts and Commentary* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 6.

life, to rank them according to their adequacy and their priorities, paying attention to their details only by way of illustrations.<sup>4</sup>

The Truth, then, is the comprehensive world-view in which the order and intelligibility of the various forms of human experience can be established. Furthermore, the Truth is not just that which is considered from a theoretical point of view, the Truth is also *practical* (in both the ordinary and Kantian senses); it requires the unity of Kant's alleged two worlds; it is (to put it in Hegelian language) an all-embracing, harmonious, participatory view of the world--the True is the whole. And this is our lead-in to *The Phenomenology of Mind*.

For Hegel 'phenomenology of mind or spirit (*Geist*)' means the study of the *Gestalten des Bewusstseins*, the study of the forms in which mind manifests itself. When Hegel talks about the study of the forms in which mind manifests itself, he is not talking about, for instance, writing a history of the whole of human thought from his particular philosophical point of view; this kind of approach leads nowhere, it provides only an informed philosophical opinion, which other philosophers might then contest from their own philosophical vantage points. A more profound and demanding form of philosophical exegesis must be engaged in, one that proceeds immanently by mastering each view in the history of thought from the interior, existentially, understanding it better than its proponents. To remain faithful to this approach, Hegel must never condemn any view externally, from a philosophical position outside of it; his criticism must always be internal and consist in taking each view more seriously than its supporters take it. Pushed to its limits as a view of human reality, each position will reveal its limitations and its place in the development of human spirit.

Hegel's conception of this kind of phenomenological investigation is notoriously evolutionary, but it is neither as mechanical nor deterministic as the common, dull-witted caricatures of his philosophy have made out. Hegel's discussions of the movement of mind

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<sup>4</sup> Robert C. Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel: A Study of G. W. F. Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 173.

are not at all simple, and never does he employ the dreary little three-step model of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis that he has become famous for (it was Fichte who introduced it into German philosophy--Schelling, too, adopted this way of speaking, but neither of them had the inane conception of dialectical development that is usually thought to go along with it). Not only does Hegel never employ these terms in this way and in this combination, he openly scorns the idea of such a happy little three-step *Volkstanz* by the *Weltgeist* (he uses them together once, in his lectures on the history of philosophy, where he reproaches Kant for his rigid architectonic approach, but that is an entirely different matter).

The necessity that Hegel sees in the dialectic of history is a very weak form of necessity, if it should be called necessity at all. Perhaps it should be described as a retrospective study of presupposition, of what had to be the case if certain forms of consciousness were to become possible. For instance, in *The Phenomenology of Mind* skepticism is not seen as the antithesis of stoicism, but rather as the state of mind that is reached when stoicism is taken more seriously than its advocates are willing to take it, when its one-sidedness is explored to its logical conclusions. And what emerges from this --the "unhappy consciousness" of medieval Christianity--is not so much a synthesis of what preceded it as the necessary consequence, to use Walter Kaufmann's fine phrase, "of not allowing the skeptic to hide in bad faith in his halfway house,"<sup>5</sup> Stoicism is "sublated" (Hegel's multiply ambiguous *aufheben*), it is picked up, canceled, and at the same time preserved in "unhappy consciousness."

This kind of development is not necessary in the sense that events *had* to work out this way, nor should they be seen as *progress*: the dialectic is not "going" anywhere; to move is not to have a preordained and predetermined direction, and to move to greater levels of complexity is not in-itself an improvement. It must be said though that Hegel does see the movement of mind as having an end. The last stage, the terminus of mind's odyssey, is the attainment of the Absolute, the True, which is the vantage point attained in

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 254.

philosophy (and which, as it happens, is also coextensive with Hegel's system of thought). At this stage, consciousness explicates that single, all-embracing, self-reflective philosophical system in which all is comprehended. The framework for this is unfolded in Hegel's *Science of Logic*, which, Hegel claims, is the schema for the movement of mind contained in *The Phenomenology*; the stages of the *Logic* disclose--who could put it better than Hegel--"pure thought, spirit thinking its own essence."

A hard act to follow. Happily for Cassirer, his aims are more modest, and his philosophical vision, while similar in some respects, is in the end significantly different. Let us begin with a general sketch of the points of agreement between the two philosophers. We know from an earlier discussion that Cassirer too believes that the Truth is the whole. Accordingly, the Truth is not static, it is not something that is there to be revealed at any given moment; rather, it is the progressive unfolding of the totality of the forms of culture (which can be contrasted with the view offered by Kant for instance the in *Critique of Pure Reason*, where the form of reason is taken to be fixed by categories of the understanding that are derived from Newtonian natural science and Aristotelian logic, both of which are assumed to be permanent and static achievements). Like Hegel, Cassirer sees his symbolic forms as tied together in a certain developmental sequence; they are all moments that consciousness must pass through in attaining its highest stage: the function of pure signification, which is most clearly revealed in scientific theorizing. As in Hegel, the lower stages make possible the higher stages and the total movement reveals a progression similar to (though again different from) that captured by Hegel's notion of *aufheben*.

However, once we try to make this general picture more specific, the disagreements between Cassirer and Hegel become apparent. An instructive place to begin is with this well-known section from the "Preface" of *The Phenomenology of Mind*, and Cassirer's response to it:

Science for its part demands that self-consciousness raise itself into this ether, in order that it may live with and for science. Conversely, the individual has the right to demand that science shall at least provide him with a ladder by which to reach to



this height, and show it to him in himself. This right is based on the absolute independence which he knows himself to possess in every form of his knowledge; for in each form, whether it be recognized by science or not, and regardless of what its content may be, it is absolute form--that is, it is the immediate certainty of itself and, if this term is preferred, it is therefore absolute being.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, and importantly, Cassirer takes up this passage in two of the prefaces to two of the volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*: in the "Preface" to the second volume (*Mythical Thought*) and in the "Preface" to the third (*The Phenomenology of Knowledge*). In both cases he is attempting to set out the distinguishing features of his approach. This is what he says in the "Preface" to the third volume, immediately after he quotes the above passage from Hegel:

It would be impossible to state more sharply that the end, the *telos* of the human spirit, cannot be apprehended and expressed if it is taken as something existing in itself, as something detached and separate from its beginning and middle. Philosophical reflection does not set the end against the middle and the beginning but takes all three as integral factors in a unitary total movement. In this fundamental principle the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms agrees with Hegel's formulation, much as it must differ in both its foundations and its development. It, too, aspires to provide the individual with a ladder which will lead him from the primary configurations found in the world of the immediate consciousness to the world of pure knowledge. From the standpoint of philosophical inquiry every single rung of the ladder is indispensable; every single one must be considered, appreciated--in short "known"--if we wish to understand knowledge not so much in its result, in its mere product, as in its character of a process, in the mode and form of its *procedure* itself.<sup>7</sup>

So, we know wherein Cassirer is in accord with Hegel's approach, but what does he mean by saying that the philosophy of symbolic forms "must differ in both its foundations and its development" from Hegel's phenomenology? This is a complex question, but in this context the differences between the two can be focused through Hegel's metaphor of the ladder. Hegel compared his phenomenology to a ladder that had been extended to natural

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<sup>6</sup> G. W. F., Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (London: Allen & Unwin, 1949), xv-xvi.

<sup>7</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, xv.

consciousness, that is, common sensory perception, in order to allow it to attain the level of philosophy or "science." Cassirer says in the second preface mentioned above, the "Preface" to *Mythical Thought*, that Hegel must set his ladder lower:

What is commonly called the sensory consciousness, the content of the "world of perception"--which is further subdivided into distinct spheres of perception, into the sensory elements of color, tone, etc.--this is itself a product of abstraction, a theoretical elaboration of the "given." Before self-consciousness rises to this abstraction, it lives in the world of the mythical consciousness, a world not of "things" and their "attributes" but of mythical potencies and powers, of demons and gods. If then, in accordance with Hegel's demand, science is to provide the natural consciousness with a ladder leading to itself, it must first set this ladder a step lower. Our insight into the development of science--taken in the ideal, not the temporal sense--is complete only if it shows how science arose in and worked itself out of the sphere of mythical immediacy and explains the direction and law of this movement.<sup>8</sup>

This difference between the two philosophers is more important than it perhaps appears: Hegel starts his investigation with the question of sense certainty, which already lies within the realm of scientific representation, whereas Cassirer roots his study of the development of the forms of consciousness in a mode of apprehension that precedes a logocentric understanding of reality (a stance that is of course consonant with Cassirer doctrine of natural signs and the primacy of the expressive function of meaning). Furthermore, the modality of myth continues to shape the others as they are realized:

Here we encounter a law that holds equally for all symbolic forms, and bears essentially on their evolution. None of them arises initially as separate, independently recognizable forms, but every one of them must first be emancipated from the common matrix of myth. . . . Theoretical, practical, and aesthetic consciousness, the world of language and of morality, the basic forms of the community and the state--they are all organically tied up with mythico-religious conceptions.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*, xvi.

<sup>9</sup> Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, 44.

To continue with the metaphor of the ladder, it is noteworthy as well that Cassirer's ladder does not have the same last rung as Hegel's: for Hegel the truth may be the whole, but the whole is realized in the philosophical system he expounds; Cassirer, on the other hand, sees no final end to the symbolic construction of reality. Admittedly, he thinks that the philosophy of symbolic forms gives us the most adequate understanding of the nature of symbolization and its place in the history of human consciousness, but he doesn't for a minute believe that it stands at the end of this development. So, while both may maintain that the truth is the whole, they have different ideas about what the whole is.

Cassirer and Hegel also do not share the same conception of how the stages that they depict are related. On numerous occasions Cassirer expresses dissatisfaction with this aspect of Hegel's system, with his vision of a dialectic that smooths over the differences in the various forms of consciousness in order to achieve an even progression that culminates in the supremacy of the concept, the Absolute Idea. In the first chapter, I quoted Cassirer on how Hegel's system privileges the role of logic, let us now add to that:

Rich and varied as [these forms] are in their content, their structure is subordinated to a single and, in a certain sense, uniform law--the law of the dialectical method, which represents the unchanging rhythm of the concept's autonomous movement. All cultural forms culminate in absolute knowledge; it is here that the spirit gains the pure element of its existence, the concept. All the earlier stages that it has passed through are, to be sure, preserved as factors in this culminate state, but by being reduced to mere factors they are, on the other hand, negated. Of all cultural forms, only logic, the concept, cognition, seems to enjoy a true and authentic *autonomy*.<sup>10</sup>

Cassirer sees Hegel's system then as actually *falsifying* these forms of consciousness; by taking them as stages in a single, linear, over all development subordinated to the concept it *negates* their natures and disregards their autonomy. Cassirer's philosophy aims to avoid this linear, hierarchical conception and preserve the autonomy of the forms by proposing

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<sup>10</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, 83. In the fourth volume Cassirer makes the interesting claim that "The configurations wrought by myth, language, and art turn out to be the most important rungs on this ladder" (87).

what Krois quite fittingly, describes as a centrifugal model: "The symbolic forms fan out from the first form of myth and henceforth remain opposed."<sup>11</sup>

This centrifugal model, opposed as it is in principle to one of linear development, nevertheless speaks to an issue that is basic to Hegel's philosophy, i.e., the unity of consciousness. For Hegel consciousness has unity because the stages of it are subordinate achievements towards the unity of the concept in the Absolute Idea. For Cassirer, for whom the unity of consciousness is just as important, consciousness has unity *because* its fundamental forms of apprehension are opposed to and incompatible with each other (a kind of post-structuralist conundrum); culture--by which Cassirer means the totality of ways of apprehending the world--is "a dialectical unity, a coexistence of contraries."<sup>12</sup> Its unity is not static but dynamic: "it is the result of a struggle between opposing forces."<sup>13</sup> Cassirer's best statement of this idea is found in this lucid excerpt:

It is different with symbolic idealism, *which begins not with the simple unity of the thing (substance), but with the unity of function.* This unity of *action* and the plurality of possible symbolic viewpoints are not opposed to each other as hostile opposites, but stand in a necessary correlation. The unity of *geist* is to be found only in the plurality of symbolic forms, not as a substantial unity but as a functional plurality. *Geist* becomes one through its conscious awareness of its identity (as action in general) in the plurality of various activities. In each of these a particular world arises (the worlds of science, religion, art), but the unity of these "worlds" is rooted in a common origin, in a principle of action, as the philosophy of symbolic forms shows. That is the true unity, the critical-ideal unity (of action), the sole unity to which we can attain, in contrast to the dogmatic-substantial--in truth, unattainable--unity of "Being" (of the Absolute, the *Thing* in itself).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Krois, *Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History*, 79. This reference to a centrifugal process is not to be taken too literally, for as our discussions in the preceding chapters have revealed, the relations between the symbolic forms are more involved than that.

<sup>12</sup> Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 222.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 223. Considering that culture is an open-ended semiotic activity, Cassirer's conception of it as a coexistence of contraries allows his philosophy a remarkably open pluralistic vision. Exactly the opposite of the tradition to which he supposedly belongs.

<sup>14</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, 225.

What Cassirer is referring to in his repeated use of the term 'action' is the process of symbolization. So, what gives the various forms of apprehension their unity, their *functional unity*, is that they are all symbolic activities that, despite their differing and incompatible principles of formation, are made possible by shared, basic semiotic structures, about which we have already spoken.

There remains an important point of contrast between Hegel's vision and Cassirer's understanding of how the different forms of consciousness are related to each other developmentally, which is, as one might put it, *die Frage von aufheben*. The fact that Cassirer does not accept Hegel's linear, evolutionary model, bent to the will of the Idea, insures that he is going to have a very different way of approaching this matter. If all symbolic forms have their origin (that is ideal, not empirical, origin) in myth, how is it that myth provides them with a basis? It would be a tedious and lengthy procedure to tackle this question in its actual complexity for each symbolic form; so, in place of an explication, I will try to make due with an illustration, which is drawn from Cassirer's study *Language and Myth*.

Cassirer argues that scientific reason grows out of the categories of myth and language, and, to a certain extent, preserves them in its constitution. The human capacity for cognitive conception has its origins in mythic apprehension, in the expressive function's elementary ability to order experience through an intense concentration of consciousness on a phenomenon that demands its practical attention. This capacity for the formation of objects under the demand of the necessity of noticing is what lies at the bottom of the linguistic capacity for naming; language becomes a possibility through--by way of--the kind of order that mythic apprehension creates in experience. Language derives from myth then a particularizing mode of thought. But language, because its fundamental mode of signification is based in the representational function of meaning, can also operate in the mode of thought of discursive logic, which is opposite in its intention to mythic apprehension, in that its direction of movement is toward generalization rather than

individualization: its intention is to tie individual things into a greater system of relations where the individual properties of objects are relevant only if they are generalizable and can be fit into a larger network of generalizations. As this is a fundamental principle of rational-scientific thought, language is then on its way to operating at a level of meaning that is based on the function of pure signification. Thus we have a kind of dialectical movement through three functions of meaning and the symbolic forms that embody them (we have seen as well how a similar progression can be found within each symbolic form as it passes through the "mimetic," "analogical," and "purely symbolic" stages of its development). However, as I have tried to stress, this dialectical development is not Hegel's, and it does not progress in accordance with Hegel's notion of *aufheben*. It is also important to keep in mind that Cassirer's history of the development of consciousness is an "ideal" history, not an empirical history of the intellectual course of the Western world (though Cassirer, more than Hegel, derives his scheme from a deep and intimate knowledge of empirical history). As an ideal history, the picture that Cassirer's approach provides is meant only to delineate for us the major developments in human consciousness's relation to its objects; he is not saying that actual history moved in such orderly, neat discreet steps.

There are a couple of points that bear on Hegel's and Cassirer's developmental schemes that I have yet to mention. The first is that Cassirer's philosophy does not assign a superior status to the terminal stage of the development that it outlines. In Hegel of course the terminal stage is unequivocally final and results in the self-comprehension of the Absolute Idea, which is realized in Hegel's philosophy. In Cassirer, the final stage--which is obtained with the function of pure signification--is only provisionally terminal and it is not seen to be "better" than the other stages. True, the other stages result in this one, but only in the sense that they are its conditions of possibility; they are not imperfect realizations of reality because of this; they are not inferior modes of apprehension. There is no question of valuation: all symbolic forms are equally valid ways in which to have a world.

The second point concerns the status and role of philosophy within the schemes that we have been examining. At first glance it might seem that Cassirer assigns to philosophy a place that is parallel to the one given to it by Hegel, but this is only a superficial resemblance, for in the philosophy of symbolic forms philosophy is no longer the "Queen of the sciences" in which all finds its end, but only a mode of comprehension with a unique standing: philosophy is not another symbolic form; it is a way of understanding symbolic forms and their methods of symbolization. The role of philosophy has now been made clear with the publication of the fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, in which for the first time Cassirer addresses this question directly:

It is characteristic of philosophical knowledge as the "self-knowledge of reason" that it does not create a principally new symbolic form, it does not found in this sense a new creative modality--but it grasps the earlier modalities as that which they are: as characteristic symbolic forms. As long as philosophy still vies with these forms, as long as it still builds worlds next to and above them, it has not yet truly grasped itself.

Philosophy is both criticism and fulfillment of the symbolic forms. [It is] criticism because it turns away from the transcendental "object," because it grasps these forms as the active intellectual construction of reality, not as directed toward some external "Absolute," and because it tries to overcome the symbolic character of the "sign," even to "eliminate" the sign and attempt to attain to "adequate" knowledge, without signs.

But philosophy does not want to replace the older forms with another, higher form. It does not want to replace one symbol with another; rather, its task consists in comprehending the basic symbolic character of knowledge itself.<sup>15</sup>

Philosophy is then, as was suggested earlier, a meta-semiotics, a philosophically informed semiotics; it is not *die Muttersprache des Weltgeist*--the hegemonic mother tongue of the World Spirit.

This view of philosophy is still consonant with the one found in Cassirer's well-known, earlier, programmatic statement of his position: the "Introduction and Presentation of the Problem" of the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. I would like to

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<sup>15</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, 226. For a pre-fourth volume (now belated) discussion of this question see Leon Rosenstein, "Some Metaphysical Problems of Cassirer's Symbolic Forms," *Man and World* 6 (1972): 320-40.

spend a short amount of time on what Cassirer says about philosophy in the "Introduction," as it will help us to better place him in relation to Hegel, and to better understand what role philosophy has within Cassirer's larger system.

After discussing what he sees as the basic significance of Kant's Copernican revolution, Kant's "revolution in method," Cassirer states that

The crucial question always remains whether we seek to understand the function by the structure or the structure by the function, which one we choose to "base" upon the other. This question forms the living bond connecting the most diverse realms of thought with one another: it constitutes their inner methodological unity, without ever letting them lapse into a factual sameness. For the fundamental principle of critical thinking, the principle of the "primacy" of the function over the object, assumes in each special field a new form and demands a new and dependent explanation.<sup>16</sup>

"Thus," as he says, "the critique of reason becomes the critique of culture," and philosophy becomes the transcendental investigation of the entirety of human symbolizing activities--it becomes in the end, as I expressed it above, the meta-semiotics of culture. Once philosophy becomes a critique of culture, Cassirer argues, the "naive realist" view of the world loses all of its plausibility: it is no longer possible to believe that there is one, true view of reality, which is the one given to us by theoretical reason through science. The question as it is traditionally known assumes a different form, "For the content of the concept of culture cannot be detached from the fundamental forms and directions of human activity: here 'being' can be apprehended only in 'action.'"<sup>17</sup> The idea of objectivity is unfettered from the notion that there is one true discourse that mirrors reality, and it is reformulated as a function of objectifying practices. It is philosophy's job to provide a critical analysis of all these objectifying practices and to unify them in an ideal center; "From the standpoint of critical thinking, however, this center can never lie in a given

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<sup>16</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, 79.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.



essence but only in a common *project*.<sup>18</sup> That common project is the objectification of experience through symbolization, through the symbolic forms that by way of their differing principles of formation make *for* the world determinate contexts of meaning.

"Throughout its history," Cassirer tells us, "philosophy has been more or less aware of the need for such an analysis and critique of the particular forms of culture; but it has directly undertaken only parts of this task, and then usually more with a negative than a positive intention."<sup>19</sup> Why? Philosophy became wary of the cultural forms because each one "tends to represent itself not as a part but as the whole, laying claim to an absolute and not merely relative validity, not contenting itself with its special sphere, but seeking to impress its characteristic stamp on the whole realm of being."<sup>20</sup> From this arose the conflicts of culture, the antinomies within the concept of culture, as Cassirer calls them, that have provided us with the spectacle of unceasing, misguided denunciations flying between science, religion, art, and all the other cultural forms about who ultimately has claim to what reality is. This spectacle made philosophy suspicious of all their assertions, but philosophy itself was part of the problem, for it too implicitly bought the idea of the one, true discourse; hence, the dogmatic systems of metaphysics themselves "usually stand in the midst of the battle, and not above it: despite the conceptual universality towards which they strive, they stand only for one side of the conflict, instead of encompassing and mediating the conflict itself in all its breadth and depth. For most of them are nothing other than metaphysical hypostases of a definite logical, or aesthetic, or religious principle."<sup>21</sup> What is required, and we will find this sentence almost verbatim in Panofsky, is "a standpoint situated above all of these forms and yet not merely outside of them: a standpoint which would make it possible to encompass the whole of them in one view,

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

which would seek to penetrate nothing other than the purely immanent relation of all these forms to one another."<sup>22</sup> This of course is the standpoint of the philosophy of symbolic forms, and, for reasons already well-known, it is definitely not the standpoint that philosophy takes in Hegel's system.

The discussions of the last few pages also enable us to make sense of another of Cassirer's doctrines that has a suspicious Hegelian (in the popular sense) ring to it, i.e., his belief that the symbolic articulation of reality has an end towards which it is moving:

Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation. Language, art, religion, science are various phases in this process. In all of them man discovers and proves a new power--the power to build up a world of his own, an "ideal" world. Philosophy cannot give up its search for a fundamental unity in this ideal world.<sup>23</sup>

Someone not familiar with our preceding discussions could be forgiven for coming to the conclusion that Cassirer believes in an optimistic doctrine of progress, but this is not at all what he is arguing for. In our discussion of pure signification we noted that this function of meaning was the opposite of the expressive function, which "does not admit of a difference between image and thing, the sign and what it designates"; at the level of pure signification this difference is fully comprehended and symbolization is free to develop systems of signification that are independent of sensory reality. With this development comes understanding; it is impossible for the shaman to see his rites as mere societal conventions, and it is just as impossible for a contemporary logician *not* to see axiomatic systems as conventional symbolic orders. The logician, unlike the shaman, is working in a modality of meaning that not only allows but requires him or her to think about the nature of meaning and semiotic relations. Hence, if we consider the ideal development of functions of meaning from the level of expression to pure signification, what we see is that we become

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 228.

increasing better equipped to understand the processes of symbolization and our symbolic creations, and this is the "progressive self-liberation" that Cassirer is talking about. He is not in complicity with some nineteenth century doctrine on the unending, luminous future of Western capitalism, but then neither was Hegel. It is true that Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* appear to have as a central theme the idea that history is the story of the development of human freedom, that the movement of history has led to the realization of the idea in the modern era that "man as man is free,"<sup>24</sup> but what Hegel means by 'freedom' here should not be taken in a straightforward social or political sense. And, contrary to received opinion, it is not a wholly optimistic doctrine. In general, Hegel seems to have a rather bleak view of human existence as a protracted, unmitigated chronicle of misery and suffering ("the slaughter bench of history"). There is, retrospectively, some reason in the movement of the grim panorama of history, but this is not a story about the life of humanity necessarily progressing, getting better, or obtaining greater happiness.

At the beginning of this chapter, I stated that Cassirer's connection to Hegel was to be found mainly in how he conceives of the relations that hold between different symbolic forms and between the different ideal stages that mark the development of individual symbolic forms. I maintained that the general idea of a symbolic form is something that can be understood in essentially Kantian terms. Donald Phillip Verene, in "Kant, Hegel, and Cassirer: The Origins of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms," claims that "the philosophy of symbolic forms is derived from Kant only in a broad and secondary sense and that its actual foundations are in Hegel,"<sup>25</sup> which is the apparent opposite of my position. What is curious about this is that we make the same points with the same references--and I agree with everything that Verene says.<sup>26</sup> This is disconcerting, but not surprising, I suppose,

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<sup>24</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, "Introduction to the Philosophy of History," in *Hegel Selections*, ed. J. Loewenberg (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957).

<sup>25</sup> Donald Phillip Verene, "Kant, Hegel, and Cassirer: The Origins of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms," *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, 30 (1969), 33.

<sup>26</sup> Well, not quite everything. For example, Verene places Cassirer's position on the role of philosophy in the phenomenology of symbolic forms closer to Hegel's. But then Verene apparently wrote his article

given all that has written in the past decades about textual interpretation. What we seem to have is a philosophical paternity dispute. But I think that it is a paternity dispute that allows for a simpler solution than most, because the case that Verene is trying to establish is in the main the same as mine. First of all, he is intent on countering the fact that the "commentators on Cassirer's philosophy generally hold that the philosophy of symbolic forms is a departure from the Marburg position, but they are agreed that the philosophy of symbolic forms is fundamentally derived from Kant."<sup>27</sup> He maintains, as we've seen, that "its actual foundations are in Hegel." But, the foundational aspects that he focuses on those that concern the relations that hold between different symbolic forms and between the different ideal stages that mark the development of individual symbolic forms, which is precisely what I do. Why then does he play up the role of Hegel at the expense of Kant? My guess is that it is a rhetorical strategy to dislodge Cassirer from his fixed place in the history of philosophy; however, I do think that it is overstatement to give Hegel the position of preeminence--equality would have done, though it seems even that would be too much.<sup>28</sup> The analysis given by André Stanguennec in "Néokantianisme et hégélianisme chez Ernst Cassirer" provides a much clearer structural account of which elements in Cassirer's philosophy are Kantian and which are Hegelian (though it also seems to me that when differences in approach are put aside, Stanguennec and Verene are proposing essentially the same analysis).<sup>29</sup> The following rather long passage summarizes Stanguennec's position:

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without knowledge of the material in the fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (I say "apparent" because Verene is one of the editors of the fourth volume).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>28</sup> If you count the references for Kant and Hegel in the index of names in the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which is the one that Verene principally refers to, you will find that there are 8 references for Hegel and 52 for Kant. Admittedly, this is no way to settle a philosophical dispute, but the impression is striking (the index of subjects is equally striking).

<sup>29</sup> André Stanguennec, "Néokantianisme et hégélianisme chez Ernst Cassirer," dans *Ernst Cassirer: de Marbourg à New York, l'itinéraire philosophique* (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 1990), 55-67.

La problématique de la systématique des formes, telle que Cassirer la met en œuvre dans le volume sur le langage (1923) est centrée sur la question de la *structure* ou de la loi de construction *a priori* de l'ensemble des formes, et la solution envisagée dans le concept de "fonction symbolique" est authentiquement néokantienne, de même qu'elle suppose une critique du modèle hégélien. Mais, dans les volumes de 1925 et 1929, c'est la question de la *genèse* téléologique du système des formes qui apparaît au premier plan. Cette question, Kant ne l'a jamais, sinon posée (c'est à elle que renvoie ce qu'il nomme déduction "subjective" des catégories et "épigénèse" de la raison pure), du moins véritablement traitée. Sa formulation et la forme générale de sa solution sont empruntées littéralement par Cassirer à Hegel dans la *Phénoménologie de l'Esprit*, bien que sa mise à exécution (*Durchführung*) s'éloigne considérablement de l'hégélianisme. Ainsi se combinent, au total, de façon originale, le modèle kantien et le modèle hégélien; Cassirer témoignant de cette recherche, dans les philosophies contemporaines d'une synthèse de dialectique (Hegel) et de réflexion (Kant), . . . un mouvement essentiel de la pensée contemporaine. Dans le cas de Cassirer, le "néokantisme" se subordonne l'"hégélianisme," car s'il existe un développement phénoménologique dialectique du système des formes, celui-ci repose en dernière analyse sur la donnée transcendante *de fait*, logiquement indériverable, de la "fonction symbolique," de même que son terme est une autocritique incessante de la culture et non l'achèvement du Savoir absolu.<sup>30</sup>

This is in all fundamental respects in harmony with the position that I have advanced, and I will conclude with it as lucid and terse summary of how the main themes of this chapter fit with the previous ones. With this discussion of the Hegelian aspects of Cassirer's philosophy in hand, we now have all of the elements that we need to explain what it could mean to call perspective a symbolic form. Thus, it is now time to turn to Panofsky, and make our way through the elaborate framework of issues and influences that formed his early art theoretical writings, and in which *Perspective as Symbolic Form* is situated.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 67.

**PART II**

**PERSPECTIVE AS SYMBOLIC FORM**

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE CRITIQUE OF WÖLFFLIN

The history of art history is a disconcertingly heterogeneous thing. Even if, perhaps somewhat mischievously, there have been publications with titles such as *The New Art History*, it is difficult to find an historical counterpart that could be named "The Old Art History."<sup>1</sup> It is difficult even if we look at German art history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which is the era that is of particular interest for this dissertation. Consider, for example, the cases of Herman Grimm and Anton Springer. Grimm was a leading figure in what came to be known as the *Gründerzeit* or the "Age of the Founders," a period of romantic and reactionary German nationalism. Grimm is one of the few German art historians who actually fits the caricature of the old art history: he believed in and promoted the cult of the "great man"; he saw art as the spiritual self-revelation of genius and ignored all artists who were not at the time considered to be geniuses; he sharply isolated the individual artist from "his" social world; he was unrelentingly elitist and anti-egalitarian; and he preferred literary speculation to archival research and the physical investigation of actual art works. Springer, on the other hand, was convinced that Grimm and his followers would destroy art history as a rigorous academic discipline. One of Springer's students described his reaction to Grimm as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, A. L. Rees and F. Borzello, eds. *The New Art History* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988). The New Art History though is already taking its place in the past, hence the 1994 conference at Le Musée d'art contemporain entitled "Définitions de la culture visuelle: Revoir le *New Art History*." The New Art History is/was typically identified with the kind of social history of art that became a recognizable approach in Great Britain in the 1970s; the corresponding "Old Art History" didn't exist as an articulated theoretical position but as set of pre-theoretical assumptions shared by the *apparatchiks* of Western cultural institutions.

Springer, an inveterate democrat and pan-German firebrand, abandoned politics for art history, but the fighting spirit stayed with him. His lectures were speeches and we were his parliament. He behaved like a party leader and would assail the rival faction "commanded" by Herman Grimm: what "drivel" it all was that his students . . . . were uttering--and with that a copy of Grimm's *Raphael* or *Michelangelo* would be slapped down onto his lectern: "twaddle," "colportage," "dime novels, all of them!"<sup>2</sup>

In contradistinction to Grimm, Springer was deeply concerned about how we should understand art's involvement in and partial constitution of the social world, and, like the New Art Historians of the 1970's, he railed against those who thought that this question could be addressed by prefacing their studies with sketches of the political and cultural developments of the age in question. Instead, Springer's goal was to specify the relations between the social world, cultural history and the forms of the individual work of art. To do this one obviously had to have the skills of a good historian and the skills of a connoisseur of art; but, as art history and connoisseurship had yet to develop a working relation, Springer set out to force a union of the two and march art history down the road to legitimation. Such a project had no place for "Mr. Grimm, who meditates on works of art with his back to them." As for Grimm's Romanticism, Springer quite simply but pointedly noted in a discussion of Gothic architecture that "moods are not construction plans." Much like, say, Irving Sandler and Mieke Bal, Grimm and Springer had close to nothing in common.

The Grimm/Springer antagonism is one conflict in a congeries of conflicts that delimit the methodological and philosophical free-for-all that was German art history in the nineteenth century. If we ask now what Panofsky's place was in the midst of this, we will find that the answer is not as clear as many writers on the topic have suggested (names will be named later). A good place to start though is with his entry into it, for this reveals an aspect of Panofsky the art historian that has not been sufficiently noted, especially when he

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<sup>2</sup> Udo Kultermann, *The History of Art History* (The United States of America: Abaris Books, 1993), 120.



has been reproached for an undue emphasis on Italian Renaissance art--Panofsky was trained in art history entirely by medievalists.

Panofsky began his university studies in the law department of the University of Freiburg. His conversion to art history came one day when his friend Kurt Badt took him to hear a lecture by Freiburg's eminent medievalist Wilhelm Vöge; Panofsky's vocation was set, and it wasn't long after that he began studying with Vöge, who ultimately became the director of his doctoral thesis.<sup>3</sup> Panofsky in later life said of Vöge that his "method was as all-inclusive as his personal involvement in art was individualistic. It combined the feeling for materials of a connoisseur with the accuracy of a bibliographer, paleographer, and document researcher and with the exegetical demands of a historian, psychologist, and iconologist."<sup>4</sup> If he sounds like the kind of art historian of whom Springer would have approved, that shouldn't be too surprising, as Vöge studied with Springer in Leipzig. But Vöge didn't have Springer's intense interest in art's relation to the social world; he brought together the study of materials and formal analysis chiefly to illuminate questions of style (and I would guess that Vöge's preoccupation with style was one of the factors that directed Panofsky, in his earlier art theoretical essays, to investigate the significance of this concept for the history of art).

So Panofsky, who is often reproached both for a partiality to Italian Renaissance art and for not paying sufficient attention to art's materiality, received his training from a German medievalist who specialized in French twelfth century sculpture and the physical evaluation of art objects. This of course isn't to deny that Panofsky had a partiality to Italian Renaissance art or that he did not pay sufficient attention to the materiality of art, but it does suggest that these reproaches should be viewed with a warier eye, especially when we consider the next step in Panofsky's career.

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<sup>3</sup> Jan Bialostocki, "Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968): Thinker, Historian, Human Being," *Simiolus* 4 (1970): 75. Aby Warburg was also impressed by Vöge's capacities and directed other art historians to attend his lectures.

<sup>4</sup> Erwin Panofsky, introduction to Vöge's *Bilderhauser des Mittelalters* (Berlin, 1958).

After completing his dissertation with Vöge, Panofsky felt the "need to develop his erudition and method even further,"<sup>5</sup> and so went to Berlin to study with Adolph Goldschmidt (another student of Springer), who was also a medievalist and who was best known for his work on manuscript illumination and ivory carvings. Vöge's approach to the materials of art was derived from Goldschmidt's, who by the time that Panofsky went to study with him had developed an international reputation as a specialist in this area.<sup>6</sup> Goldschmidt also did studies that took up questions such as the survival of antique form in medieval art and the continuity between Byzantine and late medieval art, two topics that we have come to associate with Panofsky, who probably was directed to them through his contact with Goldschmidt. If we remind ourselves that Panofsky's entire university education was supervised by two medievalists specializing in the materials of art, perhaps we can be prompted to reconsider Panofsky's writings in this area and take another look at how this education might have influenced his research. I find it very difficult to believe that it didn't; in fact, I think that his discussion of medieval art in *Perspective as Symbolic Form* indicates that it did. But this is a subsidiary topic for this dissertation, and it is one that will not be addressed directly.

Neither Vöge nor Goldschmidt seemed overly concerned with questions in art theory; at least, not like Springer, who led his crusade against Grimm and for the legitimation of the discipline in full knowledge of what were the pressing issues of the day. As was the case with many of the art historians of this era, Springer had extensive formal training in philosophy; his doctoral dissertation was an attack on Hegel's philosophy of history and the sway it held over Hegel's aesthetics; in Springer's words, "I wanted to demonstrate the artificiality of the system and make clear the internal contradictions of

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<sup>5</sup> Bialostocki, 75.

<sup>6</sup> "[A] highly competent American art historian was demonstrating the advantages of ultraviolet rays for determining the authenticity and date of a work. In the presence of Goldschmidt, the world's greatest expert on ivory, this professor applied his new method to ivory pieces. Finally he asked his guest what he thought of all this. Goldschmidt carefully examined various pieces, looked up and said with a smile: "First, Dr. X., you must show me a genuine ivory." Kultermann, 195.

Hegel's *Philosophy of History*.<sup>7</sup> Springer's philosophical concerns about what are the principles that govern our concept of art and our corresponding understanding of its history place him firmly within the tradition of what Michael Podro calls "the critical historians of art." Podro gives them this name because their reflections on the nature of art and the possibility of a history of art are informed by the tradition of classical German philosophy that begins with Kant. Panofsky is undeniably part of this tradition, although his teachers Vöge and Goldschmidt were not. How exactly Panofsky developed his theoretical interests is the province of speculation; so, let us instead turn to what Panofsky wrote--to a series of provocative and original discussions of the foundations of art history that will ultimately lead us to *Perspective as Symbolic Form*.

The subject of this chapter is the first paper in this series, "Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst," which bears the same title as the paper it was a response to: Heinrich Wölfflin's "Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst," which was originally a lecture delivered in 1912 to the Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin outlining the main theses of what was to become Wölfflin's *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe (Principles of Art History)*.<sup>8</sup> The fact that Wölfflin was by this time a very big name in German art history and Panofsky was a 23 year old student makes this critique seem somewhat audacious,

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<sup>7</sup> Anton Springer, *Aus meinen Leben* (Berlin, 1892), 115. The translation is Podro's: see Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 152. In his steadfast and unceasing opposition to Hegel's influence in art history, Springer was the nineteenth century counterpart to Ernst Gombrich, whose opposition is not only philosophical but moral: Gombrich sees in Hegelianism a philosophy of history that helped underpin and justify the programme of Nazism. While Gombrich is of course right that the Nazis used a Hegelian conception of world history to sanction their activities, it must be kept in mind that this was not so much a use as an abuse of Hegel's philosophy (the same willful distortion as we know was brought to Nietzsche's writings). While Gombrich is aware that Nazism deformed Hegel's thought, he doesn't realize that his construal, which was widely accepted by art historians, is just as much of a caricature.

<sup>8</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, "Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst," *Sitzungsberichte des königlichen Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften XXXI* (1912): 572ff. Erwin Panofsky, "Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst," *Zeitschrift für Aesthetik und allg. Kunstwissenschaft X* (1915): 460-467. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (Munich, 1915), translated into English as *Principles of Art History* by M. D. Hottinger (New York: Dover, 1950).

perhaps giving the lie to Panofsky's sly self-characterization that he was "vain but not conceited."<sup>9</sup>

The greater part of the chapter will be devoted to Panofsky's critique of Wölfflin; however, the concluding sections will be devoted to topics concerning the philosophical foundations of Wölfflin's art history, as these will provide us with some of the background that is necessary to place Panofsky's early writings.

It is evident from the very first paragraph that Panofsky's critique of Wölfflin is of more than academic interest to him, for he begins somewhat sharply by saying that Wölfflin's article is so important that it is unexplainable and unjustifiable that neither art history nor the philosophy of art has yet taken a position on its outspoken views (even at 23 Panofsky had a good sense of what was consequential). The issue that Panofsky quickly zeros in on as crucial to Wölfflin's approach is his now famous doctrine of the double root of style, which maintains that stylistic transformation in art can be accounted for by appealing to two different factors: the first factor or root is an autonomous visual tradition that links the artist's work to previous art, that is, to the tradition that has provided examples of what art is and what the artist could do; the second root is the artist's present, surrounding culture. Wölfflin's paper, and his book the *Principles of Art History*, are aimed at explaining how the first root, the autonomous visual tradition, is to be understood. This is effected through an analysis of stylistic change that is based on five pairs of opposed categories: linear versus painterly, planar versus recessional, closed versus open form, multiple unity versus fused unity, and absolute clarity versus relative clarity.<sup>10</sup> It

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<sup>9</sup> E. H. Gombrich, obituary for Erwin Panofsky, *Burlington Magazine* (1968), 359.

<sup>10</sup> Wölfflin's opposed categories are so familiar to art historians that I will not give a detailed explanation of what is involved in them and how they operate. For the non art historian, I will simply introduce the basic ideas behind the first two pairs by letting Wölfflin speak for himself. Linear versus painterly (keep in mind for comparison a painting by Dürer and one by Rembrandt): "Although in the phenomenon of linear style, line signifies only part of the matter, and the outline cannot be detached from the form it encloses, we can still use the popular definition and say for once as a beginning--linear style sees in lines, painterly in masses. Linear vision, therefore, means that the sense and beauty of things is first sought in the outline--interior forms have their outline too--that the eye is led along the boundaries and induced to feel along the edges, while seeing in masses takes place where the attention withdraws from the edges, where the outline has become more or less indifferent to the eye as the path of vision, and the primary element of the

must be emphasized that Wölfflin developed these categories in order to describe the compositional transformation that marked the movement from Renaissance to Baroque art; this is evident both in the art he brings forth for examination and in the subtitle of the book: *The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*. While it is true that Wölfflin did think that this *kind* of analysis could be brought to other eras of art, he did not suggest that this set of categories should be applied to them without qualification; this is an extension that we owe to certain of his students, followers, and epigones.

What was Wölfflin's motivation in trying to articulate an autonomous visual tradition, a "history of form working itself out inwardly,"<sup>11</sup> as he eloquently expressed it? He wanted first of all to give art history some methodological respectability; at the time that Wölfflin began his studies, the writing of the history of art had not advanced much beyond narrative, anecdotal chronologies of artists' lives and the description of their works. And while this may be diverting and even informative, it does not provide the discipline with the rigorously defined concepts and analytical tools that would make it "scientific" (in the sense of 'science' that is contained in the German word *Wissenschaft*, as in *Kunstwissenschaft*). Secondly, and this is obviously related to the first concern, if art history had no concepts and methods that were truly its own, it would not be able to isolate, characterize, and explain that which, according to Wölfflin, should be its unique and proper concern, i.e., the formal transformation of visual representations and their stylistic identities, and it would pass its time instead engaged in cultural studies that other disciplines could just as easily pursue. The *Principles of Art History* and the paper presented to the Prussian Academy of

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impression is things seen in patches. It is here indifferent whether such patches speak as colour or only as lights and darks," *Principles of Art History*, 18-19. Planar versus recessional (keep in mind for comparison a painting by Raphael and one by Rubens): "The phenomenon we have in mind is that other--that just that stage of art which entered into full possession of the means of representing pictorial space, the sixteenth century, recognized the combination of forms in a plane as a principle, and that this principle of composition in the plane was dropped by the seventeenth century in favour of a definitely recessional type of composition. In the former case, the will to the plane, which orders the picture in strata parallel to the picture plane; in the latter, the inclination to withdraw the plane from the eye, to discount it and make it inapparent, while the forward and backward relations are emphasized, and the spectator is compelled to correlate in recession," *Principles of Art History*, 73.

<sup>11</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 232.

Sciences undertake to address both of these matters. The intellectual background that Wölfflin draws upon in order to do this is impressive, and results in a unique and powerful vision of what stylistic transformation is and why it is important. I will have more to say about Wölfflin's intellectual resources and their significance for his approach to the history of art after I have considered Panofsky's critique of the doctrine of the double root of style.

Wölfflin maintains, Panofsky tell us, that every style possesses a definite expressive content; thus, a period style reflects the atmosphere and conception of life of its époque, and an artist's style reflects the artist's personality. But this is only one of the roots of style, for a style is characterized not only by what it expresses but also by the way in which it is expressed, that is to say, by the means that it makes use of in order to fulfill its expressive function, and this is the second root of style. That Raphael draws his lines in a certain manner can to a certain extent be explained by his personality, but when every artist of the fifteen hundreds, whether it be Dürer or Raphael, makes use of line rather than patches of colour as the basic means of expression, it is no longer a question of the individual artist's temperament, state of mind, or state of soul; in fact, Panofsky tells us, Wölfflin maintains that one can only understand this circumstance if one begins with the idea of a general form of vision and representation.<sup>12</sup>

The exclusive distinction that Wölfflin makes between his two roots of style, Panofsky argues, obliges him to draw a corresponding one for the concepts that he uses for delineating styles. What Panofsky wants to question, his principal issue, is whether these distinctions are defensible, and he directs his attack to two ideas that underpin them: first,

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<sup>12</sup> The relevant passage in German is: "Jeder Stil -- so beginnt Wölfflin -- habe zweifellos einen bestimmten Ausdrucksgehalt; im Stil der Gotik oder im Stil der italienischen Renaissance spiegele sich eine Zeitstimmung und eine Lebensauffassung, und in der Linienführung Raffaels komme sein persönlicher Charakter zur Erscheinung. Aber alles das sei erst die eine Seite dessen, was das Wesen eines Stiles ausmache; nicht nur was er sage, sondern auch wie er es sage, sei für ihn charakteristisch: die Mittel, deren er sich bediene, um die Funktion des Ausdrucks zu erfüllen. Dass Raffael seine Linien so und so gestalte, sei bis zu einem gewissen Grade aus seiner inneren Veranlagung zu erklären, dass aber jeder Künstler des 16. Jahrhunderts, heisse er nun Raffael oder Dürer, gerade die Linie, und nicht den malerischen Fleck, als wesentliches Ausdrucksmittel benutze, das hänge nicht mehr zusammen mit dem, was man Gesinnung, Geist, Temperament oder Stimmung nennen könnte, sondern werde nur aus einer allgemeinen Form des Sehens und Darstellens verständlich . . . (Panofsky, "Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst," 19).

whether Wölfflin can distinguish between the "eye" and the "mind" in the way that is required to uphold these distinctions; and secondly, whether he can differentiate between "form" and "content" in the fashion that is necessary in order for his doctrine to be plausible. What Panofsky does not want to question is whether Wölfflin's five pairs of opposing categories are empirically and historically correct, that is, whether they "correctly" describe the stylistic change that characterizes the movement from Renaissance to Baroque art. This is an concern that is outside of the ken of his investigation.

Let us begin with Wölfflin's distinction between the "eye" and the "mind." The issue that sets up the problem for Panofsky is this: while recognizing that the "state of mind" of Dürer and the "state of mind" of Raphael can permit us to understand the way in which their lines are drawn, and thus that their lines will possess an expressive value, Wölfflin denies that the "state of mind" belonging to the époque in its totality can determine the artists' use of the element of line rather than combinations of patches of colour, and consequently he denies that this type of determination can possess an expressive value.<sup>13</sup> Wölfflin denies that artists can choose a painterly style over a linear one because these stylistic categories describe a visual tradition that is independent of them; they refer to modes of representation, how the "eye" is related to the world in certain epochs, which determines the bounds of the artist's expressive possibilities; as Wölfflin says in a well-known passage from the *Principles of Art History*: "Every artist finds certain visual possibilities before him, to which he is bound. Not everything is possible at all times. Vision itself has a history."<sup>14</sup> It is worth stressing that when Wölfflin talks about the

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<sup>13</sup> "Wenn Wölfflin zugibt, dass die Art, wie Raffael und Dürer ihre Linien führen, aus ihrer inneren "Gesinnung" verständlich werden kann und daher Ausdruckswert besitzt, dabei aber bestreitet, dass die Tatsache, dass Raffael und Dürer Linien führen (anstatt Flecken nebeneinander zu setzen), auch von einer inneren Gesinnung bedingt sein könnte (nämlich von der gesamten Epoche), und daher auch Ausdruckswert besitzen würde . . . (Ibid., 20).

<sup>14</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, 11. Wölfflin concludes this passage with the statement that "the revelation of these visual strata must be regarded as the primary task of art history." This is the basis of Wölfflin's so-called "art history without names," which was, and still is, roundly criticized for ignoring the contributions of individual artists. Much of the criticism of Wölfflin's project however simply derives from an unfamiliarity with it: the *Principles of Art History* does not represent the entirety of Wölfflin's vision of history of art but only one facet of his attempt to provide it with a foundation. As

"eye's" relation to the world it seems that he means this to be taken quite literally, in that he speaks of an "optic," a certain relation of the eye to the world, independent of the psychology of the époque.<sup>15</sup> This is what Panofsky specifically wants to take exception with, for he does not think that vision in-itself can be the seat of such stylistic categories, and, furthermore, he does not think that this distinction can serve as the basis for the separation between expressive and formal elements that Wölfflin wants to enact. The reason that this distinction seems credible, Panofsky argues, is that Wölfflin is equivocating on two different senses of 'eye' and 'vision,' one of which is scientific and the other figurative: literally speaking, the eye is the organ that allows human beings to receive a reality, experienced at first as only subjective, Panofsky tells us, but objectified afterwards when sensation is related to the *apriori* representation of abstract space. It is the perception of this reality that one can describe as optical, as the phenomenon of vision.<sup>16</sup> If vision is understood in this way then of course Wölfflin is right in claiming it has nothing to do with the sentiments and expressive desires of individual artists, but at the same time it must also be recognized that vision in this sense plays no role in the formation of style, for the eye as the organ of visual perception does not register the world in linear or painterly pictorial styles. Consequently, without doubt the optical attitude to which Wölfflin refers

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Wölfflin himself said in a comment on his critics: "The real bone of contention has been my notion of an art-history-without-names. I do not remember how the term came to me; I think it fair to say it was something in the air—which in any case should suggest a desire to represent something basic to individuals. At which point the usual objection arises: 'If the personality is what matters in the history of art, does the extinction of the subject not impoverish art, reduce it to bloodless abstractions, and so on.' Now there could not be a grosser misunderstanding than this—as though the worth of the individual were ever in question! Rather than present a history of art that claims to invalidate all those before it, I am merely trying to find a new framework for it, guidelines for greater certainty of our criteria. Whether this effort is a success or failure is quite beside the point; I insist that art history set itself a goal beyond that of ascertaining external facts." From Heinrich Wölfflin, "Zur Rechtfertigung meiner kunstgeschichtlichen Grundbegriffe," quoted in Kultermann, 177.

<sup>15</sup> "nur eine bestimmte 'Optik' sich offenbare, nur ein bestimmtes 'Verhältnis des Auges zur Welt,' das von der Psychologie einer Zeit vollständig unabhängig wäre" (Panofsky, "Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst," 20-21).

<sup>16</sup> "In der streng gefassten Bedeutung des Wortes ist das Auge das Organ, das dem Menschen eine zunächst nur subjektiv empfundene, dann aber durch eine Beziehung des Empfundenen auf die apriorische Anschauung des abstrakten Raumes objektivierte "Wirklichkeit" schenkt, deren Wahrnehmung als optisches Erlebnis ober Sehen bezeichnet werden kann" (Ibid., 21).



is, rigorously speaking, an intellectual attitude, and his relation of the eye to the world is in reality, as Panofsky elegantly expresses it, a relation of the soul to the world of the eye.<sup>17</sup> It follows that if the artists of an era "see" in a linear or painterly fashion that this is not a literal statement about the behaviour of their eyes but a figurative one about the behaviour of their minds. And from this it follows in turn that, as the behaviour of artists' minds is not independent of their temperaments, Wölfflin's claim that more general formal characteristics such as linearity are separable from the elements of personal expression cannot be maintained.

With this issue apparently concluded, Panofsky directs his attention to the other major point of contention: Wölfflin's treatment of the form and content distinction. Wölfflin's separation of expressive elements and autonomous formal elements appears to allow him to offer a deft solution to this perennially troubling division. In Panofsky's summary of Wölfflin's position, content is that which possesses in itself an expression; form is that which is done only to serve the expression. Content is the totality of that which does not concern Wölfflin's categories of optical possibilities, for instance, the particular sensation of beauty, the particular degree of naturalism, the particular sense of space, and so forth. Form is the mode of representation in general that serves, so to speak, to render communicable the above features and offer them to the viewer.<sup>18</sup> But, Panofsky states, our earlier arguments have shown that this clean distinction cannot be maintained, for the supposedly purely formal elements upon which Wölfflin's concept of form is based have

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<sup>17</sup> "So gewiss die Wahrnehmungen des Gesichts nur durch ein tätiges Eingreifen des Geistes ihre lineare oder malerische Form gewinnen können, so gewiss ist die 'optische Einstellung' streng genommen eine geistige Einstellung zum Optischen, so gewiss ist das 'Verhältnis des Auges zur Welt' in Wahrheit ein Verhältnis der Seele zur Welt des Auges" (Ibid., 22).

<sup>18</sup> "Inhalt ist ihm das, was selbst Ausdruck hat -- Form das, was dem Ausdruck bloss dient; Inhalt die Gesamtheit dessen, was durch die Kategorien der 'optischen Möglichkeiten' nicht getroffen wird, d. h. die 'besondere Schönheitsempfindung,' der 'besondere Grad von Naturalismus' und (wie wir hinzufügen dürfen, da ja die Linienführung, die Flächendisposition usw. in ihrer spezifischen Eigenart auch von Wölfflin als ausdrucksbedeutsam anerkannt wird) das besondere Bewegungs-, Raum- oder Farbgefühl eines Künstlers oder einer Epoche -- Form der allgemeine Darstellungsmodus, mit dessen Hilfe diese mehr oder minder individuellen Tatbestände gleichsam nur mittelbar gemacht und dem Betrachter dargeboten werden" (Ibid., 22-23).

turned out to be partially constitutive of that which would be described as content. This simple fact gives us the right to assert, Panofsky continues, that in the case of a painter or a sculptor the personal expressive tendency of the artist maintains relations with the general forms of the linear or painterly modes of representation that are not different from those that a musician maintains with melodic polyphony and harmonic homophony. All fugues, whatever the diversity of individual sentiment expressed in their thematic construction, rhythm, and harmony, are grouped together, for this is the reason that they are fugues, in an identity of their elementary expressive gestures. In the same way, in the plastic arts, two works as fundamentally different in their individual manner of being as Dürer's *Holzschuher* and Raphael's *Castiglione* must necessarily have at bottom an expressive kinship for the sole reason that both are governed by the same general formal principles.<sup>19</sup>

After providing further reasons for why Wölfflin's distinction is not defensible, Panofsky suggests that we abandon it entirely and adopt in its place a division between "form" and "object." Such a distinction would put aside the question of expressive significance (at least as stated above) and use form to refer to the aesthetic aspect of the work which is not part of its objecthood. One must then, Panofsky tells us, understand the concept of form as including not only the general mode of representation, be it linear or painterly, planar or recessional, but also the path of a line, the organization of patches of colour, the composition in plane or depth, and other elements as they are realized in the

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<sup>19</sup> Dass dieser Fall in Wahrheit nicht einmal denkbar ist, gibt uns ein Recht zu der Behauptung, dass sich die persönlich-expressive Tendenz eines Bildkünstlers zu den allgemeinen Formen des Linearen und des Malerischen nicht anders verhält, als die persönlich-expressive Tendenz eines Musikers zu den allgemeinen Formen des Polyphon-Melodischen und des Homophon-Harmonischen. Wie alle Fugen, mag sich auch in ihrem thematischen, rhythmischen, harmonischen Aufbau eine noch so grosse Verschiedenheit des individuellen Gefühles offenbaren, dennoch nur deshalb, weil sie Fugen sind, in einer Gleichheit ihrer elementarsten Ausdrucks-Geste sich begegnen (so dass Künstler, denen die Fugenform nicht mehr selbstverständlich war, mit vollem Bewusstsein auf sie zurückgriffen, um diese Ausdrucksgeste zu erreichen), -- und wie umgekehrt ein Sonatensatz, nur weil er ein Sonatensatz ist, mit einer Fuge auch dann, wenn es möglich wäre, ihn in Thema, Takt und Modulation ihr aufs äusserste anzunähern, dennoch niemals ausdrucksidentisch werden kann: so müssen auch in der Bildkunst zwei in ihrer individuellen Wesensart so grundverschiedene Werke wie Dürers *Holzshuher* und Raffaels *Castiglione* nur dadurch, dass beide von den gleichen allgemeinen Formprinzipien beherrscht werden, in einem letzten Sinne ausdrucksverwandt erscheinen, und umgekehrt, wenn Holbein 100 Jahre nach seinem Tode als derselbe hätte wiederkehren und denselben Georg Gisze, nur in der neuen Form des 17. Jahrhunderts, noch einmal hätte porträtieren können, so hätte er nie ein Werk desselben Ausdrucks hervorgebracht" (Ibid., 24).

singular particularities of the work.<sup>20</sup> Leaving untouched the questions of whether Panofsky's distinction is more workable than Wölfflin's, and whether finally his critique of Wölfflin is entirely justified, I would like to focus instead on the nature of his proposed alternative, because I believe that it provides us with a useful opening that leads directly to our main concern: the basic philosophical differences that separate Wölfflin's and Panofsky's conceptions of art history.<sup>21</sup>

Wölfflin has been labeled an empiricist, a formalist, a Hegelian, and a Neo-Kantian; however, if there are Neo-Kantian elements in Wölfflin's art history, they are derived from a vision of that philosophical position that is quite at odds with the one that Panofsky is drawing from and will increasingly align himself with. It seems to me that what bothers Panofsky about Wölfflin's distinctions between "eye" and "mind" and "form" and "content" is that they are distinctly un-Kantian. We will recall from Part I, especially from our discussions of categories and schemata, that Kant is arguing against an account of experience that separates sense ("eye" and "content") and understanding ("mind" and "form"). As for Cassirer, the philosophy of symbolic forms could be taken as one long argument against the utility and plausibility of trying to understand our cultural creations through these kinds of disjunctions. In Panofsky's proposed alternative distinction, form

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<sup>20</sup> "Unterscheidung zwischen Form und Gegenstand zurückzukehren haben, die mit Recht den Begriff der Ausdrucksbedeutsamkeit ganz aus dem Spiele lässt, und mit 'Form' einfach das ästhetische Moment dessen bezeichnet, was nicht Gegenstand ist, d. h., was nicht durch einen objektiven Erfahrungsbegriff ausgedrückt werden kann. Dann würde nicht nur die malerische oder lineare, flächenhafte oder tiefen hafte Darstellungsweise im allgemeinen, sondern--im Gegensatz zur Vorstellung des wiedergegebenen Objekts-- auch die Führung der Linie, die Anordnung der Flecken, die Komposition der Flächen- oder Tiefenelemente in ihrer individuellen Besonderheit unter dem Begriff der 'Form' zu befassen sein; aber gerade auch dann würde sich die von Wölfflin gestellte und erfüllte Forderung: jene generellen Formen von diesen speziellen abzusondern und sie durch eigene kategoriale Bezeichnungen vor denselben auszuzeichnen, als durchaus berechtigt erweisen" (Ibid., 24).

<sup>21</sup> In her commentary on Panofsky's critique of Wölfflin's form and content distinction, Michael Ann Holly makes the curious remark that "A close reading would make any sensitive reader (including Panofsky) aware, however, that Wölfflin himself never fails to notice the difference between content and form. In fact the distinction is precisely the one addressed by Wölfflin's 'double root of style'" (Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984], 63). This is indeed all true, but it is also not the issue: the question is not whether Wölfflin tries to maintain a form/content distinction in his discussions, but whether his theoretical statement of it is tenable--one can, after all, try to do something that one will not succeed at.

and content are united under a broadened concept of form that, like the Cassirerean symbol, doesn't lend itself to the traditional opposition between these two aspects. Panofsky realizes that if such a distinction is to be made, then we must keep in mind that it can only be made *formally*; for if we conceive of it as an actual division in the phenomenon, then what we will discover, like Wölfflin, is that the separated facets will find a way of reuniting themselves surreptitiously.

In order to better understand the differences between Wölfflin's and Panofsky's conceptions of art history, let us take a closer look at those elements in their respective approaches that might be called Neo-Kantian. As an introductory aside, I should mention that, with regard to Panofsky's position at the time that he published "Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst," it is difficult to state with any precision which philosophical ideas were informing his approach, for he was just beginning his publishing career. His direction becomes quite clear however with his next theoretical paper, "Der Begriff des Kunstwillens" ("The Concept of Artistic Volition"), and it is to the orientation of this paper, an orientation to which "Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst" is headed, that I will implicitly refer my discussion of Wölfflin. In turn, what I have to say about Wölfflin will not be directed towards a particular text but to certain ideas that seem to remain constant throughout his works, even though his works vary quite dramatically in other respects. Wölfflin is not someone whose views remained the same and unfolded in a progressive and orderly development. For instance, in his first major work, *Renaissance and Baroque*,<sup>22</sup> Wölfflin based his general account of architectural interpretation on a theory of empathy that seemed to cut our attempt to understand architecture off from its surrounding society, while at the same time suggesting that it embodies "what the race has to say," its *Lebensgefühl*. Furthermore, Wölfflin connected changes in architectural style to changes in the taste of society, rejecting the belief that they can be explained by appealing to the internal development and formal elaboration of architectural motifs, a view that is in fact

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<sup>22</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, trans. K. Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964).

presupposed by his conceptions of taste and style. Then in his next major work, *Classic Art*,<sup>23</sup> Wölfflin partially reversed this position and proposed that societal changes and the visual tradition be seen as the *joint* conditions of artistic transformation, to which, some commentators might (wrongly) be tempted to add, that in the *Principles of Art History* he finally achieved a 180° reversal of his original doctrine, by maintaining that artistic change is to be understood in terms of the development of an autonomous visual tradition. One of the features that remains throughout these modifications in Wölfflin's views is the tension and interplay between the social world and an autonomous visual tradition, which is finally stabilized in his doctrine of the double root of style, and which, as we have seen, is the focus of Panofsky's attack on Wölfflin's art history. Let us look further into what separates Panofsky and Wölfflin.

Like so many of the art historians of his era, Wölfflin arrived at the study of art through philosophy. His desire to use philosophy to make art history into a well-grounded and more systematic discipline is particularly evident in these statements from the beginning of his career:

Philosophy is the highest constant for me. It unites an entire age. I would choose it as the foundation for every higher cultural history; philosophy and cultural history complement each other reciprocally. The object of both is man, the whole thinking, feeling mankind; the former analyzes it, the other gives it history.<sup>24</sup>

It is essential that systematic historical knowledge must be re-cast as a psychological interpretation of historical development. What can be achieved through philological methods is shown by archaeology. Someone who can combine archaeology with that other enterprise will achieve a great deal. From philosophy I shall draw a stream of new ideas and inject them into history. But first I must become master of the historical material, and I must become its complete master. I shall take as the first example of this enterprise the art of the Baroque.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Classic Art: An Introduction to the Art of the Italian Renaissance*, trans. Peter and Linda Murray (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

<sup>24</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Nachlass* (III A 69), from a letter to his parents, May 11, 1884, Basel. Quoted in Joan Hart, "Reinterpreting Wölfflin: Neo-Kantianism and Hermeneutics," *Art Journal* 42 (Winter 1982), 292-300. Hart's translation.

<sup>25</sup> From J. Gantner, ed., *Jacob Burckhardt und Heinrich Wölfflin. Briefwechsel und andere Dokumente ihrer Begegnung, 1882-97* (Basel, 1948), 36. Podro's translation, *The Critical Historians of Art*, 99.

The second quotation provides us with one of the guiding philosophical ideas behind Wölfflin's art history throughout his career, and the first sentence, with its reference to "a psychological interpretation of historical development," specifies Wölfflin's most important theme. Wölfflin received his philosophical training at the University of Basel, where there was prominent support for a psychologistic interpretation of Kant. Broadly speaking, the label 'psychologism' refers to the intellectual tendency to approach philosophical problems from the standpoint of psychology; John Stuart Mill, for example, argued that the axioms of mathematics and logic are psychological in origin. Although psychologistic approaches to logic and mathematics usually attract the most controversy and debate, psychologistic theories are common in epistemology and metaphysics, as well as in ethics and aesthetics. In Wölfflin's case, it is his attraction to the psychologization of aesthetics, through philosophers who tried to make empathy the basis for understanding art, that is of principal interest to us. Wölfflin was taught aesthetics by one such Neo-Kantian philosopher, Johannes Volkelt,<sup>26</sup> whose major work, *Der Symbol-Begriff in der neuesten Aesthetik*, investigated the concept of symbolization in the writings of, among others, Friedrich Theodor Vischer, Robert Zimmermann, and Hermann Lotze, all of whom believed that it was necessary not only to return to Kant but also to "advance" beyond him by psychologizing his doctrine of the *apriori*. (The name of Robert Zimmermann leads to a network of connections that is of particular interest for this era of art history. Zimmermann's understanding of Kant was quite directly influenced by Johann Friedrich Herbart's writings, especially his *Psychologie als Wissenschaft: neu gegründet auf Erfahrung, Metaphysik und Mathematik*, which, as the title suggests, proposes psychology as the foundation for knowledge. Herbart stands as the nexus for the above mentioned network, in which Wölfflin was implicated, for Herbart also influenced the views of Konrad Fiedler, who, in turn, was the philosophical inspiration for Adolf Hildebrand's

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<sup>26</sup> Hart, 293.

*Das Problem der Form*, which was reviewed by Wölfflin and found its way into the *Principles of Art History*.<sup>27</sup> I will return briefly to this philosophical network and Wölfflin's link to it when I discuss Riegl's approach to the history of art).<sup>28</sup>

One result of the position developed by Volkelt, Lotze, Vischer, and Zimmerman was that the question of symbolization in art was reformulated into a question of empathetic engagement, with the viewer's relation to the art object based on anthropomorphic projection. In his dissertation, *Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur* (1886), Wölfflin adopted this theory for the study of architecture, arguing that the parts of a building are like the parts of a body, and that we relate to it as we do to a human presence, attuning ourselves to postures and their embodied moods. Wölfflin took a step beyond the theoretical reflections of his mentors by canvassing contemporary psychological inquiries

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<sup>27</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, "Adolf Hildebrands 'Problem der Form'," in *Kleine Schriften (1886-1933)*, ed. J. Gantner (B. Schwabe: Basel, 1946).

<sup>28</sup> In "Reinterpreting Wölfflin: Neo-Kantianism and Hermeneutics," Hart makes the very significant claim that Wölfflin's mature writings are under the distinctive influence of Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutics. This is far from an implausible idea, for Hart's sleuthing has brought forth considerable corroborating evidence: after his days at the University of Basel Wölfflin went to study with Dilthey at the University of Berlin; it was Dilthey who introduced him to the works of the contemporary psychologists he used to support his contentions about architecture and empathy; Wölfflin's journals and letters contain numerous positive references to Dilthey's philosophy; there are certain structural features of Wölfflin works that suggest he was influenced by the way in which Dilthey proceeded methodologically; there are discussions in Wölfflin's publications that suggest that, like Dilthey after *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, he abandoned the idea of having psychology serve as the basis for the cultural sciences and turned instead to hermeneutics; and so on. Unfortunately, Hart's claims are vitiated by the generality and vagueness of her arguments. Here is a representative example: "Circular reasoning is intrinsic to hermeneutic thought. The historian is forever aware of the limiting conditions of all understanding and interpretation. In order to understand the whole, it is necessary to understand the parts, while to understand the parts it is necessary to have some initial intuition of the whole. Understanding is an ever-widening, never-ending spiral. Wölfflin wrote: 'Only when the whole was taken together as a system could the feeling for the differentiation of parts awaken, and only within a severe, tactile unity could the partial forms develop an independent effect'" (295-296). To begin with, the quotation from Wölfflin's *Principles of Art History* is not about a hermeneutical act of historical understanding; it is one of Wölfflin's speculations about how artists felt their way to a coherent style through multiple unity in composition. True, a similar principle may be involved, but that fact is insufficient to establish that Wölfflin understood and adhered to Dilthey's complex hermeneutical approach. Besides, if this was all that were required to establish such a connection, then a vast number of scholars would instantly and unwittingly become followers of Dilthey: for example, in "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline" (9-10), Panofsky gives an exemplary statement of how the hermeneutic circle is a central problem for research in art history, but I can't see that this is any reason to believe that Panofsky is a Diltheyan. The problem of the hermeneutic circle is a concern that cuts across philosophical camps, recognition of it does not commit one to a particular doctrine. Such is the nature of Hart's argumentation. How precisely the relation between Wölfflin and Dilthey is to be understood is a question that remains open.

for confirmation of his theory, which he found in the research of Gustav Fechner and Wilhelm Wundt. The empirical generalizations about psychological types and architectural preferences that seemed nascent in their work led Wölfflin, who even at this stage in his life had his eye on grand scale explanatory principles, to speculate about how such research would reveal the ways in which the spirit of a people expressed itself in their architectural forms:

One could reason *a posteriori* from the idea of such a psychology of art, from the impression that we receive, to the feeling of a people that produced these forms, these proportions. One could raise the following objections: the conclusions are unjustified; relationships and lines do not always signify the same thing; the human feeling for form changes.

These objections cannot be disproved so long as one has no psychological basis. However, as soon as one can prove that the organization of the human body is the constant denominator of all change, one is secure against this assault, because the uniformity of this organization also guarantees the uniformity of the feeling for form.<sup>29</sup>

This is an important and a telling passage for Panofsky's critique of Wölfflin. Even though almost thirty years separate Wölfflin's dissertation and the paper that Panofsky is responding to, and even though Wölfflin's understanding of his approach and its foundations changes quite dramatically during this period, there are features fundamental to Wölfflin's art history that remain unchanged, the most important of which is that the principles of art historical understanding can be discovered inductively *a posteriori*--in the end this is what Panofsky's debate with Wölfflin comes down to. In his dissertation Wölfflin places his faith in the development of psychology: psychology will discover the true principles that underlie the organization of the human psyche and its constitution of experience; the traditional Kantian *a prioristic* understanding of these matters must be abandoned and replaced by the vision suggested by this promising and exciting new science of the mind. However, if one wants to take the road offered by psychologism there

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<sup>29</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kleine Schriften (1886-1933)*, ed. J. Gantner (B. Schwabe: Basel, 1946), 46. Hart's translation, 294.



is a toll to pay, and that is the loss of necessity, for to develop principles inductively through psychological research ensures that one's principles will never be more than contingent and probable. It is also, and this is important to Panofsky's case, to remove oneself from the project of the Kantian critical philosophy. In an important passage on the transcendental deduction of the categories in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A 85/B 116), where Kant is discussing the uniqueness, importance, and difficulty of his approach, he adopts for philosophical purposes an old Imperial legal distinction between proofs *quid facti* and *quid juris*, that is, proofs of questions of fact and proofs of questions of rights. To provide a transcendental deduction of the categories is to provide a justification *quid juris*, a proof that the categories are in fact the concepts that constitute the bounds of possible of experience. This is to be distinguished from an empirical deduction, *quid facti*, which only seeks for the origins of these concepts in experience; an approach, Kant argues, which is typified by the works of Locke and Hume. But it is not only philosophers such as Locke and Hume who have failed to address the question of *quid juris* justification, psychologism in all its varieties is in exactly the same position, which makes one wonder why someone would claim to be taking their inspiration from Kant when their ultimate principles have only been given, and can only be given, an empirical deduction. Plainly stated, since Kant has provided the premises for the critique of any psychologism, we have to ask whether those who have tried to rewrite the *Critique of Pure Reason* along these lines have even grasped the *Critique's* basic import.

With regard to Panofsky's debate with Wölfflin, we can frame the present point of contention thus: because Wölfflin has developed his principles inductively from experience he has only provided a *quid facti* justification for them; hence, there is no proof, no guarantee, that his principles are *the* principles of art history. This is what motivates Panofsky to state that when Wölfflin claimed that the "optic" of the seventeenth century was a painterly optic, a recessional optic, etc., his claim admittedly had the appearance of discerning in this "optic" something that would reveal that the seventeenth century had to

represent its subjects in a painterly and recessional fashion. In truth, this claim only says that the seventeenth century's representations of its subjects were painterly and recessional. It clarifies the facts that furnish the matter for the inquiry; it does not explain them.<sup>30</sup> Panofsky is not denying that Wölfflin's classifications have descriptive usefulness, but he is denying that they reveal those aspects of works of art that determine their nature *as art*. As Michael Podro has pointed out, as matters stand Wölfflin has not even established that they are artistically relevant.<sup>31</sup>

We have to be clear about what the matter of contention is here. This might well be taken as just another misguided debate about ultimate and unchangeable principles that is simply beside the point once we have ceased to believe that the study of art in any way requires them. But this is not really what is at issue. The aversion to the idea of ultimate standards for determining what is and what is not art is based on the well-founded fear that such standards privilege certain forms of art to the exclusion of others. But this debate is not about deciding what is and what is not going to count as art; it is a debate that operates on a different conceptual level; it is about, in Kant's terms, a transcendental question. Consider again how Kant proceeded in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In order to find the conditions of possibility for empirical knowledge, Kant took science as it stood at his time and asked what conceptual presuppositions must be in place in order for this construction to exist. He wasn't legislating rules for what could and what could not count as science, that was already established by scientific activity itself. Similarly, in Cassirer's case, he didn't set down rules *a priori* for what is myth, language, or contemporary natural science, but rather aimed at disclosing the conditions of possibility for these forms of constructing

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<sup>30</sup> "Der Satz, dass die 'Optik' des 17. Jahrhunderts eine malerische, tiefenmässige usw. war, klingt zwar, als wiese er in dieser 'Optik' etwas nach, woraus hervorgeht, dass das 17. Jahrhundert malerisch und tiefenmässig darstellen musste; in Wahrheit aber besagt er nichts weiter, als dass das 17. Jahrhundert malerisch und tiefenmässig darstellte: er enthält die Formulierung, nicht die Begründung der zu untersuchenden Tatsachen" (Panofsky, "Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst," 25).

<sup>31</sup> Michael Podro, "Art History and the Concept of Art," in *Kategorien und Methoden der deutschen Kunstgeschichte 1900-1930*, ed. Lorenz Dittman (Stuttgart: Steiner-Verlag-Wiesbaden-GmbH, 1985), 210.

experience as they exist in human culture. Panofsky's concern is of the same sort: if art exists as a distinct form of ordering experience, then it too must have its unique principles that make it art and not something else. Such a mode of investigation does not in principle restrict art to being of a certain kind or from a specific era or culture; it is open to accept as art whatever people who are knowledgeable about art take art to be, though of course this determination is itself historically bound (this kind of critical inquiry is, as I have mentioned before, analogous to what Foucault is pursuing when he talks about disclosing the historical *a priori*s of certain formations of knowledge). At this point in his career Panofsky is content to direct his inquiry to art in general, but, granting myself some license to speculate, a post-Cassirerean Panofsky might well have resumed his debate with Wölfflin in order to take him to task for failing to reveal the historical *a priori*s particular to western European Renaissance and Baroque art. That said, the question remains (though at least we now recognize it to be a separate question) whether the parameters of Panofsky's inquiry into the fundamental principles of art history were determined by a restricted view of what could count as art, and the answer to this is "Yes." Panofsky does give Renaissance art place of privilege; how he does is a question that will be answered in installments as more of his writings come under consideration.<sup>32</sup>

I had two main goals in this chapter: I wanted to provide a sketch of the art historical milieu that Panofsky entered when he began his studies; and I wanted to bring his early theoretical concerns to the forefront by juxtaposing them to Wölfflin's, which offer a perfect foil against which to see how precisely Panofsky's theoretical direction at this point was influenced by Neo-Kantianism. The debate with Wölfflin was focused on the concept of style, and it is to the question of style that we will turn in the next chapter, for it was a

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<sup>32</sup> For discussions of Wölfflin that touch on issues related but not directly germane to the theme of this chapter see: Marshall Brown, "The Classic Is the Baroque: On the Principle of Wölfflin's Art History," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (December 1982): 379-404; E. H. Gombrich, "Norm and Form: The Stylistic Categories of Art History and their Origins in Renaissance Ideals," in *Norm and Form: Studies in the art of the Renaissance I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 81-98; Arnold Hauser, *The Philosophy of Art History* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985); Christine McCorkel, "Sense and Sensibility: An Epistemological Approach to the Philosophy of Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34 (Fall 1975): 35-50.

concept of great theoretical consequence, and it is central to understanding both the issues that run through Panofsky's writings on art theory and his approach to them.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE QUESTION OF STYLE IN THE HISTORY OF ART HISTORY

The discussions of the previous chapter presupposed two ideas that have defined the practice of art history almost since its inception as an independent discipline; I am referring to the ideas of "style" and "form." These two ideas are crucial to the history of art as it was understood by the tradition that is the focal point of this inquiry. It was through their understanding of style and form that the art historians of this tradition, of which Panofsky represents the culmination and completion, came to believe that they possessed an instrument of uncommon revelatory and explanatory power, which, as Willibald Sauerländer has so lucidly stated it,

offered the illusion of a nearly magic insight into history and of an immediate and total access to that greatest topic of nineteenth-century historicism: evolution. If it could really be shown that decorative arts, paintings, sculptures and even architecture were all merely forms and colours on a plane or in a space and as such were all expressions and revelations of the same inner creative force and obeyed all the same stylistic laws, then art history had come closer to the arcana of history than any other branch of the humanities. Other disciplines could only try to understand historical processes, art history alone could *see* evolution. With the new concept of style as an all-embracing generating principle art history presented a glittering mirror which seemed to reflect history like an image or scenery. What wonder that this approach, which seemed to make visual illusion a method for understanding history, had enchanting effects and a tremendous popular but also scholarly success?<sup>1</sup>

It was within and through this general vision of style that Wölfflin's art history appeared to perform "an exciting positivistic miracle in successfully using the results of one branch of

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<sup>1</sup> Willibald Sauerländer, "From Stīlus to Style: Reflections on the Fate of a Notion," *Art History* Vol. 6 No. 3 (September 1983): 265.

the sciences, namely psychology, as the rational instrument and the magic wand for a new form of historical insight."<sup>2</sup> And it was within the problematic framed by this understanding of style that Panofsky offered his critique of Wölfflin. It is important to our comprehension of Panofsky's early art theoretical essays that we clearly set out the place that he occupied within this tradition and discern what the ideas of style and form meant for him. Accordingly, in this chapter I would like to examine a number of topics that pertain to the role that the concept of style had in art historical writing in general, and to Panofsky's art history in particular.

An excellent starting point is the three "classic" articles on style in English language art history; they were produced, in chronological order, by Meyer Schapiro (1953), James Ackermann (1963), and Ernst Gombrich (1968).<sup>3</sup> As if by an act of self-referential homage, they all simply bear the title "Style," and each article takes up the problems posed by its predecessor. As the initiating article, Schapiro's is the most impressive effort, for Schapiro had no predecessors, and it fell to him to make sense of this ubiquitous but hopelessly diverse notion that was expanding with the rapidly expanding field of art history. Schapiro's article remains, I think, one of the best summary documents that we have of the concerns that directed the development of art history up to the mid-century. It also offers the student of the history of art history a clear perception of how divergent the study of art has been.

Schapiro opens his account with a definition of style that is intended to be wide enough to capture its diverse uses and still say something informative. In relation to our purposes, it is interesting to note that the connection between style and form is established immediately: "By Style is meant the constant form--and sometimes the constant elements,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>3</sup> Meyer Schapiro, "Style," in *Anthropology Today*, ed. A. L. Kroeber (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 287-312; James S. Ackerman, "Style," in *Distance Points: Essays in Theory and Renaissance Art and Architecture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 3-23; Ernst Gombrich, "Style," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Stils (New York: 1968), 352-361.

qualities, and expression--in the art of an individual or a group."<sup>4</sup> This defining characterization is then related in its broadest terms to the enterprise of art history itself: "To the historian of art, style is an essential object of investigation. He studies its inner correspondences, its life-history, and the problems of its formation and change. . . . But the style is, above all, a system of forms with a quality and a meaningful expression through which the personality of the artist and the broad outlook of a group are visible."<sup>5</sup> What is truly striking from the point of view of the present is the centrality of the idea that style is directly tied to formal relations and that these formal relations are revelatory of psychological and cultural dispositions. It is striking because this is Schapiro's most general statement of the concept of style, and one can assume in that case that his lengthy discussions of the myriad of ways in which the concept is employed in art history are all meant to be subsumed under this general characterization. The question that distinguishes the various approaches then becomes *how* is the relation between form and style to be explicated and *what* exactly is revealed in this relation, e.g., for Wölfflin the "how" is his inductively derived categories and the "what" is the eye's relation to the world, for Riegl it is the opposition between haptic and optic modes of representation and racial dispositions, for Panofsky, in *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, for example, the "how" is the structural analogy between medieval theological texts and gothic cathedrals, and the "what" is the disclosure of shared metaphysical tenets, and so it would go for the other approaches to the history of art. In surveying the uses to which the concept of style has been put by art historians who believe that stylistic analysis is revelatory of the developments in humankind's intellectual and spiritual engagements with the world, Schapiro also reviews (and adds to) the criticisms that have been leveled against these positions. In doing this he not only recounts the standard objections to, say, evolutionary and deterministic models of history, but he provides us as well with an overview of the misgivings we might have

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<sup>4</sup> Schapiro, "Style," 287.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

about the projects of individual art historians. He reminds us, for instance, that Wölfflin's cyclical view of the succession of classic and baroque stages is not applicable to the better part of the world's art, that it is incapable of dealing with (and hence denigrates) Mannerist art, that it fails to explain how the cycle is recommenced (as that would require a reverse development from the baroque to the classical), and, as Panofsky pointed out, that there are real unclaritys in the doctrine of the two roots of style. Schapiro helpfully provides us with similar overviews for all of the approaches that were at the time individual enough to be distinguished. As my intention is not to offer an abridged version of the arguments in Schapiro's paper, but only to isolate some of the ideas that will be important for the chapters to follow, let me now turn to Ackerman's essay and consider a few of the salient features of his study.

To begin with, Ackerman's principal aim is not to give a complete survey of the uses of the concept of style in art history but to offer and defend his own account. His evaluation of the importance of style though does not differ from Schapiro's, for he tells us in the very first line that "Art historians are especially preoccupied with defining the nature and behaviour of style."<sup>6</sup> Ackerman's explanation of why they are is however more open-ended, for he does not explicitly claim, as Schapiro does, that "style is, above all, a system of forms with a quality and a meaningful expression through which the personality of the artist and the broad outlook of a group are visible." Ackerman also doesn't tie stylistic analysis as intimately to the analysis of form, though he does say that "Conventions of form and of symbolism yield the richest harvest of traits by which to distinguish style."<sup>7</sup> Where Ackerman begins to move out in a noticeably new direction is with his declaration that "Because our image of style is not discovered but created by abstracting certain features from works of art for the purpose of assisting historical and critical activity, it is meaningless to ask, as we usually do, 'What is style?' The relevant question is rather

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<sup>6</sup> Ackerman, "Style," 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 4.



'What definition of style provides the most useful structure for the history of art?'"<sup>8</sup> While this question is not at odds with the approach in Schapiro's essay (for he doesn't have a reified conception of style either), it does differ significantly from the essentialist thinking that was common to English language art history of that era. As Svetlana and Paul Alpers have maintained: "It is precisely because he assumes that period styles and stages of stylistic development, whether cultural or individual, are objective realities that the art historian is able to treat the style of an individual painting as an objectively describable attribute of a work."<sup>9</sup> This was especially true in the United States, as Christine McCorkel has argued in a very fine article, where the fear of speculation and the myth of "just the facts" American "know-how" combined to naturalize the notion of style and eliminate philosophical reflection about the fundamental concepts of art history.<sup>10</sup> Ackerman's way of posing the question of style forbids this kind of subterfuge, and forces any art historian who is not in bad faith to address the question of what exactly art history's concepts are designed to achieve, which is a question that the old critical historians of art, including Panofsky, always kept at the forefront of their endeavors.

But, if Ackerman wants philosophical reflection in art history, he nevertheless sides with this American colleagues in not wanting to bring back the bad old philosophy that his German predecessors seemed so fond of. "All the major theories of style," he tells us, "have been determinist in the sense that they define a preordained pattern of 'evolution': the earlier phase of a style is *destined* to move toward the later. This is to say that at any stage in the process some force other than the will of artists must be at work directing invention

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Svetlana and Paul Alpers, "Ut Pictura Noesis? Criticism in Literary Studies and Art History," *New Literary History* 3 (Spring 1972): 253.

<sup>10</sup> Christine McCorkel, "Sense and Sensibility: An Epistemological Approach to the Philosophy of Art History," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34 (Fall 1975): 35-50. This was the background for the reconfiguration of Wölfflin's approach that led to his demotion as a "formalist" or "positivist" art historian. It is also important for the creation of the so-called "American" Panofsky.

toward the goal that ultimately is to be achieved."<sup>11</sup> I think it is plainly false that all the major theories of style have been deterministic and evolutionary. But lacking the time for an historical survey, allow me to just restate something that I have already argued for about the era that we are principally concerned with. It is an open question, a moot point, whether Hegel's philosophy is evolutionary or deterministic in the senses in which these ideas are popularly understood. The question is also still open on whether those critical historians of art who have Hegelian elements in their approaches are evolutionary and deterministic in a way that conforms to popular wisdom in art history, i.e., that they believe the history of art is some kind of preordained forced march under the tutelage of the World Spirit. I am not denying that there are art historians who have evolutionary and deterministic doctrines, but I do want to argue, and I will argue, that for the major figures in the tradition that I am concerned with, it is not in any way a foregone conclusion that they do. One is often misled here by language, but a Hegelian "tone" (in the popular sense) does not warrant an inference to an underlying Hegelian apparatus--remember the case of Cassirer.

That said, Ackerman does provide an astute analysis of what is wrong with evolutionary and deterministic approaches to art and why people find them seductive. For instance, in commenting on the habit of some art historians to see artistic development in terms of a progressive movement toward a perfect solution, Ackerman makes the following useful remark:

What is called evolution in the arts should not be described as a succession of steps toward a solution of a given problem, but as a succession of steps away from one or more original statements of a problem. Each step, for the artist who takes it, is a probe that reaches to the limits of his imagination; he cannot consciously make a transition to a succeeding step, for if he visualizes something he regards as preferable to what he is doing, he presumably will proceed to do it, unless he is constrained in some way. So we cannot speak properly of a sequence of solutions to a given problem, since with each solution the nature of the problem changes.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ackerman, "Style," 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

Ackerman makes these remarks in order to combat the unfortunate influence that German Idealism has had on the habits of art historical thought. What he is really attacking though is the set of caricatures that represent the literal-minded and oversimplified understanding of Idealistic doctrines that American art historians have ungenerously attributed to their European counterparts. When Hegel says something such as "The *world spirit* is the spirit of the world as it explicates itself in the human consciousness," there is really no compelling reason to take him as literally speaking about some kind of grand spiritual entity directing the development of world history, like a medieval peasant's vision of the Christian God. To do so is to betray an egregious narrowness that is deaf to the philosophical import of poetic utterances (let us not forget Hegel's historical placement and who his friends were). So, when we read Riegl's *Stilfragen*, for instance, and encounter language that appears deterministically evolutionary, this is not yet a reason to assume that the doctrines described therein are as well (though this might turn out to be the case). In fact, I believe that Riegl's analysis of a continuous development of ornamental plant motifs from the Egyptian palmette to the Eastern arabesque is not only compatible with the account that Ackerman offers in the passage above, but that it is as well an appropriate description--in alternative language--of the process that Riegl lays out. One reason for this compatibility is that both Ackerman and Riegl are proposing, loosely speaking, a dynamic structuralist model of stylistic transformation, much the same as the one at work in the philosophy of Cassirer (remember as well that Ackerman conceives of the concept of style in functionalist terms). We will have reason to return to this aspect of Riegl's art history in the next chapter.

Let us close this section on Ackerman by giving ourselves a somewhat fuller picture of his views. By now it is clear that his "primary aim is to explain changes in style as the manifestation rather of the imagination of individual artists than of historical forces that guide the actions of men and nations."<sup>13</sup> But in saying this Ackerman is not proposing that

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

we write the history of art in terms of the accomplishments of the artist-hero; he is well aware that there are other factors involved:

We get an image of the style of an individual by observing the interaction of his private conventions and the public conventions of his time and place. Since conventions, like language, are the basic vehicle for the communication of meaning, society aids the artist in promoting their stability and in controlling the rate, the degree, and even the nature of their change. Religious symbolism, for example, is determined by religious establishments as well as by artists, and other less utilitarian conventions, such as those of landscape painting or of recent abstract art, are sustained, if not formulated, by the needs of an economically powerful class.<sup>14</sup>

In visualizing a style process, then, we must keep in mind that the individual innovations that give it pattern may be motivated as easily from the outside as from within the style itself. Since the artist may experience and put to use in making a work of art anything in his environment, the historian must reconstruct as much of that environment as possible. Each work of art can be considered a repository of experiences entering from every direction in the artist's surroundings. That it owes a special debt to great predecessors in the same tradition, to the artist's teachers and colleagues, is no more than a plausible hypothesis; the role of these likely contributions must be weighed against that of all the works of art and other possible visual and nonvisual stimuli available to the artist.<sup>15</sup>

Ackerman describes the position outlined in these two passages as a "contextualist" approach; it is the general manner of proceeding, he tells us, of the "best modern historians" working in the visual arts. These "best modern historians," we might add as a final reminder, don't operate with an essentialist conception of stylistic phenomena, but with the understanding that questions of style are directed by the kinds of relations that the art historian stipulates, which are a function of his or her interests.

E. H. Gombrich is a figure who represents another well-known approach to the visual arts. Gombrich introduces his survey of the central issues bound up with the question of style with a definition that is much wider than that given by either Schapiro or Ackerman, in that it includes acts as well as objects, and both descriptive and evaluative or normative uses of the word style: "Style is any distinctive, and therefore recognizable, way

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

in which an act is performed or an artifact made or ought to be performed or made."<sup>16</sup> At the heart of Gombrich's conception of style is his claim that we can only talk about *expressiveness* in relation to a style in "cases where there is a choice between ways of performance or procedure,"<sup>17</sup> a point that he supports by appealing to the linguist Ullmann: "The pivot of the whole theory of expressiveness is the concept of *choice*. There can be no question of style unless the speaker or writer has the possibility of choosing between alternative forms of expression. Synonymy, in the widest sense of the term, lies at the root of the whole problem of style."<sup>18</sup> In thus placing an emphasis on the relation between style and expressiveness, Gombrich gives that connection the same importance that it had for Schapiro, though now it is more directed to individuals than to societies and races (Ackerman implicitly assumes existence of this relation, but does not explicitly discuss its significance). There is a change of emphasis as well for the question of form, which, in sliding from being definitional for Schapiro to merely noteworthy for Ackerman, has all but disappeared in Gombrich's account (a clear indication of the growing distance between the concerns of our late-nineteenth century art historians and the present era). A similar fate, as we know, is just around the corner for the question of style. But that is too far in the future for us, of greater immediate interest is how it came to art history in the first place.

Both Gombrich in "Style" and Sauerländer in "From Stylus to Style: Reflections on the Fate of a Notion" trace the development of the art historian's notion of style from the writings of the Greek and Roman teachers of rhetoric.<sup>19</sup> Both agree that it wasn't until the eighteenth century that style came into its own as a recognizable art historical concept, and

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<sup>16</sup> Gombrich, "Style," 352.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 353.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Gombrich and Sauerländer refer mainly to the Latin origins of the concept. For a discussion of the different orientations of the Greek and Latin terms (the first spatial, the second temporal) see George Kubler in "Towards a Reductive Theory of Visual Style," in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 119-127.

they further agree that the credit (or blame) for this goes to Winckelmann and his *Geschichte des Kunst des Altertums (History of Ancient Art)*.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, there is a lot that Winckelmann seems to be responsible for. It was his treatment of the style of Greek art as expressive of Greek civilization that set off an avalanche of similar studies that, when all came to rest, resulted in a history of art composed of consecutive period styles. In fact, Sauerländer argues, it was only through Winckelmann's fusion of style and aesthetic historicism that the modern discipline of art history became possible. This is where the trick was turned--this is bottom of the garden path.

Winckelmann's well-known claim--that art history's aim is to trace the origins, progress and decline of art in the styles of nations, periods, and individuals--now seems so familiar, and perhaps so empty, that it requires an effort to remember that it was once a startling and revolutionary idea. What was so original, as just mentioned, was Winckelmann's linking of the fine arts and historicism. And, "In order to achieve this, Winckelmann had to transform the traditional normative concept of style into an hermeneutical instrument flexible enough to serve the new historical interpretation of varying aesthetic experiences. Style became now the keyword for the bridge leading from visual perception to historical insight. This was what Winckelmann himself in a letter in July 1764 called 'so to speak a new discovery, of which one had previously dreamt nothing!'"<sup>21</sup> Once Winckelmann started dividing ancient art into periods and linking those periods in evolutionary patterns to corresponding political and cultural states of affairs, then the fate of the concept of style was sealed for the next two hundred years; a normative

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<sup>20</sup> Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, trans. G. Henry Lodge (New York: F. Unger, 1967). There are two relatively recent books that have added new perspectives to our understanding of Winckelmann. The first, Alex Potts' *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), takes a deconstructive look at Winckelmann and his enterprise from a variety of angles, including his gender difficulties and how they might effect our view of his aesthetic ideals and the relation of his art theory to other important figures of the Enlightenment, such as Burke. The second, Jeffery Morrison's *Winckelmann and the Notion of Aesthetic Education* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1996), explores Winckelmann's conception of an aesthetic education in relation both to his aesthetic theory and to attempts to realize it in the lives of his students.

<sup>21</sup> Sauerländer, "From Stilus to Style: Reflections on the Fate of a Notion," 259-260.

aesthetic concept had become historical, and history became aesthetic. Thus, in the forging of the seductive idea that past visual styles mirror past social arrangements, the possibility arose to see the art historian as standing in a privileged position for understanding the past. The great downside to this vision, as Sauerländer points out, was that "In such a view the notion of style could function as the instrument of alienation, detaching form from history and its disturbing and conflicting reality. This is, to the present, the greatest temptation of an understanding of style which pretends to afford an insight into the totality of art history or even history."<sup>22</sup> It is a temptation that recent art history has worked hard to escape.

Interestingly, even though Gombrich agrees with Sauerländer about Winckelmann's legacy, he is just as guilty of separating style from the entanglements of history, for in discussing external factors that influence the development of style he speaks only of the pressures of technology, social rivalry and fashion (though he does include political conflict under social rivalry). Perhaps Gombrich overlooks themes germane to the social history of art because of his aversion to the reductive, totalizing approaches characteristic of the dominant Marxist models common in the era in which he wrote his article. Gombrich's antipathy towards both left and right wing Hegelianism and historicism is well-known. And who can blame him; he survived the perverted pseudo-Hegelianism of the Nazis only to witness the immediate ascendancy of an equally frightening left-wing counterpart in Stalin's Soviet Union. But putting aside the question of whether Hegelianism and historicism are inherently dangerous politically, Gombrich was certainly right to subject them to constant critical scrutiny, for their influence on historiography, especially in art history, was enormous.

Let us consider some of the charges against them. There is a view of Hegel's philosophy, derived mainly from popular works such as *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* and *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*,<sup>23</sup> that maintains that history for Hegel is

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>23</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (London: Bohn, 1858); and G. W. F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet (London: Penguin, 1993).

the revelation of Absolute Spirit's developing self-understanding. Each stage in this dialectic of self-awareness is actualized in and represented by a particular nation or people. Everything about this nation--its art, its science, its philosophy, its religion, its ethics, and so on--partakes in and mirrors the stage of Spirit's development that this nation represents. Furthermore, all of these aspects find their unity in referring back to a shared centre, which can be explicated in terms of a set of principles that characterize consciousness's relation to the world. This shared centre is the essence of the nation in its particular historical moment. Clearly, such claims go well past Winckelmann's vision, and for the art historian who believes that style is the principal instrument for the revelation of art's truth, the evident inference that the style of a nation's art is an expression of its consciousness is too irresistible to refuse, for not only has the key to the past been discovered, it turns out that it is the art historian who holds it. "Thus," writes Gombrich, "the historian's task is not to find out what connections there may be between aspects of a society's life, for this connection is assumed on metaphysical grounds."<sup>24</sup> And, he continues, making a thinly veiled reference to Panofsky's *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, "There is no question, for instance, whether the Gothic style of architecture expresses the same essential attitude as scholastic philosophy or medieval feudalism. What is expected of the historian is only to demonstrate this unitary principle."<sup>25</sup>

Gombrich is right to suggest that Panofsky finds the idea of cultural unity compelling, but I don't think we can say that Panofsky buys into the vision of it sketched above. For one thing, Panofsky had Cassirer's example to follow, which allowed him a more sophisticated appreciation of what Hegel's system had to offer, and a more subtle approach to thinking about cultural unity.<sup>26</sup> Besides, it is not as though Panofsky takes up

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<sup>24</sup> Gombrich, "Style," 357.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. See Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (New York: New American Library, 1957).

<sup>26</sup> Cassirer's approach to cultural unity is best revealed in *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koellen and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), and *Individual and Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963).



the relation between the principles of Gothic architecture and the structure of scholastic philosophy purely speculatively; the case he presents is tightly argued and very erudite, unlike the claim Gombrich quotes from Adolf Loos: "If nothing were left of an extinct race but a single button, I would be able to infer, from the shape of that button, how these people dressed, built their houses, how they lived, what was their religion, their art, and their mentality."<sup>27</sup> Here is someone who has completely bought into Gombrich's vision of wild-eyed Hegelianism, and Gombrich is certainly justified in insisting that this can't be taken seriously as an historiographical doctrine, but he is by the same measure unjustified in assuming that anyone who finds something suggestive in Hegel or in the idea that the products of a culture bear some internal relation to each other is on the same wavelength as Loos. "The logical claims of cultural holism," as Gombrich calls it, "have been subjected to dissection and refutation in K. R. Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism*. There is no necessary connection between any one aspect of a group's activities and any other."<sup>28</sup> Quite true, and once more Gombrich is right to point this out, given the surprising number of followers that such ideas have attracted, but it must be kept in mind as well that Panofsky and his predecessors are not amongst these followers.<sup>29</sup>

Although historicism, Hegelianism, and evolutionism (especially in its Darwinian variety) are often denounced in the same breath, this trinity of theoretical evils should be kept separate: Hegel's doctrines may be historicist but not all historicism is Hegelian (Marx and Voltaire); similarly, though Hegelianism sounds evolutionary it is not Darwinian (Riegl

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<sup>27</sup> Gombrich, "Style," 358.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.

<sup>29</sup> While Schapiro reviews these questions more dispassionately, Ackerman shares Gombrich's disapproving zeal: "The idea that Germans, or Roman Catholics, or Baroque Man embody a creative expressive will (I am recalling Riegl's 'Kunstwollen') apart from the contributions of their artists I find incomprehensible and distasteful. If German art is German, it is not because any creative innovation in it has been produced by a mystical German Spirit, but because the nation and its artists show a tendency to keep certain kinds of innovation and to cast out other kinds" ("Style," 11). Riegl too would find such a conception incomprehensible and distasteful, for, as I've already mentioned, such caricatures are literal-minded reifications of polyvalent theoretical concepts, as will become clear in the next chapter.

and Semper). Evolutionism is the member of this triad that I have not yet discussed, so let us now do so, and examine some of the ways in which this idea became connected or associated with the tradition in which I am placing Panofsky.

The conditions for an evolutionary treatment of art were set by the organic metaphors of artistic development that became common after Giorgio Vasari's *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*.<sup>30</sup> Vasari offers a general history of art and a history of recent Italian art wherein the structure of the latter is subsumable within the structure of the former. The general history of art represents a cyclical schema of growth, decay, and rebirth, in which Antiquity is seen as the peak of development in the early growth of art, the Medieval era (or the Middle or Dark Ages as they prejudicially came to be known) is a period of decay and dormancy, and the Italian Renaissance marks the rebirth and greater advancement of art.<sup>31</sup> Italian Renaissance art is itself conceived in such terms, though the reference now is to ages: the infancy of the rebirth of art corresponds to the fourteenth century, its early youth to the fifteenth century, and its maturity to the sixteenth century, which was Vasari's era. The highest point in this development was Vasari's teacher and hero Michelangelo, who represents not only the crowning moment of the Italian Renaissance, but the peak of highest achievement in the history of art, for Michelangelo was the first artist to have surpassed the greatness of the ancients. He was, in Vasari's scheme of things, the true end to which art had been evolving, and as such he was also the standard by which all other art would be judged (obviously Vasari's conception of art is highly normative, but it is interesting to note that within this developmental model Vasari makes some effort to present his judgments as relative and not absolute evaluations of individual artists and their works, the beginnings of a non normative approach to art).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, a selection translated by George Bull (London: Penguin, 1965).

<sup>31</sup> The staying power of this conception is betrayed in the title of so recent a work as John White's *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957).

<sup>32</sup> See Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy: 1450-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 86-102. It is sometimes difficult to remember that in his day Vasari was an original thinker who offered a novel way of understanding art and its relation to history. It is a testimony to Vasari that most of the non

Vasari did not use the notion of style in his descriptions, at least not as the kind of art historical concept that we have been concerned with. That concept became recognizable with Winckelmann, who applied a similar organic and cyclical scheme to ancient art, though not in the service of artistic mastery, but in defense of the idea of freedom. It wasn't Winckelmann's vision of freedom that made him so influential--it was his division of ancient Greek art into coherent period styles that corresponded to Greek cultural ideals; however, the organic conception of art that he brought to the study of art's nature and its history was of equal importance. We have already said something about the impact that the idea of period styles and their relation to cultural ideals had on the development of art history, let us now speak briefly about the influence of the organic model of art that went with it, the other side of the coin that Winckelmann minted for art history's currency.

In his Berlin lectures of 1801-02, August Wilhelm Schlegel, in speaking of Winckelmann's founding role in art history, made a remark that succinctly states what made this organic conception of art so important to this generation of German scholars: "He began by viewing ancient art as an indivisible whole, an organic unity, an entity unto itself."<sup>33</sup> Winckelmann wasn't the first person to formulate such an idea (it can be traced back to at least Plotinus), but what he did do was supply his contemporaries with a virtuosic exhibition of how it could be demonstrated for a defined cultural period. It was almost as though he had provided the concrete confirmation of a philosophical doctrine. And here a consequential connection calls out to be made, for as I argued in Part I, Kant and his followers shared this view of form as organic rather than mechanical unity. I should be careful to state however that I do not think that Kant and Winckelmann have the

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Italians who felt the need to respond to his book with an equivalent for their artistic traditions adopted, at least in broad outline, his schema for the history of art, e.g., the Spanish painter and writer Francisco Pacheco's *El Arte de la Pintura, su Antigüedad y Grandeza*, the German painter and writer Joachim von Sandrart's *L'academia tedesca della architettura, scultura et pictura: Oder Teutsche Academie der Edlen Bau-, Bild-, und Mahlerey-Künste*, and the Dutch painter and writer Arnold Houbracken's *De Grootte Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen*.

<sup>33</sup> Kultermann's translation, 56.

same conception of form; in fact, Kant's concept--especially as it is set out in relation to art in the *Critique of Judgment*--challenges fundamental features of Winckelmann's art history, for Winckelmann accepts the Greek ideal of beauty as the normative standard for all art, while Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment, involving as it does the doctrines of beauty as disinterested pleasure and genius as non determinative law-giving, cuts against the universalization of period-specific standards. Nevertheless, this commonality in the thought of Winckelmann and Kant is important, for both of these figures provided compelling arguments for an organic conception of form and the unity of art that had an immense impact on art history's self understanding as it developed throughout the nineteenth century in the works of Hegel, Springer, Hildebrand, Riegl, Göller, Rumohr, Wölfflin, and Panofsky.<sup>34</sup>

Appreciations of Winckelmann's conception of organic form and his way of linking it to period style and culture can be found in other German writers who concerned themselves with the arts: Herder, Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller were all impressed and influenced by Winckelmann's approach, even though they had their reservations. And the same was true of other European intellectuals. In England, Winckelmann gained his renown through Reynolds, Walpole, Hogarth, and Hamilton; in France, through Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Marie Henri Beyle, who changed his name to Stendhal, the name of Winckelmann's birthplace, to honour the German art historian. Sauerländer is indeed right; what today seems a collection of tired formulas was once a momentarily novel

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<sup>34</sup> In *Kant's Life and Thought*, 24, Cassirer notes that Kant and Winckelmann were put through the same system of schooling with the same curriculum. The rigors imposed on their young lives led Winckelmann's biographer, Karl Justi, to say that "there was nothing juvenile in Winckelmann's character save the strength to endure quantities of work," a description that Cassirer says is also fitting for that period in Kant's life. In maturity, Winckelmann would look back with increasing anger and bitterness on the restricted life of renunciation he led in Prussia, especially after he discovered the sensuous openness of life in Rome (small wonder that freedom was such an important theme for him). Kant, on the other hand, seems to have been able to integrate his youth into his Prussian adulthood, and find an equally vital way of reflecting on the question of freedom. As Winckelmann was seven years Kant's elder, there is apt historical parallel in the fact the Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* came out seven years before the *Critique of Pure Reason*. It would be interesting to pursue the Winckelmann/Kant relation and investigate what kind of impression Winckelmann's book made on Kant (even though Kant's work is a considerable advance on the Idealist tradition to which Winckelmann belonged), for given Kant's prodigious appetite for new and informative material, he must have been familiar with Winckelmann's writings.

doctrine that forged "with seducing ingenuity a chain of associations which leads to one of the great fascinations, promises but also illusions of art history: to the notion of bygone styles as the mirror of history and the art historian as the initiated exegete of the past. And it was this 'holistic' understanding of style, as it is first foreshadowed in Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterums*, which put art history for a certain time in a key position among the humanities.<sup>35</sup> To which Gombrich would probably add, to the great detriment of both art history and the humanities.

The kind of talk about evolution that followed Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* (1764) was not, we should remind ourselves, Darwinian, as Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) was not to be published for almost another century. But by the time Darwin became a hot topic, evolutionary thinking had already taken over the nineteenth century and a kind of botanistic mentality had established itself for the tasks of normal art history ('normal' as in Thomas Kuhn's use of the term 'normal science' in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*), for by then there were plenty of art historians, and they had been busy systematically classifying and subordinating by genus and species the styles of the objects of the world. To my understanding, Darwin's impact was never as great in art history as it was in the other human sciences; in fact, the only art historian I can think of whose writings substantially betray the presence of Darwinianism is Semper (Riegl's great opponent). Darwin it seems never matched Hegel's influence in this area. But probably for most art historians, especially in the United States, the influence was something vaguer. Perhaps it was, as Ackerman suggests in the following passage, just the evolutionary

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<sup>35</sup> Sauerländer, "From Stylus to Style: Reflections on the Fate of a Notion," 261. That modern art historians were still partially granted this status is confirmed by Svetlana Alpers: "To ask an art historian to speak on the subject of style is to expect something straight from the horse's mouth. Even when the topic is not set, colleagues in the other humanistic disciplines assembled (to take a typical academic situation) for a qualifying examination will turn to the art historian as the acknowledged bearer of, definer of, style. 'How would you describe the style of the baroque lyric in France,' or 'Could you comment on the development of the German baroque drama?' The questions are put to the student, but the professor of French or German looks across at the art historian for confirmation. We know the answers, for it is we who set, who validated the questions." Svetlana Alpers, "Style is What You Make It: The Visual Arts Once Again," in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 95.

dogmas inherent in American capitalism that encouraged so many art historians to subscribe to the belief that

if it is the destiny of styles to evolve as they did, then those works of art that promoted that evolution are destiny-fulfilling and those that did not are destiny-denying. The implication that the former are superior cannot be avoided. So, in our handbooks of the history of styles it appears that the chief function of any work of art is to contribute toward the works that follow it in a sequence; and the greater the contribution the more "significant" the work. This history of art has been fashioned into another version of the materialist success story.<sup>36</sup>

In charting the roles played by the notions of style and form in the history of art history, it has often been noted that the botanical mentality which became predominant did not, contrary to the claims of the practitioners of the era, lead to a scientifically neutral classification of period styles and their relations--the development of art history's period style classifications has been a highly normative affair. This is by no means a novel claim, and it has been recognized for quite some time in art history, but as it is an important characteristic of the history of the concept of style, and an important feature in criticisms of Panofsky, I would like to discuss certain aspects of the question as further background for the issues that I will be exploring.

All art historians know that 'Gothic' originated as a term of derision for the art that derived from the "barbarian hordes," the Goths, who destroyed the heritage of the Roman Empire; such a sentiment was already canonical in Vasari's era. 'Baroque,' as Panofsky has shown us, owes its existence to a complicated association of insults, which by the sixteenth century, "came to signify everything wildly abstruse, obscure, fanciful, and useless."<sup>37</sup> 'Rococo' was a label used by certain of David's students to dismiss the art associated with the reign of Madame de Pompadour. 'Romanesque' is an early nineteenth century term that signified the corruption of Roman artistic tradition. And 'Mannerism' was

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<sup>36</sup> Ackerman, "Style," 8. See also Paul and Svetlana Alpers, *Ut Pictura Noesis?* 441f.

<sup>37</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "What is Baroque?" *Three Essays on Style*, ed. Irving Lavin (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 19.

introduced to denote the contamination of Renaissance stylistic ideals. All of this is interesting and important anecdotal information to keep in mind when considering how art history classifies its objects, but what is even more interesting is, as Gombrich asserts, that these and other period style terms share a common heritage in that they "originally recorded the successive triumphs and defeats of the classical ideal of perfection."<sup>38</sup> This is an assertion that Gombrich has argued for at length in his collection of essays *Norm and Form*,<sup>39</sup> and it is quite sobering to realize that classical ideals, especially as interpreted in the Italian Renaissance, have had this kind of influence in determining the Western world's view of art. Such a claim is obviously also relevant to the proper consideration of the tradition of art history that is important to this dissertation, for the question that immediately poses itself is to what extent are the grand programmes of stylistic analysis developed by these art historians based, perhaps unbeknownst to them, on classical ideals and to what extent do they filter out or overlook other stylistic possibilities? In "Norm and Form" Gombrich has already answered this question for Wölfflin's art history. In assessing Wölfflin's *Renaissance and Baroque*, Gombrich argues that, in the end, "There is really no departure here from the ideal of classical perfection as a system of values. The system is still used as a touchstone to separate the High Renaissance from a different system of forms."<sup>40</sup> And despite the increasing subtlety and complexity of Wölfflin's thought the same remains true, as Gombrich demonstrates, for his later works. Most art historians who are familiar with Riegl's writings would not hold that this is true of him. Panofsky's is a

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<sup>38</sup> Gombrich, "Style," 354.

<sup>39</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Norm and Form: Studies in the art of the Renaissance I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966). See particularly the title essay "Norm and Form: The Stylistic Categories of Art History and their Origins in Renaissance Ideals," but as well "The Renaissance Conception of Artistic Progress and its Consequences," and "Mannerism: The Historiographic Background."

<sup>40</sup> E. H. Gombrich, "Norm and Form: The Stylistic Categories of Art History and their Origins in Renaissance Ideals," 91. See as well Frederick Antal, "Remarks on the Method of Art History," *Burlington Magazine* 91 (Feb. 1949), and again Arnold Hauser, *The History of Art History*, 139-166. For a novel assessment of Wölfflin's categories, suggesting a more "dialectical" relation between them, such that "The baroque is at once the opposite of the classic and identical to it, later and simultaneous, cancellation and fulfillment," see Marshall Brown, "The Classic is the Baroque: On the Principle of Wölfflin's Art History," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (Dec. 1982): 379-404.

different and perhaps less straightforward story, for Panofsky has a certain allegiance to Riegl's approach, and he has as well written on the normative basis of period style categories,<sup>41</sup> but at the same time there are those who believe that Panofsky's approach is implicitly, to coin a term, 'Renocentric,' and this is a matter that will have to be factored into the evaluation of the "what" he thinks is accomplished by formal and stylistic analysis.

Svetlana Alpers is one of the best known art historians to take up the question of the implicit normative centre that Italian Renaissance art occupies in art history, and she has made some forceful remarks about the privileged position that it is given in Panofsky's thinking. Leaving aside her remarks on Panofsky until later, let us briefly consider the general case that she makes for Renaissance art's normative role. In "Style is What You Make It: The Visual Arts Once Again,"<sup>42</sup> Alpers uses Riegl's work on Dutch group portraiture to disclose one very striking example of how Italian Renaissance standards have acted as the norm for the evaluation of all art. In *Das holländische Gruppenporträt*,<sup>43</sup> Riegl analyzes how Dutch group portraits and Italian group portraits of the same era are structured by very different compositional principles. In discussing Geergten Tot Sint Jans' *The Burning of the Bones of John the Baptist*, Riegl notes that "Whoever has trained his eye--as have most art historians nowadays--in front of Italian works of art will be of the opinion that . . . the inner unity has by necessity already been given through the narrative character of the subject matter, including all participants in one story by characterizing one sector of them as engaged in action, the rest as passive bystanders."<sup>44</sup> However, Riegl tells

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<sup>41</sup> Apart from "What is Baroque?" see Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969). See especially Chapter I "'Renaissance'--Self-Definition or Self-Deception," but also Chapter II "Renaissance and Renascences," and Chapter III "*I Primi Lumi*: Italian Trecento Painting and Its Impact on the Rest of Europe."

<sup>42</sup> Svetlana Alpers, "Style is What You Make It: The Visual Arts Once Again," in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 95-117.

<sup>43</sup> Alois Riegl, *Das holländische Gruppenporträt* (Vienna: Druck und Verlag der Österreichischen Staatsdruckerei, 1931). This work is not available in English translation (though one is in the works), but relevant sections of it have been translated for W. Eugene Kleinbauer's *Modern Perspectives in Art History* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winstons, 1971), 124-138.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.



us, this is not what is happening in Geertgen Tot Sint Jans' painting: "Although the legendary event furnished the means by itself to arrive at a unifying interpretation, the painter has done all he could to reverse the situation in order to blot out the unity of action and to represent the figures as mutually independent of each other and their action . . . he deprived the main action as much as possible of every subordinating effect, first by introducing contrasting side shows, and second, by attempting to replace the active will and its possible domination of the events with an expression of passive feelings."<sup>45</sup> There is as well, Riegl remarks, a corresponding difference in the relation to the viewer that is presupposed by most Italian Renaissance art: "The figures of the Renaissance are conscious of the fact that within one pictorial unit they find themselves in mutual relationship. That means: an onlooker is presupposed, one who wants to see single figures in a picture united, and therefore everything has to be avoided that could disturb the impression of such unity."<sup>46</sup> The differences in attitude toward individual figures in Dutch and Italian art are given through the compositional devices employed by the two traditions:

It was . . . a general principle of early Dutch painting to avoid subordination and to isolate figures from one another outwardly through coordination. . . . At the time when Geertgen's painting . . . originated, subordination had already been developed into keen pyramidal compositions in Italy. Their element is the diagonal, in other words, the combining line on the picture plane. Just this line is totally missing in our painting; where it could be avoided . . . it was defeated as inconspicuously as possible. Most of the figures by far, including in part even the few who are really acting, retain a strictly vertical pose in order to stand side by side, without combining diagonals, as purely isolated and coordinated vertical axes.<sup>47</sup>

Riegl develops his insightful analysis further, drawing our attention to the fundamental differences between the attitudes of the figures depicted and the stances they take up toward

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 129-130.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 133 and 135.

the world of experience, but by now his point is clear: the principles in Dutch and Italian art are not only different, they are incompatible. And it is this incompatibility that allows us to understand why Dutch group portraits were for so long considered to be inferior works of art: they contravened Italian pictorial norms. But it is not just Dutch group portraiture that has suffered this fate, adds Alpers, Dutch art in general in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has had a similar evaluation: "To a remarkable extent," Alpers argues, in an elaboration of Riegl's central insight, "the study of art and its history has been determined by the art of Italy and its study. . . . Italian art and the rhetorical evocation of it has not only defined the practice of the central tradition of Western artists, it has also determined the study of these works. . . . Since the institutionalization of art history as an academic discipline, the major analytic strategies by which we have been taught to look at art or to interpret images . . . were developed in reference to the Italian tradition."<sup>48</sup> In contrast to Italian Renaissance art, Alpers continues, Dutch art is "non-Albertian;" a picture is not seen as "a framed surface or plane situated at a certain distance from the viewer who looks through it at a second or substitute world",<sup>49</sup> a world perceived as a theater stage on which human figures perform meaningful acts, "significant actions based on the texts of the poets".<sup>50</sup> Seventeenth century Dutch paintings are surfaces, not windows; they are descriptive, not narrative. And if, to take Alpers' principal target, Panofsky's method in "Iconography and Iconology" is turned on them, a method that was designed for Italian Renaissance art, they yield nothing, they declare themselves to be of secondary concern.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), xix-xx. See as well, Svetlana Alpers, "Art History and Its Exclusions: The Example of Dutch Art," in *Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Brouge and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 182-199.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 26-54. As for Panofsky's most famous work devoted to Northern art, Alpers has this to say in *The Art of Describing*: "Basing himself on an iconographical model of meaning first used to deal with Italian art, Panofsky in his *Early*

Ultimately, or so Alpers claims in "Is Art History?", Panofsky's view of art is based on a certain Italian Renaissance, humanist view of "man" and the kind of art that this conception of man produced.<sup>52</sup>

In "Iconography and Iconology" Panofsky himself indirectly confirms Alpers' charges when discussing works in which secondary or conventional subject matter is "eliminated." In a remark that is made almost in passing, he tells us that "the correct identification of motifs is the prerequisite of their correct iconographical analysis, so is the correct analysis of images, stories and allegories the prerequisite of their correct iconological interpretation--*unless we deal with works of art in which the whole sphere of secondary or conventional subject matter is eliminated and a direct transition from motifs to content is effected, as is the case with European landscape painting, still life and genre, not to mention 'non-objective' art*" (my emphasis).<sup>53</sup> "Non-objective" art is another area that

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*Netherlandish Painting* saw Netherlandish images as displaying disguised symbolism, by which he meant that they hid their meanings beneath realistic surfaces" (xxiv), this being the only way to approach them under the assumptions of the iconological method. Alpers' assessment of *Early Netherlandish Painting* is perhaps somewhat tainted by her critique of "Iconography and Iconology." There are more laudatory evaluations of what Hubert Damisch has called Panofsky's "chef-d'oeuvre," including this one by Damisch himself: "It so happens, remarkably, that the most subtle research engendered by the iconographic method cuts across, up to a point, Freud's schemata [Damisch is referring to Freud's concept of regression in relation to dream-work]. Panofsky has refuted a too-narrow notion of iconography, intended as an auxiliary discipline, a purely classificatory one, which would provide the historian with a first localisation in space and time of the works he has to deal with. Moreover, at a more elaborate level, he has been led to go much beyond a strictly lexical approach. His work on symbolism in Flemish painting and on the figure procedures used by the Van Eycks to represent, through purely visual means, abstract notions and relations (such as the opposition of 'before' and 'after,' of the old and the new Law, etc. is indicated by the juxtaposition within a single painting of architectural elements of the Romanesque and Gothic styles) belongs, in a formal sense, in the line of Freud's analysis of the dream-work and the acceptance of figurability (*Darstellbarkeit*). A decisive encounter, yet insufficient to break the circle of icon and sign as it has been drawn by a centuries old tradition which has passed through great crises (fits of iconoclasm) without really being shaken" (Hubert Damisch, "Semiotics and Iconography," in *The Tell-Tale Sign: A Survey of Semiotics*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok [Lisse: The Peter De Ridder Press, 1975], 35).

<sup>52</sup> Svetlana Alpers, "Is Art History?" *Daedalus* 106 (Summer 1977): 6f.. For an appreciation of Alpers work in relation to this theme see Louis Marin, "In Praise of Appearances" *October* 37: 99-112.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 32. Apropos the question of the normative nature of Italian Renaissance standards, Gombrich has written that, contrary to what was previously maintained, European landscape painting did not come into its own because of a lessening of the importance of religious themes and motifs, nor because of an extended interest in naturalistic subjects, but because the humanistic categories of Renaissance art theory were capable of being extended in such a way that landscape could become a suitable subject for art; E. H. Gombrich, "The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape Painting," in *Norm and Form*, 107-121.

clearly reveals the limitations of the iconological method. Panofsky got himself into a not very edifying debate with Barnett Newman over a reproduction of Newman's "Vir Heroicus Sublimis" in a 1961 issue of *ARTnews*.<sup>54</sup> The debate was sparked by a typesetter's error in the spelling of the title and Panofsky took Newman to task for his bad Latin. There ensued a war of scholarly references that became more embarrassing with each exchange. The debate was embarrassing because it was pedantic and because it left one with the impression that Panofsky was unable to deal with non-representational art and art that isn't derived from or based on textual references; which was, it seems, what led him to fixate on the title, the one bit of text associated with the painting.

The above prejudices are most easily detectable in the writings of the so-called "American" Panofsky, whose coming into being is usually identified with "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art," the initial version of which was published as the "Introductory" to *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, which came out in 1939.<sup>55</sup> The writings of the so-called "German" Panofsky, such as *Der Begriff des Kunstwollens* and *Die Perspektive als "symbolische Form"*, do not readily betray these prejudices. They are also generally unknown to most North American art historians. So, when commentators want to discuss the biases of Panofsky's methods, the first work that they invoke is usually "Iconography and Iconology," a work that suppresses earlier formal preoccupations at the same time as it brings to the foreground text/image relations.<sup>56</sup> We shouldn't conclude though that such biases are absent from Panofsky's earlier papers that address questions of form and style at

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<sup>54</sup> Panofsky's first letter to the editor was in *Artnews* 60, no. 2 (April 1961): 6. Newman's first reply was in *ARTnews* 60, no. 3 (May 1961): 6. Panofsky's response appeared in *ARTnews* 60, no. 5 (September 1961): 6. Newman's rejoinder also appeared in *ARTnews* 60, no. 5 (September 1961): 6. Then, mercifully, it ended.

<sup>55</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "Introductory," in *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 3-31.

<sup>56</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman is someone who looks into the prejudices and presuppositions guiding Panofsky's writings over the course of his career. Didi-Huberman's work will be discussed in later chapters.

a more theoretical level; even though there are considerable differences between the interests and the approaches found in "Iconography and Iconology" and, say, *Der Begriff des Kunstwollens*, there are also similarities that demonstrate that, as different as their aims appear to be, the writings of the "early" Panofsky nevertheless presuppose certain relations between form and text. The form and content distinction is one place where this can be made apparent.

In the Idealist philosophical tradition that provides the basis for much of nineteenth century German art history, form is never something as straightforward as shape. From Plato onward, form holds within it the idea of the intelligible, which is not disclosed in sensation. The opposition between the visible and the invisible, between, as Kant would put it, the sensible and the intelligible, identifies form with that which is abstract and general, and this in turn is associated with the intellectual or the spiritual. This association is what lies behind the traditions of allegory and idealization in Western art.<sup>57</sup> Now, as the abstract and the general obviously cannot be specific, and as the sense and significance of a work of art is identified with the abstract and general, a particular art work will have to be investigated in terms of the general formal qualities that it embodies if it is to be *truly* understood. This entails that much of what constitutes the work of art in its particularity will have to be ignored, which includes not only the physical aspects of its identity but also its content, in the sense of what is usually called its subject matter.

This picture of things goes hand in hand with that common conception of art in which, as Rosalind Krauss expresses it, "there is a work, x, behind which there stands a group of meanings, a, b, or c, which the hermeneutic task of the critic unpacks, reveals, by breaking through, peeling back the literal surface of the work."<sup>58</sup> For the tradition in

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<sup>57</sup> Panofsky himself has contributed to our understanding of this direction in Western art theory in *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), which, it is important to note, was originally published in German in 1924 as *Idea: Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte der altern Kunsttheorie* by the Warburg Institute as a companion volume to Cassirer's *Eidos und Eidolon: Das Problem des Schönen und der Kunst in Platos Dialogen*.

<sup>58</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, "Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985), 293.

question, the real meaning is identified with the formal architecture that supports the literal image, and the literal image is seen as the work's "body" while its form is its "soul"; the form is the intelligible which is conveyed through the sensible, as Michelangelo's sculptures are said to manifest Neo-Platonic doctrines.<sup>59</sup> This is where Panofsky's deliberations about texts hook up with his interest in the question of form, for the intelligible is often, in Panofsky's case, identified with literary or philosophical sources. And this is also what is at the heart of Panofsky's reaction to Newman's "Vir Heroicus Sublimis," for Newman's painting is one of those "works of art in which the whole sphere of secondary or conventional subject matter is eliminated and a direct transition from motifs to content is effected"; there is no literal image to decode and look behind for an appropriate textual source that will allow Panofsky's machinery to be set into motion.

The limitations of Panofsky's iconological method is not however my principal concern, though we will have reason to revisit the subject in Chapter XII. My aim in this chapter has been to provide a sketch of the issues and themes that were related to the concepts of style and form in the tradition to which Panofsky's early theoretical writings belonged. We have followed the development of the concept of style and noted its changing senses. We have seen the paramount position it attained and the hopes that it was expected to fulfill. And we have remarked on how it served as an instrument to order art history's material and entrench its prejudices. The next chapter will continue our exploration of the concepts of style and form, through an examination of Riegl's art history and his concept of *Kunstwollen*; both will play a central role in the development of Panofsky's art theory.

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<sup>59</sup> E. H. Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae: Philosophies of Symbolism and their Bearing on Art," in *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance, II* (London: Phaidon Press, 1972), 123-191.

## CHAPTER X

### RIEGL'S ART HISTORY AND THE CONCEPT OF *KUNSTWOLLEN*

We know from our discussions in Chapter VIII that the young Panofsky was not happy with the methodological foundations that Wölfflin's approach to form and stylistic transformation offered to art history. The problem wasn't, we recall, that Wölfflin's categories didn't provide useful tools for the analysis of style, but that Wölfflin's understanding of them was not tenable, that is, Wölfflin's distinction between the eye's relation to the world and the artist's expressive capacities was not defensible. The other problem with Wölfflin's categories, and this is the proper starting point for this chapter, is that they lack critical justification--they are inductively derived generalizations for which an argument is required, if we are to establish that they are in fact artistically relevant and that they do isolate that which is particular to works of art. This is the issue that led Panofsky to write "The Concept of Artistic Volition" (*Der Begriff des Kunstwollens*, 1920),<sup>1</sup> and to argue that Riegl's art theoretical concepts are better suited to fulfill this purpose.

To understand Panofsky's plan for Riegl's theoretical apparatus we will have to familiarize ourselves with Riegl's art history, and I would like to devote this chapter to a short account of what I see to be its defining aims and tenets. This is a difficult task, for not only is Riegl a complex thinker, he is an intriguing and suggestive one, whose work constantly calls for more attention. For a more in-depth discussion, I direct the reader to two relatively recent books on Riegl that do him justice: Margaret Iverson's *Alois Riegl: Art*

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<sup>1</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "The Concept of Artistic Volition," trans. Kenneth J. Northcott and Joel Synder, *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Autumn 1981): 17-33. Erwin Panofsky, "Der Begriff des Kunstwollens," in *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft*, ed. H. Oberer (Berlin: E. Verheyen, 1974), 29-43.

*History and Theory and Margaret Olin's Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art.*<sup>2</sup>

One way of introducing Riegl is to take up the question of why he slipped into near obscurity for so many decades and has only now reemerged as a figure of interest. The short answer is given in this passage on historicism from Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*: "I have discussed elsewhere why this reliance of art history on mythological explanations seems so dangerous to me. By inculcating the habit of talking in terms of collectives, of 'mankind,' 'races,' or 'ages,' it weakens resistance to totalitarian habits of mind. I do not make these accusations lightly. Indeed I can quote chapter and verse by enumerating the lessons which Hans Sedlmayr wanted the reader to draw from reading Riegl's collected essays, the introduction to which he wrote in 1927."<sup>3</sup> Hans Sedlmayr, who was a committed supporter of the Nazi regime, took over the chair of art history at the University of Vienna from Julius von Schlosser, who was one of Gombrich's mentors. Sedlmayr painted Riegl in Nazi colours (even going so far as to align him with Oswald Spengler) and thereby gave him a profile as undeserved as the profiles that were created for Nietzsche and

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Iverson, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993). Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992). Some of the other contributions are: Jan Bakos, "The Vienna School's Views of the Structure of the Art Historical Process," in *Wien und die Entwicklung der kunsthistorischen Methode*, ed. Leopold D. Ettlinger, Stefan Kann, and Martina Pippal (Vienna: Hermann Böhlas Nachf, 1984), 117-122; Dieter Bogner, "Empirisme et Spéculation: Alois Riegl et l'école viennoise d'histoire de l'art," in *Fin-de-siècle et modernité*, special issue of *Cahiers du musée national d'art moderne*, 14, 44-55; Jan Bialostocki, "Museum Work and History in the Development of the Vienna School," in *Wien und die Entwicklung der kunsthistorischen Methode*, ed. Leopold D. Ettlinger, Stefan Kann, and Martina Pippal (Vienna: Hermann Böhlas Nachf, 1984), 9-15; Kurt Forster, "Critical History of Art, or Transfiguration of Values?" *New Literary History* 3 no. 3 (Spring 1972), 459-470; Ernst Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); Joan Hart, "Some Reflections on Wölfflin and the Vienna School," in *Wien und die Entwicklung der kunsthistorischen Methode*, ed. Leopold D. Ettlinger, Stefan Kann, and Martina Pippal (Vienna: Hermann Böhlas Nachf, 1984), 53-64; Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Udo Kultermann, *The History of Art History* (Printed in The United States: Abaris Books, 1993); Otto Pächt, "Art Historians and Critics: Alois Riegl," *Burlington Magazine* 105 (May 1963), 188-193; Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Willibald Sauerländer, "From Stilus to Style: Reflections on the Fate of a Notion," *Art History* 6 (Sept. 1983), 253-270; Henri Zerner, "Alois Riegl: Art, Value, and Historicism," *Daedalus* 105 (Winter 1976), 177-188.

<sup>3</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 20.



Hegel. It was this association that made people shy away from Riegl, and many of the other art historians who belonged to his tradition. This association should as well be kept in mind when trying to characterize the differences between the "German" and the "American" Panofsky, for Panofsky was as alert as anyone else to the uses to which historicist explanatory models were being put; plus, as Christine McCorkel reminds us, in the United States, Panofsky found himself transplanted into an intellectual environment in which his German philosophical heritage, now equated with German political policy, was an anathema.<sup>4</sup>

Gombrich's (justified) personal hatred of totalitarianism and its historicist metaphors has been duly noted in the preceding chapter on style and form, along with his theoretical objections to historicist doctrines, which are indebted to the philosophical writings of his friend and fellow Viennese exile Karl Popper, who dedicated his book *The Poverty of Historicism* to the "memory of the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny."<sup>5</sup> Gombrich and Popper may be right in saying that by "inculcating the habit of talking in terms of collectives, of 'mankind,' 'races,' or 'ages,' it weakens resistance to totalitarian habits of mind," but, as I've already argued, not everyone who uses historicist language holds the kinds of historicist doctrines that they find so despicable. There are other possibilities. Like all of us, Riegl borrowed from past and contemporary writers and combined ideas that were not always well-suited to each other. His historicist language ultimately was not, I think, the best fit for the kind of approach he was developing, but the tension may have helped him to say things that were difficult to formulate. Perhaps, as Jan Bakos has argued, the seemingly contradictory tendencies in

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<sup>4</sup> Christine McCorkel, "Sense and Sensibility: An Epistemological Approach to the Philosophy of Art History," 35-50.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961). Popper's methodical attack on the philosophical foundations of political historicism came in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1945).

Riegl's thought "can be regarded as a consciously accepted incongruity and as a barrier to an oversimplification of history, as a way of grasping its complexity."<sup>6</sup>

It is the mitigated historicist tone, if I may put it so, of Riegl's language that has allowed him to arise as a past figure worthy of reconsideration for many younger, contemporary art historians. For if we consider some of the ideas for which he has been recently praised, we will see that the overall direction of his thought runs counter to the historicist vision that Sedlmayr and other Nazi sympathizers tried to attribute to him. First, Riegl argued against a normative, progressive conception of the history of art and offered in its stead a model of constant changes that are of equal importance and significance. Secondly, he did not accept the implicit premise behind the idea of artistic progress, that is, the notion that art involves a continuous refinement of the imitation of nature in accordance with an unchanging norm; this he replaced with the idea that art is an ever-changing transformation of form. Thirdly, he did not support the idea that history is a rational, teleological process, wherein individual works of art are merely instantiations of an *a priori* scheme; rather, for him a true history of art could only arise from a careful consideration of the qualities of actual art objects. Fourthly, he militated against any vision of art works that saw them as subordinate to and dependent upon greater historical processes; art history, for Riegl, was an autonomous discipline that investigated an autonomous human engagement with the world. Finally, Riegl aimed at making the history of art into a "scientific," i.e., rigorous, investigation of the past that produced an understanding of it on its own terms. Anyone who believes these things is not one of Gombrich's totalitarian historicists, and certainly is not someone whom Sedlmayr could legitimately identify with Oswald Spengler.

A closer look at Riegl's intellectual alignments will give us a better picture of what kinds of ideas he incorporated into his approach to art history, though this too of necessity

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<sup>6</sup> Jan Bakos, "The Vienna School's Views of the Structure of the Art Historical Process," in *Wien und die Entwicklung der kunsthistorischen Methode*, ed. Leopold D. Ettlinger, Stefan Kann, and Martina Pippal (Vienna: Hermann Böhl's Nachf., 1984), 117-122.

will have to be only a sketch.<sup>7</sup> Let us start with the Hegelian aspects of Riegl's thought, which have been the main focus of the charges of historicism that have been brought against him. Within the family of Hegelians, Riegl was a poor third cousin, for in my estimation it appears that Riegl was not that familiar with Hegel's major works; he was perhaps as much of a Hegelian as a contemporary art historian would be a Derridian, after having read some selections from Derrida and having used some post-structuralist concepts in a few publications. Most of the Hegelian elements in his writings seem to derive from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* and, not surprisingly, the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, the latter apparently having a greater influence in his later works, such as *The Dutch Group Portrait (Das holländische Gruppenporträt, 1902)*, where he appears to borrow from Hegel's discussion of the beholder's apprehension to the art object. Riegl's earlier writings seem to borrow mainly from Hegel's scheme for the historical development of art.

What had a much bigger impact on the finer conceptual constitution of Riegl's art theory was Neo-Kantian psychologism, for, like Wölfflin, he too studied with the Herbartian philosopher Robert Zimmerman, and he too was deeply impressed with Adolf von Hildebrand's *The Problem of Form in the Visual Arts*, which is indebted to both Herbartian psychology and Konrad Fiedler's art theory. One of the reasons that Hildebrand's book was so appealing to so many art historians of this era was that Hildebrand was himself a practicing artist (who did mainly neo-classical relief sculptures, a fact that is relevant to the type of approach he would evolve), and because of this his writings at least seemed to be more immediately attached to the actuality of art. Hildebrand's position is based on a theory of perception that holds that a planar image is projected onto the retina and that a three-dimensional image is constituted from a combination of such planar images. Visual experience is realized in a way that is akin to

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<sup>7</sup> Once more, see Iverson, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*. Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art*, and Podro, *The Manifold in Perception: Theories of Art from Kant to Hildebrand*.

tactile experience: vision explores the object given in perception and synthesizes an image of it from the discreet, individual images it obtains. This process is most evident and most in effect in what Hildebrand terms "near views" of objects; when you look at something close at hand your eyes are compelled to roam, taking in one aspect at a time, as they constantly focus and refocus in search of an overall image of the object. Such an image lacks unity though because it comes into existence through temporal succession. A truly unified image can only be attained in "distant views," when the eye is as immobile as possible, for when you look at a distant object the perpendicular lines of sight corresponding to your eyes are nearly parallel. But, because of this arrangement, objects seem flatter as we are further removed from those aspects that would present us with a full three-dimensional effect. Thus, Hildebrand tells us, the unity that is had in a distant view is the optical unity of a planar visual impression, not unlike what we find in looking at a two-dimensional pattern. While classical relief sculpture is the art that best accords with distant vision (because it best meets the demands of vision by presenting a fully three-dimensional figure in a unified plane),<sup>8</sup> there is, according to Hildebrand, no form of art that matches or could match the situation that accords with near vision. Obviously, there is more to Hildebrand's theory than I have outlined above, but our interest is in how Riegl interpreted these ideas in his own writings, and for that purpose what I have said about Hildebrand will be sufficient.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> My inclination is to suggest as a possible candidate Roman "impressionism," as described by Wickhoff (and amended by Riegl) who claimed that the forms in late Roman fresco paintings are not created from a single point of view but modeled individually, and that they are not conceived of as inhabiting a unified space but as existing isolated from space (it should be noted though that, fittingness aside, this suggestion is incompatible with the one Riegl proposes in *Late Roman Art Industry*). See Franz Wickhoff, *Roman Art: Some of Its Principles and Their Application to Early Christian Painting*, trans. and ed. Mrs. S. A. Strong (London, 1900); and Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1985), originally published as *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn*.

<sup>9</sup> Adolf Hildebrand's *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst* (1893) is available in English as *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture*, trans. M. Meyer and R. O. Ogden, 2nd ed. (New York: Garland Reprint, 1978). For further commentary on Hildebrand's theory of art, see Podro *The Manifest in Perception: Theories of Art from Kant to Hildebrand*, especially Chapter VI.

There are others who could be mentioned in the development of Riegl's intellectual career, people who attracted his attention for one reason or another, but I will note only one other, Hermann Helmholtz. As Margaret Olin has argued in "Spätromische Kunstindustrie: The Crisis of Knowledge in fin de siècle Vienna,"<sup>10</sup> Helmholtz was important to Riegl for one main reason: there was a revolt against positivism in late nineteenth century Viennese culture that issued in with it a turn towards a subjective and relativistic understanding of experience and truth. Although Riegl was not a positivist, he did believe that the visual experience that is provided by art adds to our inter-subjective knowledge of the world, and should be not reduced to the passing interests and impressions of the individual viewer. To circumvent the subjectivism that threatened opticality, Riegl turned his attention to tactility, and found an apparent alternative path in Helmholtz's theory of vision. Helmholtz thought that vision is the most intellectual of the senses and that touch is the most secure, because it gives us immediate knowledge of objects. Vision is dependent upon experiments and unconscious inferences, which we learn to make as children when we rely on touch to secure objects experientially. As Helmholtz says: "We are continually controlling and correcting the notions of locality derived from the eye by the help of the sense of touch, and always accept the impressions in the latter sense as decisive. . . . Touch is a trustworthy and experienced servant, but enjoys only a limited range, while sight rivals the boldest flight of fancy in penetrating to illimitable distances."<sup>11</sup> Helmholtz's theory of vision transformed Riegl's understanding of Hildebrand's theory of art and the result was the "haptic"/"optic" distinction that grounds *Late Roman Art Industry (Spätromische*

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<sup>10</sup> Margaret Olin, "Spätromische Kunstindustrie: The Crisis of Knowledge in fin de siècle Vienna," in *Wien und die Entwicklung der kunsthistorischen Methode*, ed. Leopold D. Ettlinger, Stefan Kann, and Martina Pippal (Vienna: Hermann Böhl's Nachf, 1984), 29-36.

<sup>11</sup> Hermann Helmholtz, "The Recent Progress of the Theory of Vision," in *Helmholtz on Perception: Its Physiology and Development*, ed. and trans. R. M. Warren and R. P. Warren (New York: Dover, 1968), 108. Also relevant to Riegl's art theory: Hermann Helmholtz, "On the Relation of Optics to Painting," in *Popular Lectures on Scientific Subjects*, trans. E. Atkinson (London: Dover, 1963).

*Kunstindustrie*, 1901), which I will discuss shortly, after I have set out some further background.

As is well-known to art historians, Riegl began his career as keeper of textiles and oriental carpets in the Austrian Museum of Arts and Crafts. Riegl and his colleagues were the fortunate beneficiaries of an enlightened educational programme that is still in place for Austrian art historians.<sup>12</sup> All Austrian students of art history received their academic instruction in conjunction with museums, which meant that not only were they trained to work in museums, but more importantly their seminars were held in museums in the presence of the art objects they were studying, an arrangement that most contemporary North American students can only realize in reveries. It was his daily association and interchange with the substantial collection of textiles and carpets in the Austrian Museum of Arts and Crafts that aided Riegl in formulating his initial theory of stylistic transformation and artistic development. In his first two books, *Antique Oriental Carpets (Altorientalische Teppiche*, 1891) and *Problems of Style: Foundation for a History of Ornament (Stilfragen: Grundlagen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*, 1893),<sup>13</sup> Riegl outlined long and detailed morphological histories that traced ornamental designs over vast periods of time and through diverse cultures. In both works Riegl is interested in tracking evolutionary continuity as an internal artistic development. In *Problems of Style*, his approach, as Michael Podro admirably summarizes it, "is extraordinarily simple in comparison with those of his later work, but its underlying conception is one which he never abandoned; it was that we understand art as initially transforming nature and then as transforming itself from within, out of purposes which are strictly artistic."<sup>14</sup> One of the factors that prompted

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<sup>12</sup> Jan Bialostocki, "Museum Work and History in the Development of the Vienna School," in *Wien und die Entwicklung der kunsthistorischen Methode*, ed. Leopold D. Etlinger, Stefan Kann, and Martina Pippal (Vienna: Hermann Böhlas Nachf, 1984), 9-15.

<sup>13</sup> Alois Riegl, *Altorientalische Teppiche* (Leipzig: Reprint Mittenwald, 1969); Alois Riegl, *Problems of Style: Foundation for a History of Ornament*, trans. Evelyn Kain (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, 71.

Riegl to write *Problems of Style* was his aversion to the Semperian line on the evolution of styles (in fact, Riegl's title *Stilfragen* was meant as a reference to Gottfried Semper's influential *Der Stil*, i.e., the problems of *Der Stil*).<sup>15</sup> Riegl's dissatisfactions weren't directed so much at Semper himself as they were at what Riegl called the "sub-Semperians," the enthusiastic disciples of Semper who reduced his theories to formulaic doctrines: "Whereas Semper did suggest that material and technique play a role in the genesis of art forms, the Semperians jumped to the conclusion that all art forms were always the direct product of materials and techniques."<sup>16</sup> *Problems of Style* is a sustained argument against the materialistic evolutionism of the sub-Semperians; materials, functions, and techniques do have a role in the development of styles, Riegl concedes, but, as he states in a well-conceived figure of speech, they "no longer have those positive creative roles attributed to them by Semper's theory but rather restraining, negative ones: they are, so to say, the coefficients of friction within the entire product."<sup>17</sup> Riegl's refutation of the Semperian position is one of the great *tours de force* in the art historical literature on stylistic analysis. Beginning with the supposition that the Egyptian lotus motif originated in an artistic transformation of a natural model, Riegl goes on demonstrate in painstaking detail how 5,000 years of plant ornamentation--from Egypt and the ancient Orient to Classical Greece and Rome and from there to Byzantium and the Islamic countries--can be

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<sup>15</sup> Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonische Künsten*, 2 vols. 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main, 1863). *Der Stil* has not been translated into English, and given its length (1,100 pages) and limited audience, it probably never will be. However, excerpts have been translated for the collection *Gottfried Semper: The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Wolfgang Herrmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Heading this collection is a useful article by Joseph Rykwert, "Gottfried Semper: Architect and Historian," that aims at countering some of the "bad press" that Semper has received (thanks to the misrepresentations of his followers) in the history of art because of Riegl's opposition to his doctrines. See as well Rykwert's essay "Semper and the Conception of Style, in *Gottfried Semper und die Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1976). Semper's translator has also just published a book on Semper's life and work: Harry Francis Mallgrave *Gottfried Semper: Architect of the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), which apart from "correcting" the public record on Semper, reveals that he probably had the most eventful life of any of the art historians of the era.

<sup>16</sup> Riegl, *Problems of Style*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 9.

read as a single, evolutionary process wherein all stylistic changes can be explained as internal, artistically motivated invention. Invention though is not something that can be accounted for by appealing to the imaginative intervention of the artist/artisan, for the pressures that moved that formal development are internal to it, and could not have been displaced by individual whim. The individual artisan had as much hope of changing it as an individual speaker has in reorienting the formal constraints of a natural language; in both cases the inherited structure presides over the individual will. This is a characterization that will continue to ground Riegl's theory of art, and be the basis for his concept of *Kunstwollen*.

My references to language and structure are not accidental; there is a structuralist disposition in Riegl's thought, and this is one of the features of his work that puts him in the same direction of drift as Panofsky, who will attempt to influence that drift by tying Riegl's project to his own. The importance of structural elements in Riegl's thought becomes clearer in his later writings, for *Problems of Style* is not yet a theoretically mature work, as Riegl was not at the time aware of Hildebrand's *The Problem of Form* and its inventive use of Fiedler's art theory (Hildebrand's book was published in the same year, 1893, as Riegl's). The main theoretical influence in *Problems of Style*, apart from its vaguely Hegelian developmental conception, is Herbartian psychology, which is particularly well-suited to stylistic descriptions of motifs and their relations. As Margaret Iverson explains it:

The Herbartian conception of mental activity . . . is concerned with the mind's project of ordering the elements of experience into a systematic whole. As a result, its use as a model of artistic development carries a built-in bias in favor of highly articulated systems. According to Herbart's theory, the mind receives individual, disparate presentations (*Vorstellungen*) that must be either assimilated with past or contiguous presentations or else suppressed. In this way, the mind constructs a coherent picture of the world and, at the same time, maintains its own unity. . . . Herbart argues that once presentations are maintained by the mind they acquire a certain force capable either of inhibiting other new presentations or enforcing the realization of similar ones.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Iverson, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*, 62.



If we turn to *Late Roman Art Industry*, which was published in 1901, we see that Riegl's theoretical model has sophisticated considerably in the interim. The most obvious difference is that his notion of style now links the transformation of motifs to shifts in the mind's apprehension of the world, disclosing a greater Hegelian presence in his work, or, in more art historical terms, a greater interest in the writings of Karl Schnaase, who disagreed with Hegel about the subordinate place of art in the development of *Geist* but nevertheless remained indebted to Hegel's overall model.<sup>19</sup> The other major difference is the obvious incorporation of ideas from Hildebrand's theory of perception. Riegl though does not employ Hildebrand's concepts in strict accordance with the sense that they are given in *The Problem of Form*, about which Joan Hart has remarked that "Riegl's peculiar misapplication and perversion of Hildebrand's terms--near and far images--renders the terms meaningless. Hildebrand intended the far image to apply to the classical relief style, and decidedly not to an optical, illusionistic Late Roman style."<sup>20</sup> While it is true that Riegl has turned Hildebrand's model to his own ends, it is hardly credible to say that in his hands the terms have become meaningless; they have a quite definite sense, as we shall see, it is just that it is no longer Hildebrand's sense, and there are many reasons why Riegl thought it better to reform these terms. A notable one is that he had clearly perceived that Hildebrand's theory of art implies a normative aesthetic based on classical relief sculpture, which would obviously be incompatible with Riegl's non normative approach to the history of art. So, let us return to Hildebrand's theory of perception, and consider the use to which it is put in *Late Roman Art Industry*, especially in relation to Riegl's account of relief sculpture, which provides a particularly clear example of his approach.

Riegl conceives of the development of antique art as falling into three stages that exemplify three different perceptual relations to the world and three different attitudes

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<sup>19</sup> Karl Schnaase, *Niederländische Briefe* (Stuttgart and Tübingen, 1934).

<sup>20</sup> Joan Hart, "Some Reflections on Wölfflin and the Vienna School," in *Wien und die Entwicklung der kunsthistorischen Methode*, ed. Leopold D. Ettlinger, Stefan Kann, and Martina Pippal (Vienna: Hermann Böhlas Nachf, 1984), 60.

towards experience in general. In all cases, these relations are governed by a model of the ideal self-containedness or coherence of the work of art. In the first, objects are represented in a way that stresses to a maximum degree a presentation of them as unified, isolated objects adhering to a plane. Riegl terms such a mode of representation "tactile" or "haptic," and tells us that it corresponds to a "near view" of objects.<sup>21</sup> Ancient Egyptian paintings and relief sculptures provide the clearest example of this type of art, for they present distinct, hard outlines against an obviously flat, material plane, and even reconfigure the human form so that the relations of its parts are transformed into more planar relations. This mode of representation corresponds to what, for lack of a better term, we might call the most primitive human attitude towards the world; it is, I suppose Riegl would say, the initial human response to the instability of experience. At this time human beings saw their relation to the world in principally anthropomorphic terms, that is, they perceived themselves as isolated bodies and grasped things external to them as similarly individual and distinct. However, this perception was constantly jeopardized by the flux of experience. So, in an effort to defeat this apparent contradiction, they fashioned works to deny the ever-changing instability of experience and to conform to a space that was not understood as mathematically continuous but as the negation of matter.

The second stage or phase in the development of antique art is characterized by a mode of representation in which relief elements, though still firmly connected to the ground plane, begin to be prominent enough to cast shadows and create optical modeling, but not so prominent as to undermine the haptic unity of the surface. In order to adequately grasp the visual effect created by such works, one has to retire from a near view and position oneself at a greater distance, thus obtaining a "tactile-optical" conception of things: "This kind of perception, which characterizes the second stage in ancient art, is tactile-optical and, from the optical point of view, more precisely *normal-sichtig* [a normal view]; its purest

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<sup>21</sup> The terms 'tactile' and 'haptic' are essentially interchangeable, though Riegl came to prefer 'haptic' because his critics seemed to be taking 'tactile' too literally.

expression is the classical art of the Greeks."<sup>22</sup> This perceptual possibility is forced on humankind, we might say, by the inescapability of the subjective determinants that govern perception at its very basis: the creators of such works wanted to affirm the self-containedness of the objects represented, in confirmation of the self-containedness that was revealed to them through touch, yet touch, which is the most objective of the senses, is itself ultimately subjective, in that subjectivity must be involved in combining the tactile sensations that give one an objective presentation of the object: "Consequently, the notion of the tactile impenetrability as an essential pre-condition of the material individuality is already no longer based on the sensuous perception, but is achieved with the aid of the process of thinking. In ancient artistic creation there existed from the very beginning a latent inner controversy; one was not able to avoid a subjective blend in spite of the intended basically objective perception of objects."<sup>23</sup>

The increasing recognition of the role of subjectivity in the processes of vision finds its counterpart in the works created in the third stage of the development of antique art. Now objects come forth in full three-dimensionality and bring with them a new concept of space as a measurable, though not yet infinite and continuous, medium. These objects are still oriented towards a planar presentation but now they no longer have a tactile relation to it: "This plane is no longer tactile because it contains interruptions achieved through deep shadows; it is, on the contrary optical--colourful whereby the objects appear in *Fernsicht* [distant view] to us and whereby they also blur into their environment. The perception of objects characterizing this third phase of ancient art is thus essentially optical and in particular *fernsichtig* [distant] represented in its purest form through the art of the late Roman Empire."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 25.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

It is evident from Riegl's use and characterization of the terms 'near view' and 'distant view' that he is employing Hildebrand's theory of vision, and that he is conjoining it with Helmholtz's doctrine of the primacy of touch and intellectual mediatedness of vision, and that all this is being put at the service of a vaguely Hegelian conception of how art discloses different stages and relations in consciousness's engagement with the world. We can also see that Joan Hart is right in claiming that Riegl changes the sense of Hildebrand's concepts; Hildebrand identifies distant view vision with Classical Greek relief sculpture, while Riegl matches distant view vision with the optical art of the Late Roman empire, and Classical Greek relief sculpture with his new category of tactile-optical vision. Hildebrand does not identify any type of art with near view vision, while Riegl matches it to the tactile or haptic art of ancient Egypt. The differences between Hildebrand's position and Riegl's reformed version are considerable, but, contrary to Hart, we can understand what is motivating the descriptions that Riegl gives just as clearly as we can understand those given by Hildebrand.<sup>25</sup>

At the heart of Riegl's mature art theory, beginning with *Late Roman Art Industry*, is his notion of *Kunstwollen*, which is without doubt the most perplexing and vexing concept that he formulated. There is, to my understanding, no entirely satisfactory account of what exactly he meant by the term, and unfortunately I am not in a position to provide one, though I do think that I can at least supply the framework.

The first point to be taken into consideration is a negative one: Riegl invented the term *Kunstwollen* in order to avoid using the word 'style,' which as we have seen had become a term with no agreed upon use and conflicting senses. The goal of clarity, which one supposes is the implied aim behind the invention of specialized terminology, would have been greatly aided if Riegl had actually defined his new concept. This omission or

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<sup>25</sup> We should note that Riegl's "haptic/optic" distinction, though in many ways similar, is not coextensive with Wölfflin's opposition between "linear/painterly" nor with Wickhoff's opposition between "naturalistic/illusionistic." Why this is so will become clear when we turn to Panofsky's discussion in "Der Begriff des Kunstwollens."

oversight sets up a considerable obstacle for commentators on his theory of art, as is evident when it comes to the question of how to translate *Kunstwollen*: should it be "will-to-form," "artistic volition," "artistic intention," "artistic impulse," "that which wills art," "that which art wills," or one of the other various suggestions that have been made? The choice that one makes depends of course on one's interpretation of Riegl's art theory, but that can't be settled without clarifying why he used the word *Kunstwollen* and not, say, *Kunstwille*. For this and other reasons, most commentators have thought it best to leave *Kunstwollen* untranslated and try instead to secure its sense by examining the uses to which Riegl put it in his art historical studies. I will do the same.<sup>26</sup>

The word *Kunstwollen* does occur in *Problems of Style*, but only infrequently, and not with the same sense that it has in *Late Roman Art Industry*, as one would expect, given the fundamental theoretical shift that occurs in the transition between the two books.<sup>27</sup> There are though two features that link Riegl's use of the word *Kunstwollen* in these two works: the first is that in both cases the term is introduced in opposition to a mechanistic and materialistic theory of artistic development; the second is that *Kunstwollen* is understood to be related to the formal constitution of works of art. These two features are connected, but the second leads more directly to what is central to the concept of *Kunstwollen*.

It seems clear that whatever else *Kunstwollen* represents for Riegl it at least a formal principle: it is to be understood in terms of that which is specific to art, which is, as he says in *Late Roman Art Industry*, "*Umriss und Farbe in Ebene oder Raum*" ("outline

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<sup>26</sup> Margaret Olin has pointed out in *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art*, 72, that Riegl's *Kunstwollen* is not without precedent. The phrase *künstlerischen Wollens* had a certain currency in his era, and in art historical use can be traced back to Rumohr's *Italienische Forschungen*. Riegl condensed the phrase into *Kunstwollen*, lifted it out of the subjective sphere of its everyday use, and turned it to his own ends.

<sup>27</sup> Here is a representative passage from *Problems of Style*: "It may seem paradoxical that so many practicing artists also joined the extreme faction of art materialism. They were, of course, not acting in the spirit of Gottfried Semper, who would never have agreed to exchanging free and creative artistic impulse (?) [*Kunstwollen*] for an essentially mechanical and materialist drive to imitate" (*Problems of Style*, 4).

and colour, on the plane or in space"). This is even stated explicitly in "Naturwerk und Kunstwerk I und II":

All these non-artistic domains of culture constantly play a part in the history of art insofar as they supply the work of art (which is never without an outside purpose) with its exterior impulsion, its content. It is clear, however, that the art historian will not be able correctly to assess the subject of a particular work of art and the way this subject is conceived until he has understood in what way the will [*Wollen*] that has given the impulse to such a theme is identical with the will that has formed the corresponding figure in outline and color this way and no other.<sup>28</sup>

This passage is of interest for two main reasons: first, it supports the claim that the idea of *Kunstwollen* is tied to the formal elements of art and that this is what is central and specific to art; and secondly, it reveals at the same time that the formalist direction in Riegl's thought does not exclude social, cultural, and technical concerns from the study of art history, for they "constantly play a part in the history of art," though as he says they are subordinate to the visual constitution of the work of art, for this is what the art historian must ultimately be able to address, otherwise he or she might be better described as a cultural historian. In apparent contradiction to this position, Joan Hart has said that in "Naturwerk und Kunstwerk I und II" Riegl was "emphatically insistent that the examination of art be completely divorced from other cultural enterprises and related world views. That should be the work of the comparative cultural historian, not of the art historian whose primary task was to know clearly the 'sensuous appearance of a work of art as form and color in plane or space'."<sup>29</sup> I find this evaluation difficult to reconcile with the passage quoted above (perhaps, if I may resort to an ad hominem explanation, Hart's partisan interest in revivifying Wölfflin's legacy has led her to believe that his "competitors" have to be denigrated, and this is why throughout her article she tends towards willfully strict and literal interpretations of Riegl's statements, which are in fact

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<sup>28</sup> Alois Riegl, "Naturwerk und Kunstwerk, I und II" in *Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Vienna, 1929), 64. English translation from Henri Zerner "Alois Riegl: Art, Value, and Historicism," 182.

<sup>29</sup> Hart, "Some Reflections on Wölfflin and the Vienna School," 59.

incompatible with his art historical analyses). The question that needs to be answered is: if we get the impression from Riegl that there is a separation between art history and cultural history, how are we to understand the separation that he is arguing for and what exactly is being separated? Hart's claim that Riegl wants "the examination of art [to] be completely divorced from other cultural enterprises and related world views" is unhelpful because it is vague and because she doesn't take up this question. Let us take it up then.

Riegl's art historian is then primarily concerned with the "sensuous appearance of a work of art as form and color in plane or space." But what really does this entail? A cursory consideration of the words might lead some to believe that Riegl is just another formalist, a 19th century Viennese Clement Greenberg. But even the words themselves hint that this is not so, for, as has often been said, strictly speaking space is not a formal property of works of art, given that it implies three dimensions and not merely the arrangement of shapes on a plane. But more than this, we know that space for Riegl is linked with social and cultural dispositions and world views. The three eras that he isolates in *Late Roman Art Industry* are characterized by three different perceptual relations to the world that are not merely physiological but attitudinal--the late Roman *Kunstwollen* differs from the Egyptian *Kunstwollen* because it involves an entirely distinct relation of beholding between consciousness and the objects of experience, and this relation is based on the lived, spatial engagement of the viewer with the viewed. We can though go even further. What, I would like to know, does Hart make of the last chapter of *Late Roman Art Industry*, "The Leading Characteristics of the Late Roman *Kunstwollen*"? For here is a discussion of just those connections that Hart says Riegl isn't interested in:

There is support for this interpretation of the nature of late antique art in the fact that the *Kunstwollen* of antiquity, especially in the final phase, is practically identical with other major forms of expression of the human *Wollen* during the same period.

All such human *Wollen* is directed towards self-satisfaction in relation to the surrounding environment (in the widest sense of the word, as it relates to the human being externally and internally). Creative *Kunstwollen* regulates the relation between man and objects as we perceive them with our sense; this is how we always give shape and color to things (just as we visualize things with the *Kunstwollen* in poetry). Yet man is not just a being perceiving exclusively with his

sense (passive), but also a longing (active) being. Consequently, man wants to interpret the world as it can most easily be done in accordance with his inner drive (which may change with nation, location and time). The character of this *Wollen* is always determined by what may be termed the conception of the world at a given time [*Weltanschauung*] (again in the widest sense of the term), not only in religion, philosophy, science, but also in government and law, where one or the other form of expression mentioned above usually dominates.

Obviously, an inner relation exists between a *Wollen*, which is directed toward a pleasurable visualization of things through the visual arts, and that other *Wollen* which wants to interpret them as much as possible according to its own inner drive. In antiquity this relationship can be traced everywhere. We can only sketch it now in very general terms, but this may suffice to identify another basis for our investigation of the meaning of late Roman art within the general history of civilization.<sup>30</sup>

I think it is undeniable that this passage directly contradicts Hart's evaluation of Riegl's understanding of art history. It seems to me that Hart has fallen victim to two oversights. The first is that "Naturwerk und Kunstwerk I und II," from which she appears to take her direction, is a theoretical piece that does not accurately reflect Riegl's art historical practice (Riegl gives in to some overstatement). The second is that even though *Late Roman Art Industry* is principally about *Kunstwollen* as the "sensuous appearance of a work of art as form and color in plane or space," it should not be inferred from this that Riegl believes that the study of art is independent of the other ways in which consciousness is tied to the world--he doesn't take up this topic because it is not the subject of his book, though he does, as he says, propose a sketch in very general terms (it should also be noted that in *Historische Grammatik der bildenden Künste* there is a section on the study of art as the study of varying *Weltanschauungen*).<sup>31</sup> With the proper spin, what Hart says is partially correct, for in another sense Riegl does believe that the study of art is independent of the investigation of these other concerns, i.e., in the sense discussed earlier: the study of art must be distinguishable from other inquiries and be built around that which is specific to

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<sup>30</sup> Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 231.

<sup>31</sup> Riegl, *Historische Grammatik der bildenden Künste*, edited by K. M. Swoboda and O. Pächt (Graz, 1966). There is a French translation under the title *Grammaire historique des arts plastiques*, trans. Éliane Kaufholz (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1978).



art. It is the art historian's job to get this right; political and other social histories can be left to the historians of those fields, which doesn't mean that the art historian has no interest in their results, after all, to return to our quote from "Naturwerk und Kunstwerk I und II," "All these non-artistic domains of culture constantly play a part in the history of art insofar as they supply the work of art (which is never without an outside purpose) with its exterior impulsion, its content." And with this I think that we have answered the question left unaddressed by Hart, for now we understand the separation that Riegl is arguing for and what exactly is being separated (even though we may have doubts about whether such a separation can be effected).

Riegl's doctrines undergo further changes in *The Dutch Group Portrait*. The most striking change is that the opposition between haptic and optic is replaced by an opposition between the objective and the subjective. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that the former is now subsumed under the latter, which is seen to be more general. In *Late Roman Art Industry*, the haptic/optic distinction is directed at capturing the different spatial relations that the beholder is placed in when perceptually engaged with the art object. The objective/subjective distinction includes these but involves as well certain psychological attitudes that we will discuss shortly. It would seem then that Riegl would still see any given art work as having a definite haptic/optic resolution and falling somewhere in between the extremes of both pure possibilities, but he would now also judge each work as realizing certain psychological attitudes that make it either more objective or more subjective.

What the objective/subjective opposition marks is a certain range of attitudes towards the world and other persons. Riegl notes three major divisions. The first, "will," represents an attitude of antagonism between subject and world were the two exist as separable and consciousness isolates itself as over and against its environment. Riegl again adduces Egyptian art as the prime example of this stance. The second attitude, "feeling," no longer sees the world as an antagonistic obstacle but as that with which one can be

emotionally engaged. Ancient Greek art is the best embodiment of this. The third, "attention," is a contemplative, disinterested attitude that, as the word *Aufmerksamkeit* that Riegl uses to name it indicates, is both watchful and courteous. It is the most subjective attitude.

Dutch group portraiture is an art of *Aufmerksamkeit*, as is Dutch art in general, and the Dutch *Kunstwollen*, Riegl tells us, is one of inter-subjective space and attention. The patterns of attention that are found in Dutch group portraits are also the basis for a new type of coherence in works of art, a coherence quite different from that created by the haptic/optic resolutions examined in *Late Roman Art Industry*. The dynamics of a group portrait pose special artistic problems; principally, the members of the group must be united in a way that makes them a single entity for the beholder, but at the same time they must be represented through individual portraits. The type of coherence that characterizes a successful Dutch group portrait derives from this, for the artist may aim for pictorial unity and coherence through relations of attentiveness that are interior to the work and established by the figures themselves, or through the relations that the figures establish with the beholder, or some judicious combination of the two. Whichever is chosen, we know from our discussion of Svetlana Alpers and Riegl in the previous chapter that the desired outcome will not be an Italian Renaissance resolution--coherence will not be achieved by subordination to a single figure through a dramatic narrative, but through coordination and attentiveness. The Dutch *Kunstwollen* is an expression of inward subjective life.

Because of the changes outlined above, Riegl's concept of *Kunstwollen* is subject to a significant transformation in *The Dutch Group Portrait*. This purportedly formal concept that has already been opened up to depicted space now undergoes an even more important extension; the psychological relations of attentiveness as depicted in the glances of the figures both amongst themselves and outward to the viewer become "formal" features of the art work. Effectively, the viewer's relation to the work becomes a genuine property of it, and with this Riegl moves well beyond anything that could be called

formalist art history, for now cultural attitudes that are expressive of *Weltanschauungen* are explicitly bound to the visual constitution of art. This is one of the main reasons why Riegl's later writings are of interest to Panofsky.

To further advance my account of Riegl's concept of *Kunstwollen* and its role in his art history, I would like to recapitulate and expand on some of the central features that we have so far discussed. As a beginning, it is heuristically useful to think of *Kunstwollen* as a formal principle. This is essentially how the idea, or more accurately proto-idea, functions in *Problems of Style*, where Riegl discusses the historical development of two-dimensional, decorative motifs. He conceives of the development he traces as organic, evolutionary, and teleological--antithetical to a materialistic and mechanical scheme of transformation. This is a feature of *Kunstwollen* that remains despite changes in Riegl's doctrines. The question to be answered though is how precisely are these ideas to be understood. It is very common to find Riegl's teleological conception of art explained in very crude terms; even Joan Hart, who should know better, given the caricatures of Wölfflin's ideas that she has had to counter, says that *Kunstwollen* refers to "a macrocosmic mystical force."<sup>32</sup> But although Riegl's language, like Hegel's, with whom in this and other respects he has much in common, comes close to anthropomorphizing history, one is not obliged to take him literally, as I have already argued. I think that a less prejudicial, structurally oriented account of Riegl's teleology can be offered, and I will do that shortly.

Riegl himself certainly didn't see the *Kunstwollen* as a macrocosmic mystical force. In fact, he often referred to his approach as not only scientific but positivistic: "There remains the *Kunstwollen* as the only secure datum."<sup>33</sup> It is difficult not to smile at the apparent ludicrousness of this statement, but Riegl was not a positivist in any philosophically strict sense of the term (even though he was living in Vienna at the turn of

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<sup>32</sup> Hart, "Some Reflections on Wölfflin and the Vienna School," 59.

<sup>33</sup> Riegl, "Naturwerk und Kunstwerk, I und II," 60.

the century and surrounded by the progenitors of Logical Positivism); for him positivism consisted in not having recourse to metaphysical, i.e., purely speculative, explanations for the development of art. Because Riegl has a reputation as a speculative art historian, such a claim is likely to be met with incredulity, but we should continue to remind ourselves that speaking with a Hegelian accent is not a guarantee that the person who is speaking is resorting to "metaphysical" answers for epistemological and methodological questions; indeed, Part I was devoted to a philosopher who spoke with just such an accent, but who relied on a functionalist approach to foundational questions.

So, what could it mean to say that "There remains the *Kunstwollen* as the only secure datum"? It means, if we return to the project of *Problems of Style*, that our dated historical record of artistic motifs and their developmental sequences is the most reliable evidence that we can study in order to discover the laws that govern artistic change. Such a statement presupposes two ideas that we are by now well familiar with. The first is that the formal aspect of art is the most important aspect because it is that which is unique to visual art, and the second is that visual art is an isolatable human activity with its own laws of change. Of course if we doubt either of these the *Kunstwollen* ceases to be a secure datum. We should also note that Riegl's understanding of both of these ideas is indebted to Hegel; that is, the angle that Riegl has on them is directed by Hegelian ideas: art is a fundamental and original human activity through which consciousness fashions self-understanding, and it is for this reason that the study of art has the autonomy it does. However, it is at the same time true that history, as the history of spirit and the progressive realization of Idea, involves other facets of consciousness's formative activity, and so the *Kunstwollen* is only one manifestation of spirit amongst others in an age, which is what Riegl meant in saying that "The character of this *Wollen* is always determined by what may be termed the conception of the world at a given time [*Weltanschauung*] (again in the widest sense of the term), not only in religion, philosophy, science, but also in government and law." Thus,

the assumption that eras and ages possess an inherent internal unity is an idea that Riegl shares with Panofsky and Cassirer.

If it is difficult to accept that the *Kunstwollen* is the only secure datum for a study such as *Problems of Style*, where the goal is to trace the development of two-dimensional decorative motifs, it is even more problematic for the projects of *Late Roman Art Industry* and *The Dutch Group Portrait*, where strict formalism has been replaced by a much more open conception of visual structure that includes depicted space, psychological relations amongst represented figures, and lines of sight between represented figures and the viewer. Once we move beyond the evidentness of "a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order," to use Maurice Denis's celebrated phrase, what gives us our assurance that the things we identify as part of the visual structure of the work are what we take them to be and that they are visually relevant? I'm not sure that Riegl has a ready answer to this (Panofsky though tries to provide him with one in *Der Begriff des Kunstwollens*), but I think that he could respond on two fronts. First, he could point out, with an argument parallel to the one Cassirer used in his critique of sensationalism and its doctrine of sense data, that the description of works of art in terms of their formal properties is a highly artificial process that requires that one overlook, in representational art, the identity of the depicted objects. Seeing a Raphael Madonna and Child as a configuration of coloured shapes requires that one adopt an attitude that, far from being more natural, presupposes a theory about what formal properties are and how they are identified and individuated. Such a way of viewing has no greater primacy than our well-established patterns of everyday perception. Hence, our ability to read the direction and intent of a gaze is no less problematic than our ability to discern a pyramidal colour skeleton. The second aspect of Riegl's response could be methodological. He could say that we can determine which features of works of art are visually relevant when we try to construct the transformational sequences that chart their development; in this way, the case that he makes for the structures of internal and external coherence in Dutch group portraits is like the case that

Wölfflin makes for the movement from a linear to a painterly mode of representation, i.e., they are the result of empirical investigation and established inductively.

Keeping the above discussions in mind as background, we can now give ourselves a compact statement of the concept of *Kunstwollen* that removes it from the realm of metaphysical forces: it is a principle that postulates that the elements of visual structure in art are transformed by processes interior to and specific to art--though initiated by relations that consciousness establishes with the world--and that these transformations can only be adequately described in terms of an organic model and not a mechanical one. With this serviceable characterization in hand, we can as well clarify an aspect of the concept of *Kunstwollen* that has led many commentators to believe that it is an idea that is incapable of rigorous application. Riegl uses the term to cover periods of greater and lesser length and wider and narrower specificity. Thus, we can talk about the Ancient Egyptian *Kunstwollen* that covers 3,000 years or the *Kunstwollen* of seventeenth century Dutch art. Equally, there is a *Kunstwollen* for all of Late Roman art, but at the same time we find Riegl referring to Rembrandt's *Kunstwollen*. How can the concept have such an elastic range of application? In terms of the account I have attributed to him, Riegl could answer that wherever we find that the elements of art are achieving novel and distinctive arrangements we hypothesize that consciousness has entered into a new formative relation with experience. So, the length of the period of time is not really one of the relevant determining factors in its application. The same is true for the question of wideness and narrowness of scope: there is a *Kunstwollen* for Dutch group portraiture but there is a noticeably distinctive elaboration of the visual structures that characterize this genre in Rembrandt's paintings, sufficiently so that we could feel justified in speaking about Rembrandt's *Kunstwollen*.

We can further clarify relations between the general and the particular in Riegl's art history by examining an analogy that he draws between language and art, an analogy that is explicitly invoked by the title of his book *Historische Grammatik der bildenden Künste* (*Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*). In this work Riegl says that "Although the

elements of art are of course different from those of language, every work of art speaks its own artistic language. Now, if one can speak of a language of art, one can also speak of an historical grammar of this language, in a strictly metaphorical sense of the term of course."<sup>34</sup> Riegl's statement is slightly ambiguous: to what does his analogy refer? Individual works of art? Distinct artistic traditions? Or art in general? The analogy applies to all of them because they are connected in a hierarchical relation of subsumption; and for him this means that the main concern is with the third division, with discovering the elements that are common to the visual arts in general and the laws that regulate the combinations and transformations of these elements: "We must no longer concentrate on individual works of art or individual species of art, but on the elements with whose clearer analysis and understanding a true unifying copingstone of the theoretical structure of art history will be built."<sup>35</sup> Riegl continues in the passage immediately following this one to reassert the analogy with language as a justification of his plan for the study of art: "Language also has its elements and the developmental history of these elements is called the historical grammar of the language in question. He who merely wants to speak a language, does not need the grammar. . . . However, he who wants to know why a language followed this and no other development and to grasp the place of language within the whole of culture; he who, in a word, wants a scientific understanding of the particular language, requires the historical grammar."<sup>36</sup> What we can infer from these passages it seems to me is that art history is like the general science of linguistics (at least as Riegl understood the objectives of that science in his time); it aims at discovering the fundamental elements of its object of study and the rules that determine the relations of those elements in all their historical occurrences. So, following the linguistic analogy, particular stylistic

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<sup>34</sup> Riegl, *Historische Grammatik der bildenden Künste*, 211. My translation.

<sup>35</sup> Riegl, *Historische Grammatik der bildenden Künste*, 210. Translation by Margaret Iverson in "Style as Structure: Alois Riegl's Historiography," *Art History* Vol. 2 No. 1 (March 1997), 64.

<sup>36</sup> Iverson, "Style as Structure: Alois Riegl's Historiography," 66.

traditions and the individual art objects that are examples of them can be seen as historically specific instantiations of a more general theory art. This doesn't mean though, contrary to a common misperception of Riegl's vision of art, that the individual art object should be reduced to the role of a mere illustration in the grand elaboration of the history of art. This is of course the same charge that was repeatedly laid against Wölfflin's art history, and it perplexed Wölfflin (as I'm sure it did Riegl) that this was the conclusion that was constantly arrived at, for it is a conclusion based on a very lopsided understanding of what they were trying to achieve: in searching for the greater structures that underlie the world's varying representational traditions their intention was not to eliminate more specific and varied studies, but only to ground them in an awareness of what is specific to art as art (that such a vision has its own prejudices has already been touched on).

Returning to Riegl and his analogy between art and language, Margaret Iverson has argued that in *Problems of Style* Riegl pursues a line of inquiry that "resembles that pursued by his exact contemporaries, the Neo-Grammarians, who brought the results of comparative study into historical sequence and who discovered that sound shifts are governed by laws which admit no exceptions. The comparison is suggestive because both Riegl and these linguists attend to transformations of formal components and these components are seen as figuring in a law-governed evolution."<sup>37</sup> This Neo-Grammarian slant is superseded, Iverson tells us, in Riegl's later works where his direction seems to be more in harmony with that of Saussure, and, by implication, with the type of structuralist approach to cultural phenomena that grew out of Saussure's linguistic model. The second part of this claim is more plausible than the first. There are very few notions in Riegl's art theory that resemble Saussurian doctrines in a substantial way. If there is a similarity, it is with the more general ideas about signifying systems that have come to be identified with Saussure's linguistics. Iverson admits as much when she cites as instances of this commonality the idea of language as a system of interrelated signs founded on convention

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 66.



and Saussure's emphasis on a synchronic as opposed to a diachronic analysis of language; however, even the second similarity has to be qualified, for as Iverson acknowledges, "While certain of his procedures are analogous to those of Saussure and the Russian Formalists who stress synchronic analysis, Riegl nevertheless adheres to the view that understanding art involves working out its historical pattern of development."<sup>38</sup>

If we want to follow Riegl's linguistic analogy and try to find out to what extent his investigations are in harmony with early structuralist models, then the commonalities that we look for are going to have to be quite general.<sup>39</sup> The following three ideas provide a good starting point, for they are the basis for any structural analysis: 1) a structural approach examines a cultural phenomenon as a system of signs that possesses internal coherence, or, as Cassirer would say, it seeks to disclose a thoroughgoing organization of the system's constituent elements according to functional laws that determine their identities through their relations to each other; 2) it doesn't conceive of the structure as static but as possessing the capacity for transformation; 3) the structure is presented as self-identifying and self-regulating, in the sense that it is assumed that it does not draw its directives from outside of itself and that its laws give it its identity as a closed system. Anything that is to be considered a structural analysis must approach its objects in these terms, and a brief examination of the major features of Riegl's later works reveals that they do. As we have seen, both *Late Roman Art Industry* and *The Dutch Group Portrait* attempt to present the artistic traditions that they cover as having strong internal coherence because of the principles that organize their formal elements. Furthermore, the formal elements are determined through their relations to each other, as for example when a cast shadow becomes an optic element because it occludes a haptic one. It is also evident from Riegl's

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>39</sup> It is not unusual to come across remarks about an affinity between Riegl's art history and structuralism. However, it is rare to find a developed discussion of the connection. The two most cited papers that do discuss the connection are Margaret Iverson's "Style as Structure: Alois Riegl's Historiography" and Sheldon Nodelman's "Structural Analysis in Art and Anthropology," *Yale French Studies* 36 and 37 (October 1966), 89-103. Neither of these papers though discusses this affinity in depth.

analyses that the structures he postulates, like his greater conception of art history, have been formulated so that transformation is inherent to them; in fact, they fit Cassirer's model especially well, as they are both *ergon* and *energia*: structural configurations under the pressures of historical transformation. Moreover, Riegl makes it very clear that art is a closed system that is constituted by its own principles and not guided by interests external to its own directives, much like a Cassirerian symbolic form. As a final point we could add that there are as well aspects of Riegl's approach to art that are characteristic of (though not exclusive to) structuralism taken as a philosophical position. For instance, like Cassirer, Riegl believed that the nature of the objects that he investigated was relational and not substantial. This is why he was one of the first art historians to give up the idea that the development of art is a progressive realization of mimetic ideals, that there is a true substantial reality of things that art strives or should strive to represent. Because Riegl believed that art is an activity that forms rather than replicates human reality, he was able to develop a non evaluative approach that saw all periods of art as of equal interest and significance.

I stated earlier that we don't have to think of *Kunstwollen* as macrocosmic mystical force because we can restate Riegl's teleological conception of art in structuralist terms.<sup>40</sup> Now that we have a definition of *Kunstwollen* and a preliminary analysis of the structural features of Riegl's art history, we can show how this can be done. One can have a

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<sup>40</sup> I can't help citing a final, particularly irksome example from Michael Ann Holly's *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984): "Postulating an 'Infinite Spirit' or 'Idea' behind history that works itself out dialectically through time by manipulating human actors caught in its path, Hegel never deviated from characterizing the past as exemplifying a logical, rational process. He recited history not merely as the continuing story of men, women, and events but as the biography of the 'World Spirit' (28)." Margaret Iverson gave the appropriate response: "It is hard to understand why anyone should hold such a bizarre view. But the idea that thought has an intelligible history which moves through formulations, either artistic or conceptual, that can then be reflected upon and so transcended, is not so ridiculous, and this is a fairer characterization of Hegel's philosophy. Neither does Holly seem to grasp the urgency behind this idea: that we have access to the past only because our own view of the world is the culmination of that development. Hegel's philosophy is about bridging the gap between ourselves and alien generations, and also about bridging the gap between Mind and its objects. Hegel, like Marx after him, regarded man's original relation to the world as one of inhibition and constraint: objects in the world stand as imposing, alien, obdurate and independently existing realities. Hegel's dialect of history is the progressive realization that the world is in fact mind-formulated," "The Primacy of Philosophy," *Art History* IX/2 (June 1986), 272.

teleological model that does not refer to ultimate goals, final causes, and so forth, and that is nevertheless not reducible to a mechanistic account that views the elements which are related to each other as a mere aggregate. Such a model would be organic, in Cassirer's understanding of the term. In order to set up my exposition of this model, consider this quote from Michael Ann Holly's *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, in which she is referring to a passage from *Problems of Style* where Riegl is contrasting his theory to that of the "sub-Semperians":

Things change, but why and how? Does their alteration manifest a grand historical spirit working itself out through history, or does the impetus for this change come from an inexorable law of artistic evolution? The difference between the two may be subtle, but without opting for either one, Riegl leaves his ideas open to a number of questions. Just how is the reader to make sense of a phrase to the effect that the tendril ornament attained a "goal" which "centuries have persistently sought"? Does Riegl mean a goal for which the history of art has striven, or does the goal flash on the distant horizon like a Hegelian star, urging all historical progress ever onward, irrespective of the development exigencies of the artistic situation?<sup>41</sup>

It is not clear to me which of these two alternatives Holly eventually decides upon, though it hardly matters, as they are both equally remote from Riegl's art historical project. Let us look at the passage in *Problems of Style* that prompted Holly's reflections: "However, anything one might say in this regard will sound unconvincing as long as the technical-materialist theory of the origin of the earliest primeval art forms and ornamental motifs remains unchallenged, even though it has failed to define the precise moment when the spontaneous generation of art ends, and the historical development effected by laws of transmission and acquisition begins."<sup>42</sup> I haven't tracked down the excerpt in which, as Holly claims, Riegl speaks of the tendril ornament attaining a goal which was for centuries

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<sup>41</sup> Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, 72.

<sup>42</sup> Riegl, *Problems of Style*, 5. In her text Holly cites only part of this passage, which she translates as: "Still it always remains uncertain in such a case where the domain of that spontaneous process by which art is created stops and the historical law of inheritance and gain comes into play." The German original, with her editing, is: "Bleibt es doch in solchem Falle ewig zweifelhaft, wo der Bereich jener spontanen Kunstzeugung aufhört und das historische Gesetz vor Vererbung und Erwerbung in Kraft zu treten . . . beginnt."

persistently sought, though I have no doubt that he would say something like that, but is it really justifiable to assert that Riegl's statement about laws of transmission and acquisition affecting this development is really about a "grand historical spirit working itself out through history" or "an inexorable law of artistic evolution"? What would be the basis for such a claim? That he sometimes speaks of ornamental motifs attaining goals? If I say that Holly's willfully literal reading of a figurative phrase reveals the same positivistic spirit that Panofsky encountered when he arrived in the United States, am I really saying that Panofsky was greeted by a positivistic spirit when he landed in New York?

There are other ways of understanding how purposive historical development is effected by laws of transmission and acquisition. I would like to borrow from Peter Caws the idea of "potentially intelligible structures," which he uses in quite another context for quite other purposes.<sup>43</sup> Imagine a set of elements amongst which there are already connecting relations (Riegl's set of motifs from *Problems of Style*, for instance). Within this system there will be structures that could be taken by someone acquainted with the system as incomplete structures, i.e., it would be possible to imagine adding to them in such a way that others familiar with the system would also sense their completion. These are what we will call potentially intelligible structures. The number of ways of completing such structures however will be finite, for not every way will be possible or intelligible, given the elements, relations, and developmental history of the system. As a simple example, take the figure of a square with one side missing, and the desire to close the open side. It is immediately apparent that this simple description rules out a great number of possible ways of completing the figure, e.g., it can't be completed by making it into a circle, a triangle, etc. Nevertheless, a large number of possibilities remain. And as the system develops elements are transformed and new relations established, in accordance with the choices that have been made (though it should be noted that Riegl's art history requires that these transformations result from a "dialectic" of Mind/World relations, which

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<sup>43</sup> Caws, *Structuralism: The Art of the Intelligible*, 204-208.

will be discussed in the following chapter). The result of any particular completion is not so much implied--determined by inexorable historical laws or whatnot--as permitted by the initial arrangement of conditions. No solution for completing a potentially intelligible structure was a necessary outcome that could have been predicted; rather, every choice that was made was one that the system could accommodate. However, when we look back on the development of the system, we have the sense that things were almost destined to turn out this way, because it is such an intelligible pattern of transformation and expansion. We can almost see the end in the beginning; the result in itself seems purposive. And in a sense it is, because it has all been brought about purposively. We might even find ourselves inclined to figurative overstatement, and say something such as "the figure attained a goal which was persistently sought." This model is in harmony with the fundamental features of our definition of *Kunstwollen* and the structural principles discussed above. Furthermore, it gives us a way of understanding Riegl's claims about the developmental impulse interior to art that is charted through the transformation of motifs; it allows us to explain how individual artists have a role in affecting the process even though the process itself can only be grasped supra-individually; it enables us to further articulate how *Kunstwollen* can be applied to longer or shorter periods of time and wider or narrower artistic traditions; it is not incompatible with the idea that artistic processes originate in attempts to copy nature; and it is not at odds with Riegl's claim that major shifts in the direction of the visual tradition correspond to major shifts in the way consciousness apprehends the world. I am not maintaining that this was in fact Riegl's position; he could not have stated it in these terms. But I do think that his proposals are captured by this way of thinking of them. And I believe that this way of thinking of them provides a more suitable background against which to understand why Panofsky was attracted to both Riegl and Cassirer. In the following chapter I will examine how Panofsky attempted to bring the originality of Riegl's thought back to the old, and for him pressing, question of the foundations of art history.

## CHAPTER XI

### "THE CONCEPT OF *KUNSTWOLLEN*" AND OTHER ESSAYS

If I were asked to cite a passage that most clearly represents the project of Panofsky's early art theoretical essays, it would be this one, with which "Der Begriff des Kunstwollens" begins:

It is the curse and the blessing of the systematic study of art that it demands that the objects of its study must be grasped with necessity and not merely historically. A purely historical examination whether it goes first to content or to the history of form, elucidates the phenomenal work of art only by reference to other phenomena, it does not have any higher order knowledge on which to ground itself: to trace back the particular iconographic representation, derive a particular formal combination from a typological history, . . . is not to fix it in its absolute place and meaning related to an Archimedean point outside its own sphere of being, but it is to remain inside the total complex of actual interconnected appearances. Even the longest 'developmental series' necessarily place the lines within the limits of the purely historical complex.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, 180. Kenneth J. Northcott and Joel Synder have translated "Der Begriff des Kunstwollens" as "The Concept of Artistic Volition" in *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Autumn 1981), 17-33. I have chosen to use Podro's translation for this passage because it better fits my understanding of the essay and the project it belongs to. I will on occasion use Northcott and Synder's translation. I will not though use their translation of the title, as I prefer to keep *Kunstwollen* untranslated. Thus, there is a slight risk of confusion as, depending of the proprieties of reference, I will alternate between "The Concept of Artistic Volition," "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*," and of course "Der Begriff des Kunstwollens." Holly also offers a translation of the above passage in *Panofsky and the Foundation of Art History*, 79. In German the passage is: "Es ist der Fluch und der Segen der Kunstwissenschaft, dass ihre Objekte mit Notwendigkeit den Anspruch erheben, anders als nur historische von uns erfasst zu werden. Eine rein historische Betrachtung, gehe sie nun inhalts- oder formgeschichtlich vor, erklärt das Phänomen Kunstwerk stets nur aus irgendwelchen anderen Phänomenen, nicht aus einer Erkenntnisquelle höherer Ordnung: eine bestimmte Formkomplex typengeschichtlich oder aus irgendwelchen besonderen Einflüssen ableiten, die künstlerische Leistung eines bestimmten Meisters in Rahmen seiner Epoche oder sub specie seines individuellen Kunstcharakters erklären, heisst innerhalb des grossen Gesamtkomplexes der zu erforschenden realen Erscheinungen die eine auf die andere zurückbeziehen, nicht von einem ausserhalb des Seins-Kreise fixierten archimedischen Punkte aus ihre absolute Lage und Bedeutsamkeit bestimmen: auch die längsten 'Entwicklungsreihen' stellen immer nur Linien dar, die ihre Anfangs- und Endpunkte innerhalb jenes rein historischen Komplexes haben müssen," Erwin Panofsky, "Der Begriff des Kunstwollens," in *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft*, ed. H. Oberer (Berlin: E. Verheyen, 1974), 33.

The history of art, if it is to be *Wissenschaft*, must ground itself transcendently and not merely comprehend the material that it studies historically. A work of art, as it is traditionally studied in art history, is only investigated in relation to its place within different developmental series; its sense and significance as a work of art is not grounded in principles outside of its phenomenal status, outside of its sphere of being as an instance within an iconographical or formal series. In fact, such studies do not speak to its sense and significance *as* a work of art; they do not refer to and they do not disclose the principles outside of its merely historical existence that would allow us to understand its nature *as* art --they do not provide an Archimedean point for the grounding of the study of art history. "Thus," Panofsky continues, "in considering art we are faced with the demand (which in the field of philosophy is satisfied by epistemology) for a principle of explanation by which the artistic phenomenon can be recognized not only by ever further references to other phenomena within its historical sphere but also by a consciousness which penetrates the sphere of its empirical existence."<sup>2</sup> According to Panofsky, the most important steps taken in this direction were made by Riegl, who unfortunately never got around to fully addressing the matter because of his untimely death (and perhaps because his energies were spent trying to win back the autonomy of art from theories of dependence such as Semper's). But even so, Riegl gave us the central idea with which to search for "the inherent laws underlying artistic activity. . . . he introduced a concept which was to denote the sum or unity of the creative forces--forces both of form and content--which organized the work from within. This concept was [*Kunstwollen*']."<sup>3</sup>

Because Riegl was not forthcoming about the precise meaning that he wanted to attach to the concept of *Kunstwollen*, and because of the backgrounds and interests of those who took over the term, *Kunstwollen* came to take on psychological overtones.

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<sup>2</sup> Panofsky, "The Concept of Artistic Volition," 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

Panofsky however, as I've mentioned many times, wants nothing to do with psychologism and in this paper, as in the one on Wölfflin, we see, as Georges Didi-Huberman noted, that "la méfiance à l'égard du *psychologisme*, méfiance viscérale, se fera à chaque page un peu plus éclatante et précise."<sup>4</sup> In purging Riegl's doctrines Panofsky critiques three principal psychologistic interpretations of the idea of *Kunstwollen*: the first attempts to base it on the artist's psychology, the second on the collective psychology of a period, and the third on the psychological responses of the viewer. I won't recount or comment on Panofsky's arguments, for the general ideas on which they are based are well-known in the philosophy of art, and our main interest lies with the alternative that he offers.

In moving to the statement of his theory Panofsky also criticizes the view that *Kunstwollen* is only an abstraction, a discursive synthesis derived from the artistic intentions of a period. But this kind of view, Panofsky argues, is also inadequate to Riegl's idea because "such a summation could lead only to the phenomenological classification of individual styles, not to the discovery of stylistic principles which, underlying all these characteristics, could explain the ontological basis of the style's character according to form and content."<sup>5</sup> The concept of *Kunstwollen* "defines the phenomenal characteristics of the work in question not generically, as discovered by abstraction, but fundamentally, revealing the work's immanent meaning and laying bare the actual root of its being. . . . [*Kunstwollen* ] cannot be anything except (and not for us, but objectively) what 'lies' in the artistic phenomenon as its ultimate meaning."<sup>6</sup>

Panofsky has already furnished us with a fairly complex set of statements on what he thinks the concept of *Kunstwollen* means and on what he sees its role to be in the study of art. So, before we further complicate our exposition perhaps we should order and

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<sup>4</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image: Question posée aux fins d'une histoire de l'art* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1990), 119.

<sup>5</sup> Panofsky, "The Concept of Artistic Volition," 25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 26



summarize what we presently have. First, what would a proper explanation of this concept furnish us with? It would provide us with the inherent laws underlying artistic activity, that is, the principles that explain the ontological basis, and not just the phenomenal features, of a style's character according to form and content. Secondly, how is the concept of *Kunstwollen* related to these principles? *Kunstwollen* is in fact specified through these principles. It is a concept that denotes the sum or unity of the creative forces--forces both of form and content--which organize a work from within and give it its coherence. Thirdly, what would this yield for us? It would reveal what objectively 'lies' in the artistic phenomenon as its *Sinn*, its ultimate or intrinsic meaning as a work of art.<sup>7</sup>

There is much that still needs to be explained in this summary, but perhaps that can best be done by further developing Panofsky's account. The centre to which the above remarks are connected is revealed in this statement: "A comparison from epistemology may help to clarify the significance of this definition [of *Kunstwollen* ]. If I take any judgmental proposition--for example, the one made famous by Kant's *Prolegomena*: "the air is elastic"--as given, then I can look at it from many points of view."<sup>8</sup> Panofsky then goes on to detail how it can be examined historically, psychologically, grammatically, and logically. After this he states: "Finally, I can ask whether an analytical or synthetic, an experiential or perceptive judgment is expressed in it. In asking this last transcendental philosophical question of it, something is revealed that I would call the epistemological essence of the proposition: that which is in it as purely cognitive content."<sup>9</sup> In other words, by investigating this judgment transcendently we can determine which Kantian category it embodies, explain what kind of judgment it is, and understand how it manages to say something true about experience. Panofsky invokes Kant's distinction from the

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<sup>7</sup> What I have been variously calling "immanent meaning," "ultimate meaning," and "intrinsic meaning" is *Sinn* in the originals. A justification for this translation can be found in Jan Bialostocki, "Erwin Panofsky [1892-1968]: Thinker, Historian, Human Being," 72-73).

<sup>8</sup> Panofsky, "The Concept of Artistic Volition," 26.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

*Prolegomena* between judgments of perception and judgments of experience in order to drive home how such an investigation differs from a psychologistic one. As we have investigated the background necessary to this discussion at great length in Part I, no more will be said about the philosophical machinery that is being put into motion by Panofsky; however, as I have not discussed the difference between judgments of perception and judgments of experience I will briefly comment on this distinction.

Kant wrote the *Prolegomena* after it became evident that his critics had not grasped the aims and methods of the critical philosophy. The *Prolegomena* was intended as an outline of the central themes and arguments of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but it did not present them, as in the *Critique*, "in a synthetic style preceding from principles" but only "sketched out after an analytic method." Kant introduces the distinction between judgments of perception and judgments of experience in the *Prolegomena* as a way of aiding the reader in understanding the role and nature of the categories. The basic idea is this: when I say something such as, "The air *seems* elastic," I am making a judgment that connects two concepts in a way that has only subjective validity; I am stating a psychological reality that is true for me but cannot be universalized. But when I say "The air *is* elastic," or "If I change the pressure on a body of air, that will change its extent," I am saying something that is not only compatible with the subjective truth stated above, it is also an experiential truth that has universal validity, i.e., it is true for everyone who makes that judgment in the conditions under which I made it. The difference between the subjective judgment of perception and the objective judgment of experience is that the latter embodies one of the categories (the category of causation) that define the bounds of possible experience and enable us to say true things about the world by uniting understanding and sensation. What Panofsky wants, the central and defining idea of "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*," is that art history should undertake an investigation into what would be the category equivalents for art that would allow us to distinguish merely subjective judgments from objective ones; in other words, he believes that art history should search for the "standards of determination

which, with the force of *apriori* basic principles, refer not to the phenomenon itself but to the conditions of its existence and its being 'thus'.<sup>10</sup> This is what he believes the concept of *Kunstwollen* can provide, and hence furnish the fixed Archimedean point that is required to ground our understanding of art. We should note that although this project is inspired by Kant's *Prolegomena*, it is very much a Cassirerean idea, for Panofsky is approaching art as Cassirer would: he is circumscribing art as an autonomous symbolic order that is constituted by a unique set of *apriori* concepts that define it as an independent form of human engagement with the world.<sup>11</sup>

Before I explain how Panofsky thinks we can find the category equivalents for art, I would like to head off a quandary that might arise from the passages that we have so far been considering, and in doing so further elucidate Panofsky's conception of *Kunstwollen*. Panofsky describes his project in epistemological terms twice in the early sections of his paper. The first is: "Thus, in considering art we are faced with the demand (which in the field of philosophy is satisfied by epistemology) for a principle of explanation"; the second is: "A comparison from epistemology may help to clarify the significance of this definition." But in-between these two references he also says: "a [discursive synthesis] could lead only to the phenomenological classification of individual styles, not to the discovery of stylistic principles which, underlying all these characteristics, could explain the *ontological* basis of the style's character according to form and content" (my emphasis). It seems clear from the context in which it occurs that this sentence pertains to how the concept of *Kunstwollen* is to be understood. And it seems equally clear from the other sentences that Panofsky intends *Kunstwollen* to play an epistemological role in art history. How though is an epistemological principle supposed to solve an ontological question? If

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>11</sup> At this time, as far as I know, Panofsky had not developed a personal acquaintance with Cassirer (Cassirer began teaching at the University of Hamburg in 1920, Panofsky in 1921). It is not even clear at this point if Panofsky was familiar with Cassirer's writings, but this too is of limited consequence as the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* was not published until 1923.

we read this sentence in relation to another, with which we are already familiar, and that is also concerned with an ontological question, I think that we can better discern the sense of what he is saying: "[The concept of *Kunstwollen*] defines the phenomenal characteristics of the work in question not generically, as discovered by abstraction, but fundamentally, revealing the work's immanent meaning and laying bare the actual root of *its being*. . . . artistic volition cannot be anything except (and not for us, but objectively) what 'lies' in the artistic phenomenon as its ultimate meaning" (my emphasis). This passage does not fully answer our quandary (in fact Panofsky's infelicitous language somewhat perpetuates the unclarity), but it does at least point to a way out: according to Panofsky, what we gain epistemologically through the concept of *Kunstwollen* is knowledge of the being of a work of art, what it is in-itself, its ultimate meaning.<sup>12</sup>

Let us return to the question of finding art's category equivalents. Panofsky argues that it is with the concept of *Kunstwollen* that art's categories can be specified and the ultimate meaning of art's objects revealed: "once more it seems as if . . . it is Riegl who has come furthest in the creation and use of such fundamental concepts. He has not only created the concept of [*Kunstwollen* ], he has also discovered categories suited to the understanding of the concept. His concepts of 'optical' and 'tactile' (a better form is 'haptic'), in spite of their continued formulation as psychological and empirical, . . . aim at

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<sup>12</sup> I am perhaps overstating the case in saying that Panofsky's language is infelicitous and perpetuates an unclarity. I may be imposing my presuppositions on a philosophical doctrine that others find quite acceptable. In the history of philosophy what was called speculative philosophy was divided into the two branches: epistemology and metaphysics, while ontology was a subdivision of metaphysics. There has been a long-standing debate over whether epistemology or metaphysics (ontology) has priority. One side, to which Descartes, Locke, and Kant are usually assigned, claims that epistemology is the prior philosophical science as the investigation of the possibility and limits of knowledge is a necessary and indispensable preliminary to any metaphysical reflections about the nature of reality; accordingly, metaphysical questions are to be distinguished from epistemological questions. The other side, to which figures such as Spinoza, Hegel, and Whitehead are usually assigned, believes the opposite, while concurring that metaphysical questions are not epistemological questions. However, there are of course those who argue that epistemology and metaphysics are logically interdependent and that a metaphysically presuppositionless epistemology is as unattainable as an epistemologically presuppositionless metaphysics. I would have expected Panofsky to fit into the first group. But, as Cassirer fits more comfortably into the third group than either the first or the second, perhaps the same is true of Panofsky, and perhaps it is this alignment that leads him to speak of the same issue in almost the same breath as epistemological and ontological.

revealing a meaning immanent in artistic phenomena."<sup>13</sup> However, as Riegl's intention is to reveal immanent meaning by relating it to fundamental attitudinal possibilities, Panofsky suggests that we adopt instead the concepts that Riegl developed in his study of Dutch group portraiture, for the terms "objectivistic' and 'subjectivistic,' the pair of concepts developed later as an expression of the possible intellectual attitude of the artistic ego toward the artistic object, are without doubt by far the closest to having categorical validity."<sup>14</sup> We can well understand Panofsky's preference for the terms 'objectivistic' and 'subjectivistic,' for in Riegl's study of the Dutch group portrait, as already mentioned, these terms were devised so that they could subsume the 'optical'/'haptical' distinction and at the same time go beyond it by including such pictorial features as internal and external gazes as "formal elements"; Riegl's willful indifference to standard ways of drawing the form/content distinction must have pleased Panofsky, who we will remember devoted his paper on Wölfflin to undermining the doctrine of the double root of style and the way in which it presents the relation between form and content, a battle that he is still waging in this essay (though now with a more powerful, positive doctrine of his own): "the artistic entity presupposes the use and the determination of the concept of [*Kunstwollen* ], which demands that any interpretation aimed at the inner significance of an artistic phenomenon must comprehend that phenomenon as a unity. Formal and imitative elements (in contrast to Wölfflin's doctrine of the "double root of style") need not be reduced to separable and, for their part, irreducible concepts."<sup>15</sup> Thus, Wölfflin does not do justice to Riegl's concepts

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<sup>13</sup> Panofsky, "The Concept of Artistic Volition," 28-29.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 29. The idea that the viewer's relation to the work of art is part of its essential characterization is an idea that Riegl, and by extension Panofsky, takes over from Hegel. In his *Aesthetics* Hegel provides a brilliant analysis of how a painting's composition, especially its two-dimensional character and choice of viewpoint, implicitly involves the viewer's subjectivity, thereby making the fact that it is seen from a certain viewpoint part of its subject: "By displaying what is subjective, the work, in its whole mode of presentation, reveals its purpose as existing *for* the subject, for the spectator and not on its own account. The spectator is, as it were, in it from the beginning, is counted in with it, and the work exists only for this fixed point, i.e., for the individual apprehending it." *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 806.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 26.

when he declares that they are merely other names for his own; from Panofsky's point of view, Riegl's concepts ground Wölfflin's, if Wölfflin's have art historical legitimacy.

So, how then are the concepts "subjectivistic" and "objectivistic" to function as categories for art? In "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*" this is not entirely clear because Panofsky is only presenting us with the outline of the project he envisions:

The present essay aims not to undertake the deduction and systematization of such transcendental/aesthetic categories but merely to secure the concept of artistic volition in a purely critical manner against mistaken interpretations and to clear up methodological presuppositions of an activity which is aimed at its comprehension. I do not aim to pursue the content and significance of fundamental concepts of the artistic view beyond these suggestions. Nevertheless the suggestions can indicate how a systematic investigation of this sort will have to proceed.<sup>16</sup>

The direction that Panofsky would like his suggestions to take is this: "objectivistic" and "subjectivistic" are to be conceived of as two poles between which individual works of art can be located. We must be careful to note however that not all works of art can be assigned a location:

The line drawn between the two poles of "objectivism" and "subjectivism" only forms a one dimensional axis on which not all points of the plane can lie. The others can only be determined negatively with regard to this axis, and, while we recognize them as lying outside it, we must content ourselves with the modest achievement of determining when we have to assume this "outside" according to the particular circumstances. Medieval art or the art of Rembrandt or Michelangelo can, for example, only be characterized by trying to qualify their position--at any given moment a special one--outside the line of objectivism and subjectivism.<sup>17</sup>

What Panofsky is saying would be easier to comprehend if we knew how to take his references to axes and planes. Is it just a figure of speech? Are all works of art to be thought of as locatable on one plane? Are there different axes and different planes for

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 28. In a footnote to this passage Panofsky tells us that he hopes to return to these matters. He partially fulfills this hope in a few essays that follow "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*," which we will consider in due time.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

different types of art? Despite this unclarity, we do know two things though: the objectivism/subjectivism opposition functions like a category for visual art; and it will not be the only category appropriate to the visual arts.

One way to work at getting a better idea of what Panofsky has in mind is to try to compare what he is suggesting to the Kantian framework that he is referring to. Kant divides his twelve categories into four groups of three. The third group, for instance, is called the categories of Relation and comprises Causality and Dependence, Inherence and Subsistence, and Community or reciprocity between agent and patient. It could be that Panofsky sees the objectivism/subjectivism opposition as akin to a heading for a group of categories; so, just as there are different kinds of empirical relations, there are different types of objective/subjective resolutions in art objects. Kant derived his twelve categories from the forms of judgment in Aristotelian logic, which explains their neat arrangement. Because Panofsky has no such apparent guideline for the derivation of his categories, it is difficult to say if this is what he has in mind, and, if it is, how many categories there would be. But, if Panofsky is following Kant's example, and it is my impression that he is trying to, then it could be that he sees the objectivism/subjectivism opposition as like a heading for a group of categories.<sup>18</sup>

Even if the "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*" is somewhat incomplete, we do get a clear statement of the inquiry that Panofsky wants to undertake. We get a somewhat more complete statement of his Neo-Kantian plans for grounding art history in his 1925 essay "Über das Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zur Kunsttheorie" ("On the Relationship between Art History and Art Theory").<sup>19</sup> In the five years though that separate "On the Relationship

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<sup>18</sup> The fact that Panofsky speaks of a "line drawn between the two poles of 'objectivism' and 'subjectivism'" raises another problem, as a line can be understood as either a continuum or a discontinuous scale. On theoretical grounds, my inclination is to opt for the latter, as a continuum would all but defeat the intended purpose of isolating particular categories; besides, as there are only a limited number of pictorial elements that could figure in objective/subjective resolutions, there could only be a limited (though not small) number of combinations of these elements.

<sup>19</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "Über das Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zur Kunsttheorie," *Zeitschrift für Aesthetik und allg. Kunstwissenschaft*, XVIII (1925): 120-161. Reprinted in Erwin Panofsky, *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft*, ed. H. Oberer (Berlin: E. Verheyen, 1974), 40-75.

between Art History and Art Theory" from "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*" there has been a change in Panofsky's conception of how to construe art history's *Grundbegriffe*. The change seems to have been occasioned by his contact with Edgar Wind, whose doctoral dissertation was supervised by Panofsky and Cassirer at the University of Hamburg.<sup>20</sup> Panofsky's concerns with intrinsic meaning, coherence, and the objective/subjective opposition are still in place, but the latter has undergone a reformulation and name change, though the central idea remains and determines the model that he offers. Following Wind, Panofsky now makes the opposition between "fullness" and "form" (*Fülle und Form*) the most general antithesis of art, replacing objectivity and subjectivity as the fundamental category of artistic realization.<sup>21</sup> As before, fullness and form are two poles between which individual works of art can be located, but this time there are no artworks that do not fit on this scale; anything that is a work of art embodies a fullness and form resolution, which itself is characterized through subordinate pairs of opposing values, as, for example, in this triad: elementary values (optical/tactile), figurative values (depth/surface), and compositional values (internal links/external links). Here is an example from Jan Bialostocki that concerns Egyptian relief sculpture, which would be close to the form pole of the opposition: "To decide for surface (as opposed to depth) means to decide for rest (as opposed to movement), for isolation (as opposed to connection) and for tactile values (as opposed to optical ones)."<sup>22</sup> Every work of art's identity, its being as an answer to the fundamental artistic problem of fullness and form that its existence provides, is determined by how it resolves these values; furthermore, its resolution on one of these scales

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<sup>20</sup> The title of Wind's dissertation was *Ästhetischer und kunstwissenschaftlicher Gegenstand: Ein Beitrag zur Methodologie der Kunstgeschichte*. A summary of its results were published under the title "Zur Systematic der künstlerischen Probleme" in the same issue of *Zeitschrift für Aesthetik und allg. Kunstwissenschaft*, as Panofsky's "Über das Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zur Kunsttheorie."

<sup>21</sup> *Fülle* has been translated as "fullness," "abundance," "plenty," and "completeness"; I think the sense is best captured with "fullness." Similarly, *Form* can be translated as "form," "figure," "make," or "mode"; I think that it is most sensible to stay with the English word 'form.'

<sup>22</sup> Bialostocki, "Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968): Thinker, Historian, Human Being," 73.



determines its resolution on the others. This may seem abstract and remote from the actual objects under consideration, but this impression is overcome once we realize that these values can be resolved in different ways with different pictorial elements and brought to the concrete level of the individual art object; so, for example, the optical/tactile resolution can be discussed with all of the subtlety of Riegl's analyses and complemented with any other analysis that further elaborates this relation in a particular case. What we attain in comprehending how a work achieves a resolution on a given scale is an understanding of the creative principle employed in solving the particular artistic problem that is represented by the opposition that defines that scale. When this is accomplished for all the scales involved we have the creative principles that, because of their interdependence, reveal how the work gains its unity or coherence by addressing the fundamental artistic problem that it solves, *post facto*, by existing. This is the work's *Kunstwollen*, which specifies its intrinsic meaning *qua* work of art. This is Panofsky's fullest statement of what the concept of *Kunstwollen* is to be understood.

For the sake of clarity and thoroughness, I would like to further develop two of the ideas contained in this account of Panofsky's Neo-Kantian vision of how to ground art history. The first involves a distinction that has been operative but which has not been explicitly stated, i.e., the differentiation between art history and art theory that Panofsky's discussion assumes. The way that he makes it, especially in "On the Relationship Between Art History and Art Theory" but also in "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*," is well-captured by Silvia Ferretti in a discussion of Panofsky's relationship to Edgar Wind: "Like Panofsky," Ferretti says, "Wind poses the question of the nature of the artistic problem. Implicitly he already distinguishes between art history and art theory in noting the difference between the artist's *preliminary task*, which is connected to the realization of the artistic phenomenon and susceptible to the *reconstruction* of the motives that determined it, and the *artistic problem*, which is connected to the fundamental antinomic character of the

artistic phenomenon and susceptible only to *speculation*.<sup>23</sup> The essays that I have been and will be considering are principally concerned with the artistic problem (what I earlier referred to as the fundamental artistic problem), which at this stage of Panofsky's career is encapsulated in the notion of *Kunstwollen*, as it has been explained above.

We shouldn't conclude however that Panofsky's differentiation of the interests of art theory and art history is a declaration of their independence (especially considering that the perspective from which he is working is Kantian, for in that case one of the tasks of the former is to look into the conditions of possibility of the latter's object of inquiry). In *The Critical Historians of Art* and in "Panofsky: de la philosophie première au relativisme personnel,"<sup>24</sup> Michael Podro provides a good discussion of one important way in which art theory and art history are related in Panofsky's early publications. According to Podro, one of the central topics motivating Panofsky's investigations during this era is the question of how the present could have an authoritative viewpoint towards the past. In *The Critical Historians of Art* Podro argues that Panofsky pursues this question through two strategies, which he calls the systematic strategy and the adaptive strategy. The first is represented by the project that we have been following in the theoretical papers so far discussed. The second is represented by Panofsky's art historical essays such as "Albrecht Dürer and Classical Antiquity" and "The First Page of Vasari's Libro."<sup>25</sup> In both of these essays Panofsky sets out to show how artists "sought to overcome cultural strangeness, to show

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<sup>23</sup> Silvia Ferretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg: Symbol, Art, an History*, trans. Richard Pierce (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 208. I cannot let the word 'speculation' pass without comment. While the sense intended here would have been plain to late nineteenth century British Idealists, 'speculation' has altogether the wrong sense in contemporary English. Even something cumbersome, such as 'theoretical articulation,' would have been better. Actually, Ferretti herself (or her translator) provides a serviceable replacement in the next paragraph: 'ideal construction.'

<sup>24</sup> Michael Podro, "Panofsky: de la philosophie première au relativisme personnel," trans. Jacques Bonnet in *Pour un temps/Erwin Panofsky* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou/Pandora Editions, 1983), 61-69.

<sup>25</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "Albrecht Dürer and Classical Antiquity" in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 236-294; Erwin Panofsky, "The First Page of Vasari's Libro," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 169-225.

how one culture could appropriate the art of another and appropriate it as art."<sup>26</sup> He did this by demonstrating that both Dürer and Vasari had become sensitive to art different from their own and that they had come to understand that art that was unfamiliar could only be interpreted by reference to their own traditions. At first glance, as Podro remarks, it may appear that this strategy is unrelated to the systematic strategy: "But this, surely, does not provide an Archimedean point from outside the field of historical phenomena, a principle drawn from a higher source. Well, in a sense it does, it provides a point outside the field of phenomena that are being studied, phenomena which, *ex hypothesi*, are removed from the historian's own position in time and place, and it provides a general principle for all such interpretation: that historical interpretation is always a matter of establishing both continuity and discontinuity with the products of one's own culture -- which may be more or less adequate to the task."<sup>27</sup> This way of linking the adaptive strategy to the systematic strategy, of conjoining theoretical reflections and historical studies on how the present can have an authoritative viewpoint towards the past, come together in the texts *Perspective as Symbolic Form* and "The Theory of Human Proportions as a Reflection of the History of Styles."<sup>28</sup> But now it is Panofsky himself rather than Dürer or Vasari who is in the position of the historian.

In "Panofsky: de la philosophie première au relativisme personnel" Podro takes a different angle on the connection between the two strategies and Panofsky's approach to the relation between art theory and art history. His point of departure is the discrepancy between the conceptual generality of art theory and the plenitude of the historical information that is the concern of art history. Podro's question is (and I quote the original French text rather than retranslating it back into English): "Comment Panofsky pouvait-il

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<sup>26</sup> Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, 185.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>28</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "The History of the Theory of Human Proportions as a Reflection of the History of Styles," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 55-107.

sérieusement accepter ce schéma d'interprétation quand dans le même temps il avait entrepris un travail réclamant une multitude de matériaux historiques que le schéma n'aurait pu inclure"?<sup>29</sup> Podro suggests that we can specify the connection between the two that Panofsky has in mind if we think of the problem in relation to what Cassirer says in *Language and Myth* about the development of systematic order in natural languages. The passage in Cassirer that Podro refers to is this one: "we can show that all the intellectual labor whereby the mind forms general concepts out of specific impressions is directed toward breaking the isolation of the datum, wresting it from the 'here and now' of its actual occurrence, relating it to other things and gathering it and them into some inclusive order, into the unity of a 'system'."<sup>30</sup> The idea that Podro wants to draw from this passage (though it is hardly the most immediate inference) is that "Pour Cassirer il semblerait que l'incapacité logique d'un système à épuiser les qualités d'un détail ne constitue pas un obstacle important. Le système conceptuel une fois qu'il a atteint certain de complexité deviendrait l'artefact et l'objet de l'esprit aussi bien que son point de vue."<sup>31</sup> How though does this apply to Panofsky and the issue of the relation between art theory and art history? Podro refers us back to his suggestion that Panofsky's approaches in the systematic and adaptive essays come together in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. Just as Dürer and Vasari could move to understanding that which was unfamiliar to them by approaching it on the basis of what was most familiar, so we can see in *Perspective as Symbolic Form* that Panofsky is using Renaissance linear perspective as a basis from which to approach other, more unfamiliar, forms of perspective such as his hypothesized Antique curvilinear perspective. Since *Perspective as Symbolic Form* is both an art theoretical investigation of the sense and significance of perspective and an art historical study of the forms of perspective in Western civilization, Renaissance linear perspective takes on the position of

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<sup>29</sup> Podro, "Panofsky: de la philosophie première au relativisme personnel," 65.

<sup>30</sup> Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Podro, "Panofsky: de la philosophie première au relativisme personnel," 65.

being the familiar conceptual reference point for the greater study, while also being part of its art historical subject matter; it becomes "l'artefact et l'objet de l'esprit aussi bien que son point de vue."<sup>32</sup> This is an astute observation on Podro's part, and if he is correct that Panofsky has fashioned the structure of his texts to mirror the structure of his arguments, then Panofsky's achievements as a writer are even more impressive than are commonly acknowledged. (The same tactic is employed in "The History of the Theory of Human Proportions as a Reflection of the History of Styles," which I will be discussing shortly.) But there is another parallel that Podro wants to bring to our attention, for according to him Panofsky's approach also makes Renaissance linear perspective "l'analogue de la philosophie Kantienne: la philosophie qui peut faire par comprendre la relation réciproque de l'esprit et du monde extérieur et la manière par laquelle l'expérience devient le produit de cette interaction. La perspective de la Renaissance est également considérée comme mettant cette relation entre l'esprit et le monde extérieur à la portée de notre compréhension et de notre contrôle."<sup>33</sup> This kind of claim will have to wait until my discussion of *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, but I would like to comment on what Podro says following this passage: "Ce qui notre discussion ici est que la position néo-kantienne ne présente plus à l'historien un point de vue d'Archimède trans-historique depuis l'extérieur du champ phénoménal de l'histoire";<sup>34</sup> rather, "Le système absolu ou le point d'Archimède est devenu la position

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<sup>32</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell appears not to be familiar with this paper by Podro, and this adversely affects his reading of *The Critical Historians of Art (and Perspective as Symbolic Form)*, for he says that Podro maintains that *Perspective as Symbolic Form* "makes a double (and contradictory) argument about Renaissance perspective: first, that 'it has no unique authority as a way of organizing the depiction of spatial relations, that it is simply part of one particular culture and has the same status as other modes of spatial depiction developed within other cultures'; second, that it 'provides an absolute viewpoint for interpreting other constructions'" (*Picture Theory*, 31). In pasting together two sentences from Podro, Mitchell creates the appearance of support for his position (which is declared in a parenthetical remark) that Panofsky's position is contradictory. However, from the discussion above we can see that Podro does not believe that Panofsky is involved in any such simple blunder.

<sup>33</sup> Podro, "Panofsky: de la philosophie première au relativisme personnel," 66.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

propre à la conscience néo-kantienne du début du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle."<sup>35</sup> I agree, in general, but being specific in this instance is very important, for Panofsky could see his way to giving up his Archimedean point because the philosophy of symbolic forms in particular, and not just Neo-Kantianism at the beginning of the twentieth century, had shown him how to ground the study of art immanently.<sup>36</sup>

Let us turn to the second matter concerning Panofsky's vision of how to ground art history that I said deserves closer comment. We know that the idea of the "artistic problem" is tied to the fundamental opposition of fullness and form, but what exactly do fullness and form refer to and how does their opposition relate to the artistic problem? Allow me to attempt to answer this through what might at first appear to be a digression. Ferretti argues that both Panofsky and Wind saw Riegl as the one who had the key insight into the nature of the artistic problem: "[Riegl] had discovered the nature of the problem in the tension--hidden in artistic reproduction but constantly active in it, a preestablished motif of the unceasing development of art--which draws a new problem from every solution, precisely because the latter is intimately antinomical. The problem is thus configured as the need to transcend contradictions. In fact Riegl read in the latent contrasts a historical factor of artistic development."<sup>37</sup> So, every solution is intimately antinomical, and because of that proposes new problems. What does this mean? For Panofsky, it means that every artistic product is the result of a negotiation between our opposing desires to accommodate the plenum of sensory experience and at the same time give it intelligible form, but as this negotiation necessarily thwarts the complete fulfillment of both desires, an inherent tension remains in the solution that at the same time suggests it as a problem that is capable of other resolutions. A passage in "On the Relationship between Art History and Art Theory" will

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> One last remark on Podro's reflections. If Podro is right that Panofsky uses Italian Renaissance perspective only as a foil and the methodological centre for his investigations, then he has taken some of the bite out of the accusations that Panofsky's approach in these papers is "Reno-centric."

<sup>37</sup> Ferretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg: Symbol, Art, an History*, 208.

help us develop this further: "This meeting between two opposing principles can be effected only due to the fact that the *apriori* necessity of an antithesis is corresponded by the equally *apriori* possibility of a synthesis. . . . If the opposition between '[fullness]' and 'form' is the *apriori* premise of the existence of artistic problems, the reciprocal action between 'time' and 'space' is the *apriori* condition of the possibility of their solution."<sup>38</sup> Leaving aside the last remark about time and space, let me try to tie this quote to what came before it. Fullness and form are the two principles that are linked in the fundamental opposition that defines art (an opposition that derives from our opposing desires to accommodate the plenum of sensory experience but at the same time form it); both are necessary but they are also necessarily antithetical, in that an attempt to recognize the plenitude of sense threatens to overwhelm our capacity to form it, and conversely our need to form sense threatens to impoverish it; but, as there must be a resolution of their opposition in order for there to be an art object, they must also necessarily be capable of being synthesized. However, as every resolution through synthesis retains the antinomical relation between the principles, any given solution to the artistic problem, i.e., the problem of resolving the opposition between fullness and form, will suggest that the resolution could have been other than what it was, thereby prompting further attempts at solving the fundamental artistic problem.<sup>39</sup> It is this kind of "dialectical" movement through antinomical relations that Panofsky and Wind have borrowed from Riegl in order to account for development in art's history. Note as well that Panofsky and Wind are still at one with Riegl in thwarting the traditional form/content distinction, for the fullness/form opposition, more than its objective/subjective predecessor or the proposal in the essay on Wölfflin, is an attempt to take over the form/content distinction and rethink it in such a way that the disputes that it generates can't be raised. We can now also see why I said earlier

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<sup>38</sup> Panofsky, "Über das Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zur Kunsttheorie," 50. Ferretti's translation, 209.

<sup>39</sup> We must remind ourselves that the language used here can be misleading, for the artistic problem is not a reality that precedes the solution, but a postulation that serves to make sense of and explain *post facto* the solution.

that while the objective/subjective opposition has undergone a reformulation and name change, the idea remains central to the new pair of concepts that Panofsky proposes.

The opposition between fullness and form is, as Panofsky said, the *a priori* premise for artistic problems. It is the equivalent of a category for art (whether there could or should be others is immaterial for our discussion). It is, then, a condition of possibility for anything being art that its existence as a representation embody a resolution of the fullness and form opposition, just as it is a condition of possibility for a judgment stating a natural law that it embody the category of causality. Furthermore, just as we operate with the category of causality only when we have an account of what is and what is not a causal connection, so we also need to be able to specify what characterizes a fullness and form resolution, and that is the role of Panofsky's sets of opposing values.

We can understand why Jan Bialostocki was tempted to give "On the Relationship between Art History and Art Theory" the subtitle "Prolegomena to Any Future Art History Which Could Claim to be a Science."<sup>40</sup> It is obvious that Panofsky has made a serious attempt to follow the lessons of the critical philosophy and set out the *Grundbegriffe* pertinent to art; however, there is a very important difference between Panofsky's prolegomena and Kant's *Prolegomena*: Kant's short, analytic work followed on the heels of his monumental, synthetic study that actually undertook the transcendental deduction of the categories. Panofsky has not done this, as he said in "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*," "The present essay aims not to undertake the deduction and systematization of such transcendental/aesthetic categories but merely to secure the concept of artistic volition in a purely critical manner against mistaken interpretations."<sup>41</sup> What Panofsky attempts in "On the Relationship between Art History and Art Theory" is to circumvent the transcendental

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<sup>40</sup> Bialostocki, "Erwin Panofsky (1893-1968): Thinker, Historian, Human Being," 73.

<sup>41</sup> Panofsky, "The Concept of Artistic Volition," 28. It is noteworthy that in the footnote that is attached to this quote Panofsky says that he hopes on a later occasion, perhaps numerous occasions, to take the task of actually deducing art's category equivalents. One would of thought that "On the Relationship between Art History and Art Theory" would have been the perfect opportunity.



deduction. What he offers in its stead is, it is true, a very sober and thorough reflection on what might be a good candidate for art's fundamental category, but without the actual deduction his proposal has no critical authority, and that unfortunately must be the final evaluation of Panofsky's philosophical efforts to derive the *Grundbegriffe* particular to the study of art.

The other theoretically oriented papers from this era, though not overtly concerned with finding a Neo-Kantian framework for art history, pursue issues that are related to the project put forth in "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*" and "On the Relationship between Art History and Art Theory." I would like to consider one last paper in this chapter that is connected to questions that have already been raised in our discussions of these essays. I mentioned earlier that in "The History of the Theory of Human Proportions as a Reflection of the History of Styles," as in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Panofsky's theoretical concerns are merged with art historical studies in a combination of what Podro called systematic and adaptive strategies for historical understanding. "The History of the Theory of Human Proportions" was originally published in 1921,<sup>42</sup> one year after "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*" and in the same period as "Albrecht Dürer and Classical Antiquity."<sup>43</sup> Because "The History of the Theory of Human Proportions" was written three years before "On the Relationship between Art History and Art Theory" the theoretical direction that it betrays is in line with the project of "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*," and I would like to look at it in this connection.

What Panofsky hopes to gain from a study of theories of human proportions is made quite clear in the opening paragraphs of the essay:

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<sup>42</sup> "The History of the Theory of Human Proportions as a Reflection of the History of Style" was originally published in German: Erwin Panofsky, "Die Entwicklung der Proportionslehre als Abbild der Stilentwicklung," *Monatshefte für Kunstwissenschaft* 14 (1921): 188-219.

<sup>43</sup> "Albrecht Dürer and Classical Antiquity" was originally published in German: Erwin Panofsky, "Dürers Stellung zur Antike," *Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* I (1921/22): 43-92.

There is a fundamental difference between the method of Polyclitus, between the procedure of Leonardo and the procedure of the Middle Ages--a difference so great and, above all, of such a character, that it reflects the basic differences between the art of Egypt and that of classical antiquity, between the art of Leonardo and that of the Middle Ages. If, in considering the various systems of proportions known to us, we try to understand their meaning rather than their appearance, if we concentrate not so much on the solution arrived at as on the formulation of the problem posed, they will reveal themselves as expressions of the same "artistic intention" (*Kunstwollen*) that was realized in the buildings, sculptures and paintings of a given period or a given artist. The history of the theory of proportions is the reflection of the history of style; furthermore, since we may understand each other unequivocally when dealing with mathematical formulations, it may even be looked upon as a reflection which often surpasses its original in clarity. One might assert that the theory of proportions expresses the frequently perplexing concept of the *Kunstwollen* in clearer or, at least, more definable fashion than art itself.<sup>44</sup>

We can see then in the most general statement of the aims of the essay that it is a straightforward extension of the Rieglian programme foreseen for art historical studies in "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*": the concept of *Kunstwollen* is to be more clearly and concretely specified by articulating it through something as precise and determinable as theories of human proportions. Such a study would provide a more concrete and specific mapping of subjectivistic/objectivistic resolutions.

In order to study the multitude of approaches that have been taken to proportions within the history of Western art a way must be found to order them and profitably compare them to one another. Panofsky's procedure for doing so begins with a distinction between what he terms "objective" proportions and "technical" proportions. Questions about objective proportions are questions about the actual proportions of human bodies. Technical proportions on the other hand relate to artistic concerns and artistic processes, as for example when artists worry about optical adjustments that have to be made for statues placed well above the location from which they will be viewed, or when they try to determine the length that a represented forearm should have if it is to be radically foreshortened in a painting. Having secured this distinction Panofsky then tells us that

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<sup>44</sup> Panofsky, "The History of the Theory of Human Proportions as a Reflection of the History of Style," 55-56.

"There were, therefore, three fundamentally different possibilities of pursuing a 'theory of human measurements.' This theory could aim either at the establishment of the 'objective' proportions, without troubling itself about their relation to the 'technical'; or at the establishment of the 'technical' proportions, without troubling itself about their relation to the 'objective'; or, finally, it could consider itself exempt from either choice, viz., where 'technical' and 'objective' proportions coincide with each other."<sup>45</sup> The last possibility was effected only once within the history of Western art and that was with Egyptian art. There are three conditions, Panofsky tells us, that can impede such an identification of technical proportions with objective measurements: first, the parts of the human body change their dimensions with movement; secondly, the artist naturally sees the subject foreshortened in certain respects; and thirdly and correspondingly, the viewer sees the finished work itself as foreshortened or distorted. Egyptian art ignored all of these and evolved a grid-based system of construction that could indicate to any craftsman under any circumstances how a figure should be organized. Once the craftsman received his instructions the result was a foregone conclusion. The Egyptian's absolute denial of the subjective conditions of viewing, Panofsky tells us, "clearly reflects their *Kunstwollen*, directed not toward the variable, but toward the constant, not toward the symbolization of the vital present, but toward the realization of a timeless eternity."<sup>46</sup>

The situation for Classical Greek art, which took into consideration all of the above conditions, was accordingly completely different: "Hence, the Greeks could not start out with a system of proportions which, in stipulating the 'objective' dimensions, also irrevocably set down the 'technical' ones. They could admit a theory of proportions only in so far as it allowed the artist the freedom to vary the 'objective' dimensions from case to case by a free rearrangement--in short, only in so far as it was limited to the role of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 61.

anthropometry."<sup>47</sup> A system of proportions such as the famous canon of Polyclitus could then, in Panofsky's estimation, only be of a purely anthropometric character, that is, it provided an organic way of determining the proportions of the normal human being; it could not predetermine technical measurements for a work of art. Apart from being organic as opposed to mechanical, the Greek approach was also normative and aesthetic in that it aimed at capturing beauty, which it did through a numerical representation of the relation of the parts to the whole in terms of common fractions. And, as in the case in Egyptian art, this is a reflection of the Classical Greek *Kunstwollen*, for if we look into the philosophical doctrines of the era we find that, "With the sole exception of Plotinus and his followers, classical aesthetics identified the principle of beauty with the consonance of the parts with each other and the whole."<sup>48</sup>

The situation is again different when we turn to the Medieval period, as we can see in this compact passage where Panofsky compares it to the two eras previously discussed:

Thus the Middle Ages faced the same choice as classical Greece; but it was forced to elect the opposite alternative. The Egyptian theory of proportions, identifying the "technical" with the "objective" dimensions, had been able to combine the characteristics of anthropometry with those of a system of construction; the Greek theory of proportions, abolishing this identity, had been forced to renounce the ambition to determine the "technical" dimensions; the mediaeval system renounced the ambition to determine the "objective" ones: it restricted itself to organizing the planar aspect of the picture. Where the Egyptian method had been constructional, and that of classical antiquity anthropometric, that of the Middle Ages may be described as schematic.<sup>49</sup>

The basic principle of planimetric schematization in Medieval art is interpreted in different ways in the Byzantine and the Gothic traditions, for brevity though let us just consider what Panofsky has to say about Byzantine art. The theory of human proportions corresponding to this tradition is still connected, though distantly, to classical models in

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 73.

that it took the organic arrangement of the human body as its point of departure. But it turned against the classical *Kunstwollen* when it replaced measurement through common fractions with a modular system founded on the grosser divisions of the human body, which, furthermore, could be reduced to simple drawing procedures based on geometrical construction. Panofsky claims that this approach had its origins in Eastern, particularly Arabic, traditions that involved number mysticism and harmonistic cosmologies, though the planimetric and schematic intent of the Byzantine *Kunstwollen* became separated from this as well. "But," Panofsky informs us, "it is not by accident that the Byzantine studio practice adopted a system of measurement formulated for an entirely different purpose and finally forgot its cosmological origin altogether,"<sup>50</sup> for what this reconceived practice had to fulfill or realize was the unique Byzantine *Kunstwollen*.

The Italian Renaissance presents yet another set of circumstances in that it "looked upon the theory of proportions with unbounded reverence; but it considered it, unlike the Middle Ages, no longer as a technical expedient but as the realization of a metaphysical postulate."<sup>51</sup> "[In] so far as the mediaeval theory of proportions followed the line of harmonistic cosmology, it had no relation to art; and in so far as it stood in relation to art, it had degenerated into a code of practical rules which had lost all connection with harmonistic cosmology."<sup>52</sup> Only in the Italian Renaissance, Panofsky argues, do these two currents merge again:

The theory of human proportions was seen as both a prerequisite of artistic production and an expression of the pre-established harmony between microcosm and macrocosm; and it was seen, moreover, as the rational basis of beauty. The Renaissance fused, we may say, the cosmological interpretation of the theory of human proportions, current in Hellenistic times and the Middle Ages, with the classical notion of "symmetry" as the fundamental principle of aesthetic perfection. As a synthesis was sought between the mystical spirit and the rational, between Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism, so was the theory of proportions interpreted

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

both from the point of view of harmonistic cosmology and normative aesthetics; it seemed to bridge the gap between Late-Hellenistic fantasy and classical, Polyclitan order. Perhaps the theory of proportions appeared so infinitely valuable to the thinking of the Renaissance precisely because only this theory--mathematical and speculative at the same time--could satisfy the disparate spiritual needs of the age.<sup>53</sup>

This unique placement of the theory of proportions is also mirrored in the Renaissance's way of treating the relation between technical and objective proportions. Like Classical Greek art, Renaissance art takes into consideration the three subjective conditions that can impede the identification of technical proportions with objective measurements. But Renaissance artistic practice doesn't just recognize the existence of these conditions it rationalizes them in artistic procedure: "It was, therefore, a fundamental innovation when the Renaissance supplemented anthropometry with both a physiological (and psychological) theory of movement and a mathematically exact theory of perspective."<sup>54</sup> The Renaissance, then, found a way of accounting for both objective and technical proportions and the relation between them, and this is what distinguishes and sets it off from the other epochs of the history of Western art. Having come to this conclusion, Panofsky makes a statement that is central to his early essays and pertinent to my concerns: "Those who like to interpret historical facts symbolically may recognize in this the spirit of a specifically 'modern' conception of the world which permits the subject to assert itself against the object as something independent and equal; whereas classical antiquity did not yet permit the explicit formulation of this contrast; and whereas the Middle Ages believed the subject as well as the object to be submerged in a higher unity."<sup>55</sup> What Panofsky is suggesting is that we see Renaissance art theory as analogical to Kantian epistemology, in that both assign equal significance to the subject and the object in the act of apprehension. So, like pre-Kantian philosophies that gave too much significance to one side or the other

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 89-90.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

in the relation of knowing, theories of art that preceded the Renaissance did not, as the study of the history of human proportions has shown, find an apt balance or resolution between the objective and the subjective. Because Renaissance art theory achieves this balance, and because it represents "the 'modern' conception of the world" that is still fundamental to our own, it can act as both the foil and the stable conceptual Archimedean point from which we can survey and comprehend art that is more distant and does not derive from our world conception.

We note here as well that the objective/subjective opposition that was invoked in "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*" is in effect, for the distinction between objective and technical proportions is also "an expression of the possible intellectual attitude of the artistic ego toward the artistic object": Egyptian art is again characterized as an art given over to the object rather than to our apprehension of it; and, similarly, Classical Greek art once more finds itself located near the subjective pole as an art that fully recognizes the constitutive role of the viewer's gaze. The balance or resolution that a type of art finds for objective and technical proportions is another aspect of the greater resolution that it achieves between objectivistic and subjectivistic artistic elements. But now Panofsky can be more specific about how to state the objective/subjective opposition, as "the theory of proportions expresses the frequently perplexing concept of the *Kunstwollen* in clearer or, at least, more definable fashion than art itself."

Another feature of Panofsky's discussion that we should remark on, and I have quoted him at length in the preceding pages in order to provide substantiation of this, is that like both Hegel and Riegl he is very intent on tying artistic elements to a civilization's *Weltanschauung*, e.g., "Perhaps the theory of proportions appeared so infinitely valuable to the thinking of the Renaissance precisely because only this theory--mathematical and speculative at the same time--could satisfy the disparate spiritual needs of the age," etc. This is then conjoined with Riegl's "Hegelian" conception of how one era gives way to another in the oppositional development inherent in the problems fundamental to art, which

is set out in Panofsky's schema of the different ways in which cultures have resolved the conflict between objective and technical proportions. Because theories of proportions shift with fundamental attitudinal changes the conclusion naturally follows that they are *ipso facto* a reflection of the history of style, because, as was discussed in Chapter IX, style provides the most direct connection to the spiritual life of another civilization. They reveal a *Kunstwollen*, but they do not define it because they disclose only one aspect of it. In relation to "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*," they further articulate the objectivistic/subjectivistic opposition.

I would like to conclude this chapter by discussing some issues that concern the interpretation of the project of Panofsky's early art theoretical essays. I will let Michael Podro introduce the first one: "In a series of papers between 1915 and 1927, Panofsky revived the Hegelian project of constructing an absolute viewpoint from which to regard the art of the past, a viewpoint from which the inner structure of all works of art could be made clear. The inner structure was assumed to be thought-like in ways which, broadly, correspond to those which Hegel had seen in art."<sup>56</sup> For my purposes, the second sentence is the most important, and within it the salient word is 'thought-like.' What Podro means by 'thought-like' is not that problematic, at least not generally, given his reference to Hegel. How he interprets what Hegel is saying is unavoidably a more complex matter, though he does give us some indications in *The Critical Historians of Art*. Podro introduces our topic with a quotation from Hegel's *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*: "Just as the works of Apelles or Sophocles would not have appeared to Raphael and Shakespeare--had they know them--as mere preliminary studies, but as a kindred force of the Spirit, so Reason cannot regard its former shapes as merely preludes to itself . . . ."<sup>57</sup> Immediately following this Podro says:

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<sup>56</sup> Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, 178.

<sup>57</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 89.



Taking as our starting point this passage, we might put a problem implicit in Hegel's aesthetics like this: Raphael may be able to recognize his affinities with Apelles, Shakespeare with Sophocles, and so Hegel might recognize Plato not only as precursor but as having his own un superseded vision. But how can Hegel as a philosopher have a comparable affinity with Raphael or Shakespeare? Philosophy is not writing plays or painting pictures, so the kind of affinity which makes one artist available and a challenge to another does not seem to carry across to the relation between philosopher and the art to which he addresses himself. Artists adapt, re-interpret and resist the influence of other artists, but how could a philosopher have such intimate relations with paintings or plays? How can paintings challenge his thought, make him think differently? The question is not: how can painting be the object of discursive thought? but how can painting be *thought-like*, or how can thought conduct itself in painting?<sup>58</sup>

Another way of putting this is how can art participate in the realization of Idea in Philosophy? If art is to be overcome but yet nevertheless in some fashion retained in Philosophy as Absolute Spirit's terminus, how is art comprehended by Philosophy as thought? I can only provide the outline of an answer. We already know that Hegel believes that at different moments in history consciousness's relation to the world assumes different forms, and that these forms are articulated by artists in art works, which "call forth in the Spirit a sound and echo of the depths of consciousness. In this way the sensuous aspect of art is spiritualized, since in art the spirit appears made sensuous."<sup>59</sup> In other words, although art as sensuous is not discursive, it still, as embodied spirit, presents us with examples of thought's fundamental relations to the world. We can make this clearer through an actual example from Hegel. In discussing the various stages of art, Hegel says of Classical Greek art that in it Spirit arrives at a stage in which it can recognize itself in art, that is, it sees in classical sculpture's spiritually infused forms an appropriate presentation of its own sense of how mind permeates matter in human being. This art then becomes reflective and reflexive because mind self-consciously recognizes that the art object is a suitable expression of its self-understanding. It is in this limited sense, I believe, that Podro

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<sup>58</sup> Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, 18.

<sup>59</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 39.

claims that Panofsky sees art in his early essays as "thought-like," though Panofsky's connection to this notion is by way of Riegl's art history, and is not couched in traditional Hegelian terms (it is through Riegl that Panofsky finds the fundamental concepts that can serve as the categories for art, and provide the basis for an authoritative viewpoint from which the present can comprehend the art of the past).

In *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* Michael Ann Holly appears to reaffirm Podro's analysis, but a careful examination of Holly's remarks reveals that there is an important discrepancy between the position that I have outlined above and her interpretation of it, which is worth pursuing because it leads, by a shift of emphasis, to an understanding of Panofsky's work that is not tenable, and because it grants us an opportunity to evaluate some of Holly's arguments that bear on the issues of this chapter.

The discrepancy that I alluded to becomes evident in this sentence: "With its grounding in neo-Kantian epistemology, much of the essay [The Concept of *Kunstwollen*], it is true, can be read as an effort to discover how 'works of art are like special kinds of discursive thought'."<sup>60</sup> The quote within this sentence is a remark she attributes to Michael Podro in a graduate seminar at the University of Essex in 1976. I of course wasn't present when Podro spoke, but I find it difficult to believe that what he said had this sense, for if Panofsky had believed that art objects are discursive, then there would have been no point to the discussion of Hegel's aesthetics that we just worked our way through--Podro's question after all was how does Panofsky see works of visual art as "thought-like," if they if not discursive. If they were, then Podro's question would not be a particularly problematic one.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, 96.

<sup>61</sup> It is true that Holly claims that Podro made this remark in 1976, which was six years before the publication of *The Critical Historians of Art*. Perhaps he changed his mind in the interim. But I haven't found anything in *The Critical Historians of Art*, or other writings, that leads me to conclude that Podro believed that Panofsky saw art objects in this fashion.

Some of the arguments Holly advances that pertain to Panofsky's philosophical plans for the concept of *Kunstwollen* are also questionable. I have in a number of places in the preceding chapters tried to indicate that Holly did not have an adequate understanding of Hegel's philosophy when she wrote her book (which was her Ph. D. dissertation for Cornell University). I would now like to argue that she did not understand Kantianism and its relation to Panofsky's art history as well as she should have. Consider this representative excerpt: "Without providing specific details, Panofsky has advocated the delineation of a generally applicable intellectual procedure in art historical interpretation . . . He has suggested that we need to discover a single permanent Archimedean viewpoint from which to interpret various cultural artifacts, for the artifacts and the cultural complexes they embody offer only intrinsic principles of interpretation."<sup>62</sup> The problem is with the word 'interpretation.' In this context 'interpretation' is ambiguous, and I believe that Holly comes down on the wrong side of the ambiguity. The word that would have been unambiguous is 'understanding,' as in the phrase "Panofsky attempts a transcendental critique of art historical understanding." With some slack 'interpretation' can be substituted for 'understanding' in this context, but I am certain that this is not what Holly is doing, for the rest of the passage points in a different direction. Contrary to what Holly maintains, Panofsky has not "advocated the delineation of a generally applicable intellectual procedure in art historical interpretation," he is not interested at all in suggesting a procedure or method that we can use to interpret all works of art. To speak of interpretation in this way is to propose that Panofsky is engaged in the more usual art historical task of providing principles with which to study a certain genre or body of work, as, say, Michael Fried does in *Absorption and Theatricality*, where he discusses the importance of absorptive involvement and the denial of the beholder in eighteenth-century French painting.<sup>63</sup> As I

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<sup>62</sup> Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, 95.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

hope my arguments in this chapter have demonstrated, Panofsky's concerns are critical or transcendental and to construe what he is doing as interpretive is to be fundamentally mistaken about what he is recommending to the study of the history of art.<sup>64</sup>

As further confirmation that Holly does not understand the Neo-Kantian approach Panofsky is taking, consider what she has to say about his statement that "artistic volition [*Kunstwollen*] cannot be anything except (and not for us, but objectively) what 'lies' in the artistic phenomenon as its ultimate meaning":

First of all, a strong positivist faith is implicit in the view that an analyst can be "objective" about the material with which he or she is dealing and can offer a valid interpretation not just for the present but for all times ("not for us but objectively"). The sentiment arose from--or perhaps opposed--a general relativist despair. Theorists at the beginning of this century from a variety of fields hoped to free their scholarship from value judgments and cultural preconceptions: they aimed, in other words, to make their studies conform to the established principles of scientific discourse. In this article, certainly, Panofsky proved to be no exception. Still, despite the climate of opinion, we would expect to find Panofsky more subtle in his use of the notion of objectivity for several reasons, primarily because he had been addressing himself publicly to the issue on and off for some time.<sup>65</sup>

The first sentence alone clinches my argument. Panofsky is not talking about an ideal of scholarly objectivity, about some imagined state of prejudiceless apprehension in which the way things really are is revealed in their eternal historical truth. None of the critical historians of art were this naive. Certainly Panofsky wasn't, who, as Holly herself reminds us, was noted for his contributions to the analysis of the idea of objectivity. But all this is beside the point, as is the lecture that Holly gives Panofsky for his carelessness, since he meant something completely other by the phrase "and not for us, but objectively." As our investigations have shown, in this context what 'objectively' is referring to is the status that *Kunstwollen* has as a category; it is "objective" because it is art's equivalent of an *a priori*

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<sup>64</sup> For further confirmation of my claim that she is confounding a transcendental analysis with a search for interpretative principles, see her discussions on pp. 79-80, 82, and 88. Podro also sometimes uses 'interpretative' in his discussions, but I maintain that his usage suggests that he understands it transcendentially; see *The Critical Historians of Art*, 179-180.

<sup>65</sup> Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, 89.

concept, it is a condition of possibility for artistic phenomena. Holly should have been aware of this, as it is the central idea of Panofsky's essay, and the conclusion that I would delicately like to draw from the fact that she wasn't is that she did not understand the Neo-Kantian basis of Panofsky's project.<sup>66</sup>

The last text that I would like to discuss in this section is Margaret Iverson's "Postscript on Panofsky: Three Early Essays," which is the final chapter of *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*. Iverson focuses on "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*," "The History of the Theory of the Human Proportions," and *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, but what she has to say is germane to the greater undertaking that connects all of the essays we have been considering. Iverson too believes that Panofsky's Neo-Kantian model led him too close to seeing art from the point of view of epistemology. Iverson's grasp of the conceptual structure and the aims of Kant's philosophy is though secure, which is immediately apparent in a passage such as this one, which deftly makes a crucial distinction overlooked by Holly: "Der Begriff des *Kunstwollens*' is not so much an interpretation of Riegl's concept as an appropriation and reformulation of it. Panofsky regarded the concept as the nearest art history had come to finding a general principle that would make art susceptible of systematic interpretation and render our critical judgments objectively valid. Such judgments are only possible, however, if the works themselves contain a concept or a principle of intelligibility that holds the various components of the work together with *necessity*."<sup>67</sup> The crucial distinction is the one made between general principles and critical judgments, which Holly confounded by conflating transcendental questions with interpretative ones. In "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*" Panofsky is not interested in providing interpretative standards for critical judgments but in unearthing the *a priori* principles that will allow us to know which ones are relevant to artistic phenomena.

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<sup>66</sup> If further evidence be needed, there is this sentence: "He was determined to find a principle of interpretation . . . that in no way could arise from within the artistic phenomenon itself," which in fact says the opposite of what Panofsky maintains.

<sup>67</sup> Iverson, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*, 152-153.

There are omissions though in Iverson's vision of Kant that foretell where her reading of Panofsky's essays is going to take a path that diverges from the one I have been urging us to follow:

Panofsky carried forward Riegl's project, but he did so with a somewhat different set of priorities. Chief among them was his effort to find an absolute viewpoint, an Archimedean point, in relation to which all the products of art could be authoritatively understood. He seems to have found too diffuse Riegl's multiple typology of styles equivalent in value. In Panofsky's hands, Riegl's sliding scale of possible relations to the world between a predominantly objective outlook and a subjective one got collapsed into the dual necessary conditions of knowledge as described by Kant. Because, in Panofsky's scheme, they constitute conditions of knowledge, the question of the optimum relation between them is crucial. There must be a just balance between sensuous receptivity and active mental formulation.<sup>68</sup>

There are three claims that I would like to underline in this passage. The first two occur in the sentence "In Panofsky's hands, Riegl's sliding scale of possible relations to the world between a predominantly objective outlook and a subjective one got collapsed into the dual necessary conditions of knowledge as described by Kant." The first claim concerns Iverson's assertion that Panofsky renounced Riegl's objective/subjective scale for a model with a single viewpoint applicable to all artistic phenomena. This is a very misleading way of stating the transformation that Riegl's position undergoes in Panofsky's hands. To begin with, nothing of the sort takes place in "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*"; true, the scale is no longer explained in Riegl's terms, but it nevertheless remains a scale. I assume then that the true targets of Iverson's statement are the texts on human proportions and perspective. In making this criticism, she is alluding to is the way in which Panofsky uses Renaissance art theory as the viewpoint and comparative basis for his studies of other eras. According to Iverson, the role given to the Renaissance theory of proportions and system of perspective reveals the "normative aesthetic implied by Panofsky's early essays."<sup>69</sup> "Panofsky's

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 149-150.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 150.

appropriation of Riegl's concept . . . turned it into a gauge that measures other styles as lacking in relation to the ideal of Renaissance art."<sup>70</sup> But it is not necessary to interpret the structure of these texts in this way. Recall that Michael Podro proposed that we view the analytical strategy of these texts as mirroring the hermeneutical strategies explored in the papers on Dürer and Vasari, that is, as starting from what is nearest to one's culture in order to be able to comprehend what is most distant from it. In proceeding in this fashion one may of course wind up positing one's norms as the evaluative basis for other societies, but that is not the only possibility. To make her argument Iverson will have to do more than note that Panofsky uses the Renaissance as a comparative basis; she will have to demonstrate either that Panofsky isn't using his norms as this type of hermeneutical starting point, or that the analytical strategy is itself prejudiced.

The second claim, though it occurs in the same sentence as the first, is about quite another issue. I find Iverson's statement that Panofsky collapsed Riegl's scale "into the dual necessary conditions of knowledge as described by Kant" to be a curious thing to say. I gather that the phrase "the dual necessary conditions of knowledge" refers to what Kant called sensibility and understanding, and their necessary relation in the production of empirical knowledge. This is a curious thing to say because it treats this complex as though it were something like a non-variable alternative to Riegl's scale of objective/subjective resolutions, which is emphatically not the case, because understanding and sensibility are not two poles of an opposition that characterizes consciousness's relation to the world; rather, their existence and union (as faculties or powers) is a transcendental condition for any such relation--it is not as though somehow the Egyptians got by with less from sensation and more from understanding, while the Romans had more sensation and less understanding. Furthermore, two different epistemological orders are being conflated in Iverson's critique: the relation that Kant describes between sensibility and understanding is, as I stated above, one that concerns faculties or powers, whereas Riegl's

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

objective/subjective opposition is being enlisted to serve as a category. Although Panofsky does not explicitly make this distinction, in my judgment he proceeds in accordance with it.

The third claim that I would like to examine, in the quotation with which this discussion opened, follows the sentence on Riegl's sliding scale being collapsed into Kant's dual necessary conditions of knowledge. It adds: "Because, in Panofsky's scheme, they constitute conditions of knowledge, the question of the optimum relation between them is crucial." In this sentence, like the one before it, the troublesome phrase is "conditions of knowledge." Like Holly Iverson maintains that in these early works Panofsky is extending Kant's epistemological model for empirical knowledge to the study of art. The *Kunstwollen* paper however is apparently exempt from this characterization, for she says that it "is essentially an attempt to make analogies between art and knowledge and between systematic art history and epistemology work," and I assume that she wouldn't use the word 'analogies' unless she was in accord with Panofsky's statement that his paper is built on a "*comparison* from epistemology." Panofsky makes it quite clear in a number of places in the essay that he is not trying to assimilate artistic questions to epistemological ones, e.g., "Just as a particular epistemological essence belonged to the proposition 'the air is elastic' when it was considered in the light of causality (and only thus), so an immanent meaning can be discovered in the objects of aesthetics"<sup>71</sup> -- propositions have cognitive content, artworks have immanent meaning. Iverson's statement must then be meant to apply only to the texts on human proportions and perspective. So, why does she think that in these two texts Panofsky has abandoned Riegl's art history for Kant's epistemology? Her motivation seems to derive from two statements that Panofsky makes that suggest some correspondence between his models and Kant's philosophy. The first is the one from "The History of the Theory of Proportions" that states that the Renaissance system is "a specifically 'modern' conception of the world which permits the subject to assert itself

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<sup>71</sup> Panofsky, "The Concept of Artistic Volition," 27-28.



against the object as something independent and equal,"<sup>72</sup> that is, it is like Kantian epistemology in recognizing the equal contribution of the world and the subject. The second comes from *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, where Panofsky claims that, in Iverson's words, "Perspective's transformation of the experience of space into a mathematical system is compared with Kantian epistemology, for both are said to achieve an 'objectification of the subjective'."<sup>73</sup> But it is a far too hasty inference to conclude from such statements that Panofsky is directly transferring Kant's epistemological model to the history of art. A more justifiable conclusion would be that Panofsky is trying to place his theories within a general philosophical orientation that is Kantian. He is not applying a cognitive model to art--he is attempting to fashion an approach that achieves for the study of art what Kant achieved for empirical knowledge. We will return to this question in the final chapter on *Perspective as Symbolic Form*.

My main goal in this chapter was to provide an exposition of what the concept of *Kunstwollen* meant for Panofsky, how he intended to use it as a category equivalent for the understanding of art, and how that undertaking was developed and transformed in the movement between "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*," "On the Relationship Between Art History and Art Theory," and "The History of the Theory of Human Proportions as a Reflection of the History of Styles." I also indicated some of the ways in which, in relation to the issues of this chapter, Panofsky's purely theoretical works connect to his more straightforward art historical studies. And, finally, I tried to further illuminate both of these matters by examining some important contemporary evaluations of Panofsky's early essays.

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<sup>72</sup> Panofsky, "The History of the Theory of Human Proportions as a Reflection of the History of Styles," 99.

<sup>73</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 123.

## CHAPTER XII

### "THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICAL TIME" AND "THE PROBLEM OF THE DESCRIPTION OF WORKS OF VISUAL ART AND THE INTERPRETATION OF THEIR CONTENT"

In this penultimate chapter I would like to discuss the two last members of the group of essays that is usually taken to define Panofsky's early art theoretical papers: "Zum Problem der historischen Zeit," "The Problem of Historical Time," and "Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst," "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art and the Interpretation of Their Content".<sup>1</sup> Neither of these essays have received much attention in the literature with which I am concerned, though they both raise issues that are relevant to understanding the background for and arguments in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, and I would thus like to consider those aspects of them that are most pertinent to my inquiry.

"The Problem of Historical Time" was an appendix to "Über die Reihenfolge der vier Meister von Reims,"<sup>2</sup> which, as the title suggests, was a discussion of the succession of styles in the construction and decoration of the Reims cathedral. Panofsky wrote "Über die Reihenfolge der vier Meister von Reims" as a contribution to the then ongoing debate on how to best conceive the stylistic overlappings characteristic of this famous monument. After taking up a position on the art historical question central to the debate, in "The

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<sup>1</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "Zum Problem der historischen Zeit," in *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft*, ed. H. Oberer (Berlin: E. Verheyen, 1974), 77-83. And Erwin Panofsky, "Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst," in *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft*, ed. H. Oberer (Berlin: E. Verheyen, 1974), 85-97.

<sup>2</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "Über die Reihenfolge der vier Meister von Reims," *Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* (1927): 55-82.

Problem of Historical Time" Panofsky turned to a greater contemporary controversy: the difference between the natural sciences and the cultural sciences. Although embedded in this larger dispute, Panofsky's essay directly addresses only the question of whether there is a conception of time in cultural studies that is distinct from the measure of astronomical time characteristic of natural scientific inquiry. He vigorously argues that there is:

First of all, we must recognize something that intuitively the art historian finds completely natural, and this is that there is no identity of any sort between historical (cultural) time and astronomical (natural) time. Thus, when the historian says "in 1500" he does not want to speak of a point in time as something set, such that between itself and another point in time fixed by convention there would have been one thousand five hundred rotations of the earth around the sun, but of a point in time whose sense is not only characterized by certain concrete "historical events," but equally by certain concrete cultural particularities. And everyone knows that the expression "the sixth decade of the fourteenth century" in historical language and thought has a totally different significance according to whether the historian is thinking of Byzantium or the Occident, of Italy or Germany, and even of Cologne or Schwäbisch Gmünd. In fact, historical time is always dependent upon a certain historical space; only, we can no more identify this historical space with geographical space than we could identify historical time with astronomical time.<sup>3</sup>

For cultural historians, Panofsky tells us, the concepts of time and space above all signify *unities of meaning*, which in the history of art primarily concern stylistic unities that cover multiplicities of phenomena and unite them in well-ordered wholes. As these unities of meaning are constructed rather than discovered, the historian of art is faced with a world constituted by a seemingly infinite variety of systems of reference in which relations in time

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<sup>3</sup> Panofsky, "Zum Problem der historischen Zeit," 77-78. This and all further passages from "Zum Problem der historischen Zeit" have been rendered into English by me. The German reads: "Nun müssen wir zunächst ohne weiteres die dem Kunsthistoriker instinktiv selbstverständliche Tatsache zugeben, dass die historische (Kultur-)Zeit in keiner Weise mit der astronomischen (Natur-)Zeit identisch ist: wenn der Historiker „um 1500“ sagt, so meint er damit nicht einen Zeitpunkt, an dem seit einem konventionell fixierten Anfangstermin 1500 Erdumläufe um die Sonne stattgefunden haben, sondern er meint einen Zeitpunkt, der nicht nur durch bestimmte konkrete „Ereignisse“, sondern auch durch bestimmte konkrete Kultureigentümlichkeiten sinnmässig charakterisiert ist. Und jeder weiss, dass „das sechste Jahrzehnt des 14. Jahrhunderts“ (von dem bekannten Unterschied zwischen den Zwanzigjährigen und Sechzigjährigen ganz abgesehen) für den historischen Sprach- und Denkenbrauch in Byzanz etwas ganz anderes „bedeutet“ als im Abendland, in Italien etwas ganz anderes als in Deutschland, und selbst in Köln noch etwas anderes als in Schwäbisch-Gmünd. Damit erweist sich die historische Zeit als jeweils abhängig von einem bestimmten historischen Raum; allein--und das ist hiermit implizit bereits gesagt--dieser historische Raum ist seinerseits ebensowenig dem geographischen gleichzusetzen, als die historische Zeit mit der astronomischen identifiziert werden dürfte . . . ."

and space are mutually defined and interrelated. Each of these systems of reference furnishes a framework within which to examine a certain parcel of historical space in relationship to a certain duration of historical time, or vice versa. However, if this line of thought is pursued the question immediately arises of how these unities of meaning could themselves find a greater unity? Given their apparent lack of homogeneity, don't they find themselves frozen in an isolation *selbstgenügsamer*, sufficient unto themselves?<sup>4</sup>

Panofsky claims that his analysis does not force us to give up the idea that the greater historical world is an ordered one, but we do have to recognize that its order is of a secondary nature. Our individual systems of reference and the unities of meaning that they create have to be attached to the exigencies and established orders of natural time and natural space, so that we can say things such as, to use Panofsky's example, that Filippino Lippi lived a certain length of astronomical time and that during it he worked in certain precisely locatable geographical domains, and that he was able to see the works of Masaccio but that Masaccio was not able to see his. The unity that can be found for the greater historical world results from our persistent efforts to connect our systems of reference to the accepted referents of the natural order. And we succeed at this because

These "unities of meaning," more or less vast, that we discern in the phenomena of history are at the same time unities of effectiveness that precisely link these phenomena *in concreto*. For these larger or smaller systems of reference in which we see the symbol of a common membership, significative and so to speak purely static, are at the same time systems of relations inside of which and between which one can prove that there exist dynamic relationships. These are the relationships that political history has the habit of calling "goal" and "consequent," "cause" and "effect," "action" and reaction," while the history of art describes them as "influence" and "receptivity," "suggestion" and "taking a stance," "translation" and "progress." Discovering them is not the goal but the necessary result of any critical study of stylistic grouping.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Panofsky remarks at this point that his analysis has a number of points in common with Georg Simmel's in "Das Problem der historischen Zeit," *Philosophische Vorträge der Kantgesellschaft* (Berlin, 1916), 6. This is somewhat odd, as Silvia Ferretti also notes in *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg: Symbol, Art, and History*, 217, in that Panofsky's analysis doesn't in fact have that much in common with Simmel's.

<sup>5</sup> Panofsky, "Zum Problem der historischen Zeit," 80: "Jene engeren oder weiteren „Sinneinheiten“ die wir in die historischen Erscheinungen hineinschauen, bedeuten zugleich auch Wirkungseinheiten, die eben die Erscheinungen in concerto miteinander verbinden: jene kleineren oder grösseren Bezugssysteme, in denen wir eine sinnhafte und gleichsam rein statische Zusammengehörigkeit sich symbolisieren sehen, sind zugleich

Natural time and natural space are then the constants by reference to which our unities of meaning are also comprehended as unities of effectiveness. What characterizes a phenomenon as historical is precisely that, on the one hand, it presents itself as a structure of sense that is independent of natural time and space and, on the other hand, that it is nevertheless fixed to moments in astronomical time and locations in physical space. So, to again use an example from Panofsky, if a bolt of lightning strikes the earth it remains historically inconsequential, regardless of its precisely determinable coordinates, if it doesn't enter a context of signification, as it would by, say, killing an important person or setting fire to a notable monument. Conversely, an object of art for which the origin and era are unknown, remains outside of the realm of the historical, regardless of its apparent sense, if it can't be inserted into a context delimited by astronomical time and geographical space.

It is only with this understanding of historical time and its relation to natural time, Panofsky continues, that we can make sense of the paradoxes that usually accompany the notion and explain why, for instance, the concept of contemporaneity is almost useless from an art historical perspective when an African sculpture from around 1530 is spoken of as being contemporaneous with Michelangelo's 'Medici Madonna.' Astronomical contemporaneousness and historical contemporaneousness connect according to the extent that relationships can be discerned between unities of meaning and unities of effectiveness. The greater the number of the relations the more plausible it becomes to treat them in tandem; so, with two objects such as the African sculpture and the 'Medici Madonna,' the paucity of relations makes speaking of them in the same breath almost ludicrous, whereas

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Beziehungssysteme, innerhalb derer, und zwischen denen, sich dynamische Zusammenhänge nachweisen lassen. Zusammenhänge, die die politische Historie als „Zweck“ und „Folge“, „Ursache“ und „Wirkung“, „Aktion“ und „Gegenaktion“ anzusprechen pflegt -- während die Kunstgeschichte sie mit Ausdrücken wie „Einfluss“ und „Rezeption“, „Anregung“ und „Stellungnahme“, „Tradition“ und „Weiterbildung“ bezeichnet--, und deren Aufdeckung nicht zwar das Ziel, wohl aber das zwangsläufige Ergebnis jeder stilkritischen Gruppierungsarbeit ist."

the opposite obtains in the case of Picasso's 'Portrait of Ambroise Vollard' and Barque's 'The Portuguese.' To place a work in historical time, to "date" it, in the fullest sense of the term, comes down to this: "to date' is to determine, that is to say to seek out (at the primary level) all of the small systems of reference that in each instance one can discern united in the phenomenon to be analyzed, and (at the secondary level) to fix this cross-referencing in the flow of natural time."<sup>6</sup>

Panofsky concludes by briefly commenting on how his analysis also helps us to better understand the idea of continuity in art. The more we learn about individual works, and the more that we can situate them within various systems of reference, the better we can discern the overlappings that unite and separate them. Thus, what is disclosed to us is their distance from or proximity to each other both historically and as objects related in the natural order of succession. And this in turn allows us to state how works similarly situated in natural time can be historically non contemporaneous, and vice-versa.

If we turn now to tying "The Problem of Historical Time" to the other essays that we have so far considered, one way of establishing a connection is to make what might appear to be a slight detour, and briefly discuss a figure important to Panofsky and Cassirer's vision of cultural studies who has thus far been barely mentioned, i.e., Aby Warburg. Both Panofsky and Cassirer (though especially Cassirer) developed an attachment to Warburg through their association with the Bibliothek Warburg when they were teaching at the University of Hamburg, before the Nazis forced its evacuation to London, where it became the Warburg Institute and Library. Panofsky is indebted to Warburg in many ways, but his most well-known debt is to Warburg's iconology, from which Panofsky developed his iconological method.<sup>7</sup> Warburg's approach was founded on

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 81: "„Datieren“ heisst Abstimmen, d.h. (primär) Aufsuchen aller kleinsten jeweils erkennbaren Bezugssysteme, die in der zu betrachteten Erscheinung gleichsam zum Schnitte gelangen, und (sekundär) Fixieren dieses Schnittpunktes im Verlauf der Naturzeit."

<sup>7</sup> William Heckscher cites Warburg's address to the Tenth International Congress of Art History in Rome in October 1912 as the event that marks the official birth of iconology. Warburg, in discussing the investigations that he was leading into the cosmological ideas represented in themes from the zodiac in the Schifanoia Palace, described his work as "an iconological analysis which does not allow itself to be

the belief that there are correspondences or parallels inherent to different cultural forms, which is why he canvassed the depth and breadth of human culture in search of connections that united the expression of human experience. There is constancy in human experience, and this is evident for Warburg in what he called "pathos formulas," which are lasting representations of life that, because of their deep-rootedness in the elemental human forms of engagement with the world, return and reestablish themselves throughout history. Warburg's influence is most obvious in Panofsky's iconological method in the expansion of Panofsky's understanding of what can be considered as material relevant to art history, but it can also be seen in some of the topics that came to be of long-standing interest to Panofsky, especially the idea of representations that endure in the passage from one civilization to another. Two particularly Warburgian studies in this regard are "Titian's 'Allegory of Prudence,' a Postscript"<sup>8</sup> and "Herkules am Scheidewege" ("Hercules at the Crossroads").<sup>9</sup> In the first case Panofsky tracks how the historical antecedents of Titian's allegory of time with three animal heads were altered and reinterpreted from Egypt to the Cinquecento; in the second he follows how the classical motif of Hercules is transformed into the figure of Christ. Panofsky ends the essay on the 'Allegory of Prudence' with a familiar refrain: "In a work of art, 'form' cannot be divorced from 'content': the distribution of color and lines, light and shade, volumes and planes, however delightful as a visual spectacle, must also be understood as carrying a more-than-visual meaning."<sup>10</sup> To

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hemmed in by the restrictions of the border police." See William Heckscher, "The Genesis of Iconology," in *Stil und Überlieferung in der Kunst des Abendlandes: Akten des 21. Internationalen Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte in Bonn, 1964*. Vol. 3, *Theorien und Probleme* (Berlin, 1967), 240-246. Heckscher is not suggesting that Warburg's use of the term is without historical precedent, for it is well documented that 'iconology' has been around at least since Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* of 1593. What he is suggesting is that iconology as it is presently understood in art history, especially through Panofsky's writings, finds its first clear statement in Warburg's work.

<sup>8</sup> Erwin Panofsky (in collaboration with Fritz Saxl), "Titian's 'Allegory of Prudence,' a Postscript" in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 146-168.

<sup>9</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "Herkules am Scheideweg, und andere antike Bildstoffe in der neuen Kunst," *Studien der Bibliothek Warburg*, 18 (Leipzig-Berlin, 1930).

<sup>10</sup> Panofsky (in collaboration with Fritz Saxl), "Titian's 'Allegory of Prudence,' a Postscript," 205.

comprehend this meaning as completely as possible we have to think about how the image is related to passing time, that is, we have to get clear on the problem of historical time. And this is the problematic that rests at the bottom of "The Problem of Historical Time."

It seems to me that Panofsky's approach to the question of historical time is also in keeping with the Neo-Kantian direction of his previous studies, though by the date that "The Problem of Historical Time" was published, 1927, Panofsky had already been in Cassirer's company at the University of Hamburg for six years, and Cassirer's way of approaching questions of time and space can now be readily detected in the fashion in which Panofsky formulates his solution to the issue. Like Cassirer, Panofsky understands natural time and natural space in essentially the same terms as Kant conceived of them: they are *a priori* forms of intuition that bound and structure the realm of possible empirical experience, the realm that is governed by the law of cause and effect. Cassirer differs from Kant though in that he fully recognizes the conventional, or perhaps it would be better to say, functional character of time and space. But unlike the logical empiricists and physicalists who were active in the era in which he wrote *Substance and Function*, Cassirer does not believe that this way of understanding them should be conjoined with the doctrine that natural scientific time and natural scientific space should be taken as fundamental. As we know from our discussions in Part I, Cassirer argues that time and space as forms of intuition are differently conceived according to the symbolizing tendencies inherent in the various symbolic forms, with no one conception being given priority, and with all united in a greater functional synthesis.<sup>11</sup> To my understanding, this is the same line that Panofsky is taking with regard to the autonomy of historical time and its relation to astronomical time.

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<sup>11</sup> The essentials of Cassirer's position had already been formulated in *Substance and Function* and the first volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* by the time that he and Panofsky were colleagues at the University of Hamburg; however, Cassirer's clearest and most succinct statement comes in "Mythic, Aesthetic, and Theoretical Space," a publication that post-dates "Zum Problem der historischen Zeit" by three years. See Ernst Cassirer, "Mythic, Aesthetic, and Theoretical Space," translated by Donald Phillip Verene and Lerke Holzwarth Foster, *Man and World* 2 (1969): 3-17. The essay was originally entitled "Mytischer, ästhetischer und theoretischer Raum." It was an address to the *Vieter Congress für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* and was published in its proceedings (H. Noack, Stuttgart, 1931).



Both are ideal constructions directed at distinct ways of having a world, but they are not wholly independent of each other, as someone like Simmel would maintain, because the objects of history cannot be divorced from the physical sphere. Nevertheless, history conceives its objects in a fashion that is not just different from but at odds with the way in which science constructs its objects (hence the supposed paradoxes that attend the question of historical time). Panofsky's apprehension of how the interests of historical inquiry set it off from those of natural science is very close to the position advanced by Cassirer, who we will remember argues that the basic tendency of scientific thought is that it "strives toward a conception of the world from which the 'personal' has been eliminated,"<sup>12</sup> because the task of natural science is to subordinate particulars to universals. "The science of culture," on the other hand, "teaches us to interpret symbols,"<sup>13</sup> and it does this not by subordinating particulars to universals, but by coordinating particulars into complexes of meaning. This process of coordination is an ongoing activity that is not given once and for all but is in constant movement as we reformulate our cultural constructs in accordance with our interests and our discoveries. This is the same position that Panofsky advances in his essay when he argues that the art historian seeks to establish relationships between the particulars pertinent to art historical inquiry so that works of art can be placed in unities of meaning located in historical time. Panofsky is thus working with Cassirer's understanding of the humanities and with the idea that history is a symbolic form. But this is not really much of a surprise, given that "The Problem of Historical Time" was published in the same year as *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. These two texts then are companion pieces in the sense that they each explore one of the Kantian forms of intuition in relation to the history

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<sup>12</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Logic of the Humanities*, 104. Although *The Logic of the Humanities* was published in 1942, fifteen years after "Zum Problem der historischen Zeit," it is my opinion that the basic doctrines of the book were either already stated or implicit in earlier works.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

of art, though it must be immediately added that *Perspective as Symbolic Form* is more than a Cassirerian study of the foundations of artistic space.<sup>14</sup>

Of equal importance is how this essay fits in with the vision of the aims and ends of art history that has been developing in Panofsky's writings. By this I mean how it is aligned to the reflections on style that have played such a prominent role in our discussions up to this point. Interestingly, the word '*Kunstwollen*' has disappeared from Panofsky's vocabulary; it does not occur even once in the text (an indication perhaps that Panofsky is gradually abandoning Riegl's theoretical vocabulary for Cassirer's). But this disappearance may well be only a disappearance in name, for I don't think that Panofsky's conception of style has changed significantly. At the beginning of my exposition of "The Problem of Historical Time" I paraphrased Panofsky as saying that the concepts of time and space above all signify unities of meaning, which in the history of art primarily concern stylistic unities that cover multiplicities of phenomena and unite them in well-ordered wholes. What this indicates is that for Panofsky style is still the central concept of art history and that style is, as before, the phenomenon in which artistic meaning resides. Also, the ideas through which relations between styles are understood remain the same. Recall the section in which, while speaking of the connection between unities of meaning and unities of effectiveness, Panofsky says of unities of effectiveness that "These are the relationships that political history has the habit of calling "goal" and "consequent," "cause" and "effect," "action" and reaction," while the history of art describes them as "influence" and "receptivity," "suggestion" and "taking a stance," "translation" and "progress." In other

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<sup>14</sup> *Perspective as Symbolic Form* is as well, amongst other things, the first text in which Panofsky manages to thoroughly integrate an art historical investigation with a theoretical one. True, we've seen something of this before, but to my mind the paper on the theory of human proportions represents a less ambitious undertaking; it does not have the theoretical range and pretensions of "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*" or "On the Relationship Between Art History and Art Theory," for example, whereas *Perspective as Symbolic Form* does. In this regard, "Zum Problem der historischen Zeit" occupies a sort of middle ground in relation to Panofsky's other early works; usually Panofsky wrote either an historical piece or a theoretical one, with the theoretical pieces taking up questions left implicit in the historical ones. In "Zum Problem der historischen Zeit" we get a kind of conjunctive unity, with the theoretical text following as an appendix.

words, the history of art is still a history of stylistic influence and progression, and this is further confirmed by the fact that Panofsky deems it necessary to include in his essay a discussion of how his analysis does not threaten the belief in historical continuity and periods.

There is one important change, though. While the idea of an Archimedean point, an absolute viewpoint on to the history of art, has not been disavowed, there are changes on another front that suggest that it may have to be revised or reformulated. When Panofsky says that unities of meaning are constructed rather than discovered, and that the historian of art is faced with a world constituted by a seemingly infinite variety of systems of reference in which relations in time and space are mutually defined and interrelated, he is introducing a relativity into the historical construction of the phenomena of art history that does not sit easily with the idea of an absolute viewpoint. This is not to say however that the two cannot be reconciled. Whether they can or cannot depends upon how this absolute viewpoint is conceived: if we think of the *a priori* elements that constitute the absolute viewpoint in the way that, for example, the logical empiricists assumed Neo-Kantians wanted to conceive of them, i.e., as not only prior to experience but fixed and immutable, then there are going to be problems. However, if our conception is Cassirer's, i.e., that *a priori* elements are presuppositions of experience that vary with the foundational changes in our theories, then the appearance of conflict can be mitigated, for then we have a way of explaining how what is taken as *a priori* can vary with changing historical circumstances and theoretical commitments. (As this has been covered in Chapter V in considerable detail I will say nothing more about the matter.) Because Panofsky does not directly address the issue, it is difficult to speculate on how he thinks his analysis of historical time affects the idea of an absolute viewpoint, though I don't think that it would be much of a gamble to assume that in the period between "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*" and now the idea has undergone a Cassirerian revision. And this brings me to a final point of interest: Panofsky's analysis of historical time is much more radical than anything that Cassirer

would propose; Cassirer has considerably greater faith in the unity and identity of historical periods, whereas Panofsky's analysis is really quite contemporary, in that it could be used to argue that any kind of period grouping is a wholly arbitrary construction. I surmise that this potential conflict doesn't arise because Panofsky implicitly holds the belief that, in the end, we would find that the systems of reference that we most commonly refer to are those that correspond to present period divisions.

The second essay that I would like to discuss in this chapter, "Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst" ("The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art and the Interpretation of Their Content," hereafter referred to as "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art") is of interest not only for the background it provides for our discussion of *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, but also for the fashion in which it points beyond Panofsky's early "German" essays to the approach that the "American" Panofsky will come to represent. "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art" was originally a lecture delivered to the Kiel Kant Society in 1931. Its subject, as its title indicates, is how the description of works of art is related to their interpretation; its central thesis is that description and interpretation are inescapably intertwined at all levels of art historical analysis. The latter is a point that Panofsky secures at the very beginning of the essay through an aptly chosen passage from Lucian, in which Lucian is attempting to describe the content of the painting "The Family of the Centaur" by Zeuxis. It becomes clear though that he cannot do this with assurance, because the seven centuries that separate Zeuxis' time from his own have obscured the tradition of representation upon which Zeuxis' work depends. That this is a perpetual problem, and not just one that afflicted less methodologically self-conscious eras, Panofsky makes clear by undertaking a semi-formal analysis of Grünewald's "Resurrection" that demonstrates just how much is presupposed in offering what appears to be a straightforward description of the painting's factual content.

There are many reasons why the question of the interpenetration of description and interpretation is important to Panofsky. We know that one of the main concerns that has been propelling his inquiries has been the issue of how the present can have an authoritative viewpoint on the art of the past, a point of view that is not simply a projection of the present's interests and self-understanding. We have watched Panofsky pursue this issue through, to return to Michael Podro's terminology, essays that take on a systematic approach to art historical understanding (such as "The Concept of Kunstwollen" and "On the Relationship Between Art History and Art Theory") and those that take up an adaptive strategy (such as "The First Page of Vasari's Libro" and "Albrecht Dürer and Classical Antiquity"). "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art" is a theoretical reflection on the strategy that characterizes the second group, and more particularly works such as "Titian's 'Allegory of Prudence,' a Postscript" and "Hercules at the Crossroads," which follow in the path of Warburg's studies on how certain visual representations persist in human culture. Panofsky's Warburgian investigations however are about representations that have lost their meaning but all the same endure to bear mute witness to past frameworks of sense; they are practical inquiries into how description and interpretation connect in an effort to reclaim forgotten meaning. "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art" is a theoretical inquiry that pertains to this problem in general; it is a methodical examination of how interpretation can be effectively directed and at the same time restrained.

The approach that Panofsky suggests involves isolating three levels of interpretation and the factors that act as the objective correctives on each level. On the first level we have what Panofsky calls "Phenomenon" sense, which is based on our existential experience and allows us to understand, for example, a shape with a certain configuration as a human form. For the art historian, this interpretative act is grounded in, constrained by, and corrected through a knowledge of the history of formal configurations (the sum of the representational possibilities found in the history of art). On the second level there is

what Panofsky names "Meaning" sense, which is founded on our knowledge of the literary sources that have supplied Western art with its subjects, and which allows us to conclude, for example, that an old man with a red hat and accompanied by a lion is St. Jerome. The corrective in this instance is the history of types that we have assembled from our knowledge of the documents of Western civilization. The third level is that of "Documentary" sense, which is based on our greater understanding of distinctive world views, *Weltanschauungen*, and is grounded in and corrected by the general history of ideas that has been amassed through centuries of scholarship. Panofsky adds that these divisions are of course artificial and that in reality the interpretive enterprise is an untidy affair that proceeds on all three levels at once.

Those familiar with Panofsky's later writings will have immediately recognized this tripartite schema as the not so distant cousin of Panofsky's most famous and influential "American" work: the 1939 "Introductory" to *Studies in Iconology*, that was later reprinted with seemingly minor changes in 1955 as "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the study of Renaissance Art."<sup>15</sup> Panofsky's English language commentators often suggest that "The Problem of the Description" can be seen as the initial version of these two later works, and that the changes from one version to another are inconsequential. Hence, Joan Hart pronounces that "The basic content of ["The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art"], more lucidly organized, appeared in 1939 in English as his introduction to *Studies in Iconography*, and was reprinted with minor changes in 1955 as 'Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the study of Renaissance art.'<sup>16</sup> Michael Ann Holly seems to concur when she says that "Although Panofsky first posited the iconological approach as a possible direction for art historical inquiry in *Hercules am Scheidewege und*

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<sup>15</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "Introductory," *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 3-32; and Erwin Panofsky, *Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art*, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 26-54.

<sup>16</sup> Joan Hart, "Erwin Panofsky and Karl Mannheim: A Dialogue on Interpretation," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Spring 1993): 552.

*andere antike Bildstoffe in der neueren Kunst* (1930) and 'Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst' (1930), as a 'method' it lacked a coherent systematization until [the publication of *Studies in Iconology* in]1939."<sup>17</sup> I think however that the differences deserve closer scrutiny, and I am inclined to agree with Georges Didi-Huberman that important theoretical shifts are betrayed by the changes that distinguish the texts.

Perhaps the most striking change in the passage from "The Problem of the Description" to the "Introductory" to *Studies in Iconology* is the shift in tone. Five years after having settled in the United States, Panofsky's way of presenting his ideas seems to have changed entirely. Many have suggested that this was the result of his new professional language, e.g., "Le passage de l'allemand à l'anglais, imposé à tous les émigrés allemands, aida la plupart d'entre eux à écrire de manière plus succincte et précise. Panofsky en est un exemple particulièrement glorieux, Pächt en est un autre."<sup>18</sup> But such an explanation seems to me to be no explanation at all: English has no trouble being poetic (it has one of the greatest literary traditions in the world) or obscure (look at many of the theoretical works in contemporary cultural studies). What is more likely, as was discussed in Chapter IX, is that Panofsky found that the positivistic scientism that characterized American art history was extremely hostile to his way of theorizing, and the change in tone in the "Introductory" to *Studies in Iconology* is a witness to this: gone is the difficult language, the philosophical struggles, the constant, trenchant questioning of art history's fundamental concepts. Instead, the text opens with the homey example of a man raising his hat in greeting, from which, with a smile and a reassuring pat on the back, Panofsky, now the master of plain talk and common sense, carefully leads his wary American audience through his revamped tripartite interpretive schema. The move from the "pre-iconographical description" (or formal analysis) of "natural" subject matter, to the "iconographical

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<sup>17</sup> Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, 159.

<sup>18</sup> C. Nordenfalk, "Otto Pächt, in memoriam," trans. C Rabel, *Revue de l'art*, no. 82 (1988): 82.

analysis" of "conventional" subject matter, and finally to the "iconographical interpretation" (or iconological analysis) of "intrinsic meaning," is so smooth and reasonable that it is hard to imagine that any right-thinking, anti-theoretical, art positivist would be suspicious.<sup>19</sup>

Collateral to the change in tone that marks "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art" from the "Introductory" is the choice of the visual example with which each text begins. It was Didi-Huberman, I believe, who first remarked on this, and it is noteworthy when considering the mode of expression that Panofsky takes up in each case.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to the amicable hat raiser, "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art" opens with, as previously mentioned, an analysis of Grünewald's "Resurrection," a panel from "The Isenheim Altarpiece," one of the most tortured works in the Western tradition, and it is the sober seriousness of Grünewald's images that accompany the progression of Panofsky's laboured but rigorous investigations.

The major difference though that the contrast in tone alerts us to is Panofsky's treatment of the question of interpretation itself, which is where the divergence between the two texts becomes most obvious. In the "Introductory" the reader is given the impression that the three levels of analysis can be identified and isolated, that there is a formal level, for instance, at which one can describe visual experience independent of interpretation.<sup>21</sup> It is

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<sup>19</sup> Yet, apparently this was so. Joan Hart has come across a letter (17 Feb. 1966) from Panofsky to "Monsieur le Chevalier Guy de Schoutheete de Tervarent" (a French diplomat and amateur iconographer) that records an extraordinarily obtuse proclamation by the then director of the Metropolitan Museum: "When it was published the very term 'iconology,' as yet unknown in America, proved to be puzzling to certain colleagues and one of them (the late-lamented Henry Francis Taylor, the Director of the Metropolitan Museum) became so angry that he made me personally responsible for the rise of Hitler, saying that it was small wonder that students 'confronted with this kind of incomprehensible and useless investigation, turned to National Socialism in despair.' He, of course, had never heard of Ripa and his following; nor had he ever thought of the difference between iconology and iconography as it was understood before what may be called the iconological revolution." The letter continues with Panofsky's evaluation of the ultimate triumph of his 'iconological revolution': "[Taylor] repented, however, in the end; and now, I am afraid, things have come to the point where iconology has entered a kind of Mannerist phase which evidences both the successes and the dangers of what we all have been trying to do during the last few decades" (Hart, "Erwin Panofsky and Karl Mannheim: A Dialogue on Interpretation," 564).

<sup>20</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image*, 123-125.

<sup>21</sup> The classic, and invaluable, investigation of just how inseparable the three level of analysis are in reality is Robert Klein's "Thoughts on Iconography," in *Form and Meaning: Essays on the Renaissance and Modern Art*, trans. Madeline Jay and Leon Wieseltier (New York: The Viking Press, 1979), 143-160.



unlikely that Panofsky believed this, and he does state in the last paragraph that "we must bear in mind that the neatly differentiated categories . . . refer in reality to aspects of one phenomenon, namely, the work of art as a whole. So that, in actual work, the methods of approach which here appear as three unrelated operations of research merge with each other into one organic and indivisible process."<sup>22</sup> But note that he presents this caveat as applying to *research* procedures, whereas in "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art" he argues emphatically for the *philosophical* point that there is no description without interpretation, and that every visible form already carries with it a conceptual content: "From what I have just developed, it follows that the simple primary description of a work of art is . . . in truth already an interpretation that has connections to the history of forms, or at least the description already implicitly includes the interpretation."<sup>23</sup>

And what of interpretation itself? Consider this particularly revealing passage from "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art" that invokes Heidegger:

In his book on Kant, Heidegger has some remarkable sentences on the nature of interpretation, sentences that at the outset refer only to the interpretation of philosophical writings, but that at bottom characterize well the problem of all interpretation. "If an interpretation," writes Heidegger, "reproduces only what Kant expressly said, then already from the beginning it is no longer an interpretation in so far as an interpretation has for its task to render expressly visible not that which, beyond its explicit formulation, Kant brought to light in his own foundation; but, what Kant was no longer in a position to say himself, in complete philosophical knowledge, is not that which is expressly said, but the unexpressed that is put before our eyes in the expressed. . . . Certainly, all interpretation, in order to extract from what the words say what they want to say, must necessarily employ violence." We should recognize that these sentences concern as well our modest descriptions of paintings and the interpretations that we give of their content, in so much as they are not simple observations but already interpretations.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Panofsky, "Introductory," *Studies in Iconology*, 16-17.

<sup>23</sup> "Aus dem bisher Entwickelten folgt, dass schon die primitive Deskription . . . in Wahrheit eine gestaltungsgeschichtliche Interpretation ist, oder zum mindesten implizit einschliesst," Panofsky, "Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst," in *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft*, ed. H. Oberer (Berlin: E. Verheyen, 1974) 89.

<sup>24</sup> The relevant passage is: "In Heideggers Kantbuch finden sich einige bemerkenswerte Sätze über das Wesen der Interpretation, -- Sätze, die sich zunächst nur auf die Auslegung philosophischer Schriften beziehen, die aber im Grunde das Problem jeglicher Interpretation bezeichnen: „Gibt nun eine Interpretation lediglich das wieder, was Kant ausdrückliche gesagt hat, dann ist sie von vornherein keine Auslegung, sofern einer solchen die Aufgabe gestellt bleibt, dasjenige eigens sichtbar zu machen, was Kant über die

So, not only is there is no description without interpretation, all interpretation is inherently violent. I am certain that Panofsky's fact-amassing American colleagues would not have wanted to hear such talk, especially from an already suspicious German Jew. And one can't blame Panofsky for ceasing to speak in this way, for giving up unsettling philosophers and discomfoting questions, and for replacing the violence and intensity of Grünewald with the disarming gesture of raising one's hat. After all, he had been persecuted and chased from his homeland, and he was being welcomed and given a new life in the United States--why would he want to live in conflict with the customs of the country?<sup>25</sup>

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ausdrückliche Formulierung hinaus in seiner Grundlegung ans Licht gebracht hat; dieses aber vermochte Kant nicht mehr zu sagen, wie denn überhaupt in jeder philosophischen Erkenntnis nicht das entscheidend werden muss, was sie in den ausgesprochenen Sätzen sagt, sondern was sie als noch Ungesagtes durch das Gesagte vor Augen legt . . . Um freilich dem, was die Worte Sagen, dasjenige abzurufen, was sie sagen, dasjenige abzurufen, was sie sagen wollen, muss jede Interpretation notwendig Gewalt brauchen" (Panofsky, "Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst," 92).

<sup>25</sup> The question of how Panofsky's personal plight effected his intellectual life has been speculated upon, as already mentioned, by a number of writers. Keith Moxey however has made an attempt to provide a more systematic study of how Panofsky's political and cultural predicament found its way into his work. Moxey contends, and I will only be able to provide a summary of his argument, that "Erwin Panofsky's book on Albrecht Dürer, is animated by assumptions and manifests values that can only be regarded as socially and politically motivated" (Keith Moxey, *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994], 66). Panofsky's long standing interest in Dürer, Moxey maintains, partially derives from a nationalistic desire to secure a place for German culture in the developmental model of art history that prevailed in his day. The apparent paradox in Panofsky's project is that he persisted in this in an era in which the Nazi's had told him that he wasn't really a German, that as a Jew the heritage of Dürer was something that he could not claim as his own. Panofsky's persistent interest in Dürer, Moxey explains, becomes more intelligible once we understand his class background and its values: "The value Panofsky placed on reason and the importance he ascribed to its place in the German personality must be understood in light of the value attributed to education and culture by the social group of which he was a member. Panofsky grew up in an upper-class Jewish family at a time when German Jews of this background strongly identified with German culture. The emancipation of the Jews in Germany, which occurred at the beginning of the nineteenth century, took place at the prompting of Enlightenment ideals and was associated with the liberating power of reason" (Moxey, 72). A commitment to reason is something that Panofsky believed to be an essential part of the German character; he also believed that irrational subjectivity was an equally important part of it, and that German culture was a dialectical struggle to reconcile the two. Dürer was thus a prime representative of the German character, for his artistic career is a particularly striking example of the attempt to find rational principles of order and reconcile them with the unstable world of subjective apprehension. What we see in Dürer famous "Melencolia I," according to Panofsky's equally famous analysis of it in *The Life and Work of Albrecht Dürer*, is a dramatic defeat of reason, as melancholy is represented as a genius who is reduced to despair by her awareness of the barriers which separate her from the higher realm of thought and prevent her from realizing in practice what she aspires to in theory. Panofsky takes "Melencolia I" as a spiritual self-portrait by Dürer. Moxey takes Panofsky's analysis as a projection of his concerns into Dürer's engraving: just as Dürer felt that his rational ideals were in constant danger of defeat by the non-rational restrictions of his limitations and incapacities, so Panofsky felt that the ascendancy of the Nazis represented the limits and incapacities of

Contrary then to what many commentators suggest, theoretical shifts are betrayed in the changes that distinguish "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art" from the "Introductory" to *Studies in Iconology*. But, at the same time, it is not as though, as Didi-Huberman says, "L'interrogation et la pensée critique de notre auteur n'ont pas été purement et simplement jetée par-dessus bord dans le navire qui le conduisait en Amérique."<sup>26</sup> In fact, as Didi-Huberman argues at length, Panofsky's new iconology was in its fundamentals still determined by Neo-Kantian doctrines, which aimed furthermore at resecuring the Vasarian values and humanist assumptions of modern art history: "Le ton kantien adopté par l'histoire de l'art ne serait qu'un opérateur "magique" de transformation, visant à reconduire, sur le mode d'une "objectivité" ou d'un "objectivisme transcendantal," les principales *notions-totems* de l'histoire de l'art humaniste--évidemment transfigurées dans l'opération, et pourtant, d'une certaine façon, revenant au *même*."<sup>27</sup> But even without taking up Didi-Huberman's arguments, which would take me too far afield from my proper subject, it is apparent in the "Introductory" to *Studies in Iconology* that Panofsky's new style of public presentation is still indebted to his philosophical heritage.<sup>28</sup> This is revealed

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human beings to realize the Enlightenment ideals so dear to him. In short, according to Moxey, Panofsky's cultural values and his political situation were projected into his art historical studies.

<sup>26</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image*, 129.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 133. It is a central part of Didi-Huberman's argument that Panofsky, whether consciously or unconsciously, at the same time had doubts about whether this was the right direction for the history of art to take. Hence, one can find in Panofsky's later works a kind of equivocal oscillation, such as in the famous 1959 "Forward" to the 1924 text of *Idaz*, that begins by saying that the author's ideas have not changed in their fundamentals, but then ends with the sentence: "If books were subject to the same laws and regulations as pharmaceutical products, the dust jacket of every copy would have to bear the label "Use with Care" --or as it used to say on old medicine containers: CAVITUS" (*Idaz*, vii).

<sup>28</sup> Didi-Huberman's critique of Panofsky's iconology and its relation to Neo-Kantian philosophy is often based more on rhetorical persuasion than substantive argumentation. Let us consider one example, which can be introduced with this passage: "Comme les Idées kantienne, en effet, les formes symboliques de Cassirer et de Panofsky auront été appréhendées dans l'optique de principes régulateurs qui - systématisent des synthèses -" (160). What exactly does this mean? The "en effet" allows Didi-Huberman considerable latitude for imprecision. Is he suggesting that symbolic forms have a function similar to that of regulative Ideas? Our discussions of symbolic forms, regulative Ideas and their transformation in Cassirer's philosophy rule this out entirely I think. What Didi-Huberman says in the next sentence in apparent clarification doesn't help: "comme les Idées, elles auront été d'abord pensées du point de vue de la subjectivité--en tant qu'actes du monde de la culture et non pas du monde tout court--, mais ensuite ré-objectivées, si l'on peut dire, dans leurs autorité de règles et dans leur vocation à l' - *unité finale* - des choses" (*ibid.*). "Si l'on peut dire" serves

by the way in which he distinguishes iconography (or iconographical analysis in the narrower sense, as he will later put it) from iconology (or iconographical interpretation in the deeper sense--iconological synthesis). While the object of iconographical analysis is conventional subject matter, iconological synthesis has as its object " *Intrinsic meaning or content*, constituting the world of 'symbolical' values." <sup>29</sup> The cultural equipment required for such interpretative acts is "Synthetic intuition (familiarity with the *essential tendencies of the human mind* ), conditioned by personal psychology and 'Weltanschauung' ". <sup>30</sup> Synthetic intuition however must be "controlled by an insight into the manner in which, under varying circumstances, the *general and essential tendencies of the human mind* were expressed by specific *themes and concepts* ". <sup>31</sup> In response to the reader's implicit query about how this should be understood, Panofsky adds: "This means what may be called a

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the same purpose as "en effet," and it is equally difficult to know what is being maintained; first of all, symbolic forms are not "pensées" in any standard sense, and, secondly, the distinction he suggests between subjectivity and objectivity is not just inappropriate, it goes against Cassirer's philosophy by ignoring what he says about symbolic forms as structures of objectification. In the greater context, what Didi-Huberman is trying to do is forge a connection--by analogy--between the architectonic of Kantian thought and the structure of Panofsky's art history, as is evident in the following sentence, where he states that "On pourrait même risquer l'hypothèse que le fameux schéma ternaire de Panofsky . . . destiné à exposer les catégories utilisables par l'historien d'art ne faisait rien d'autre, en somme, que suivre spontanément le schéma kantien de l'unité synthétique exposé dans la *Critique de la raison pure*" (Ibid.). We can see how through the rhetorical repetition of Kantian terminology, such as schema and category, Didi-Huberman is attempting to lead the reader to view the three levels of Panofsky's iconological model as analogous to (and by implication derived from) Kant's epistemological model based on the relation between sensibility, imagination, and the understanding. Such a comparison could never be anything but analogical, though Didi-Huberman is intent on making it seem tighter; thus, in a section on the schematism of the pure concepts of the understanding he claims that "On conçoit aisément ce qu'un tel outil de pensée pouvait donner dans le domaine de la « science de l'art » panofskienne. C'est par la magie du schématisme que le chapeau pouvait s'abattre sur les images de l'art et, une fois re-soulevé, donner à voir un concept unitaire et synthétique. La notion de « forme symbolique » joue entièrement sur la possibilité théorique de cette opération" (ibid., 164). He then proclaims: "Peut-être a-t-elle . . . oublié ce postulat kantien selon lequel l'entendement ne légifère que sur la *forme* des phénomènes, rien de plus--et l'on comprend le glissement opéré, puisqu'en histoire de l'art les phénomènes observés sont eux-même définis (et par seulement qualifiés) comme des formes" (ibid.). But this is a *wholly* specious line of argument, for the "glissement," which he has been working long and hard to get us to attribute to Panofsky, is in fact his own. Having said this, I must add that I do understand the case that Didi-Huberman is trying to make concerning Panofsky and the impact of Kantian thought on art history; there is a rightness about it that perhaps some day will be articulated in a clearer argument.

<sup>29</sup> Panofsky, "Introductory," 14.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 16.

history of *cultural symptoms*--or '*symbols*' in Ernst Cassirer's sense--in general."<sup>32</sup> This one, almost oblique, reference is enough to disclose that, even though the tone has changed and the philosophical references have been excised, Panofsky's new way of speaking is not representative of a wholly new way of approaching the study of art. And of course it is not inconsequential that the philosopher referred to is Ernst Cassirer, for this suggests that Panofsky's art history has retained at least the same philosophical armature that it had fourteen years earlier, when the philosophy of symbolic forms was brought directly to bear on perspective.

All the same, it does seem that there are fronts on which changes have been made. It may well be that Panofsky has moved away from, we might even say betrayed, certain founding insights of Riegl's art history, and perhaps even Cassirer's philosophy, in the intervening fourteen years. This charge follows from a more familiar one that we have already encountered, namely, that Panofsky's iconology subjugates art's visuality to cultural history's textuality. Didi-Huberman can act as our spokesman for this accusation, and as he states the case well, I will quote him at length:

L'iconologie, en effet, exige "une méthode d'interprétation qui procède d'une synthèse plutôt que d'une analyse . . . [et où] l'analyse correcte des image, histoires et allégories est le nécessaire préalable à une correcte interprétation". En d'autres termes, l'essence iconologique d'une image se déduit à la fois d'une analyse rationnelle menée au niveau strictement iconographique, et d'une synthèse "intuitive" fondée quant à elle sur une "familiarité acquise avec des *thèmes* ou *concepts* spécifiques tels que les ont transmis les sources littéraires" . . . C'est donc bien au concept, à l'esprit, à la signification et aux "sources littéraires" qu'est donné le dernier mot du contenu intrinsèque connaissable d'une œuvre peinte ou sculptée. Par ce biais, l'histoire de l'art élargissait dans un sens le savoir dont son objet est susceptible (et même qu'il requiert)--mais dans un autre sens elle informait son objet à sa méthode, à sa propre forme d'expression, qui est conceptuelle, ne cherche jamais autre chose que la signification, et manipule pour cela, sans fin, des "sources littéraires." C'est ainsi que les objets de l'histoire de l'art subissaient l'épreuve d'une espèce de décharnement: les couleurs de la peinture y étaient requises--et pour longtemps encore--de dire *oui* ou *non* au regard du "thème," du "concept" ou "de la source littéraire"; bref, elles y étaient requise de se décliner en noir ou blanc . . . L'iconologie livrait donc toute image à la tyrannie du concept, de la définition, et au fond du dénommable et du *lisible*: le *lisible* compris comme l'opération synthétique, iconologique, où se "traduirait" dans le *visible* (l'aspect

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

clair et distinct des "significations primaires et secondaires" de Panofsky)  
d'*invisibles* "thèmes," d'invisible "tendances générales et essentielles de l'esprit  
humain"--d'invisibles concepts ou Idées.<sup>33</sup>

If this is taken without qualification, then it does appear that Panofsky has turned away from certain fundamental tenets of Riegl's art history, in that Riegl attempted to devise concepts and principles that were specific to art and engaged it on its own terms. But it should also be noted that it is possible to have a study like iconology that doesn't neglect the materiality of art and put it at the mercy of the concept and the readable. In fact, isn't Riegl trying to achieve just such a union between these two interests? Recall this passage from the end of *Late Roman Art Industry*: "The character of this *Wollen* is always determined by what may be termed the conception of the world at a given time [*Weltanschauung*] (again in the widest sense of the term), not only in religion, philosophy, science, but also in government and law, where one or the other form of expression mentioned above usually dominates."<sup>34</sup> Riegl wanted art history to ultimately ally with a grander form of cultural studies that would respect art's specificity while uniting it with intellectual and social history. This is as well what Panofsky aimed for in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, and to a certain extent achieved, creating a compelling example of what he would later call an iconological synthesis. Furthermore, Panofsky's study is a *tour de force* that comes close to demonstrating art history's supposed special and intimate connection to questions of style, which, as we discussed in Chapter IX, make it almost miraculously well-placed to divine the inner forces of history itself. It would be more than a little ironic then, if Panofsky, seduced by this promise of art, ended up being the person who neglected--or worse yet--undermined its power by evolving a method that subordinated it to the textual.

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<sup>33</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image*, 150-151.

<sup>34</sup> Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, 231.

What of Panofsky's relation to Cassirer? Does the development of the iconological model also signal a move away from the tenets of the philosophy of symbolic forms? Wasn't it Cassirer after all who said that Hegel's philosophy was not acceptable because it subjected all forms of human expression to the tyranny of the concept, the Idea? I'm not sure that this question can be answered with a straightforward 'yes' or 'no.' Cassirer's extension of the Kantian critique of reason to other cultural forms does seem to bring with it the idea that different realms of human experience should be addressed and reckoned with on their own terms. Panofsky attempts to do this, as we will see, in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. Didi-Huberman's critique of iconology is correct in the sense that Panofsky's iconological studies do not do this as well as *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (if they do it at all), and it does seem clear that these studies subordinate the visual to the textual. So, in this sense we might say that the philosophy of symbolic forms has been left behind. However, as we have seen in our previous discussions of the "Introductory," Panofsky still relies upon Cassirer to delineate what is involved in an iconological investigation. For example, the corrective principle for the iconologist's exercise of synthetic intuition is "a history of *cultural symptoms*--or *symbols* in Ernst Cassirer's sense--in general. The art historian will have to check what he thinks is the *intrinsic meaning* of the work, or group of works, to which he devotes his attention, against what he thinks is the *intrinsic meaning* of as many other documents of civilization historically related to that work or group of works, as he can master."<sup>35</sup> Thus, the art historian continues to be involved in an activity that is very much beholden to the philosophy of symbolic forms, and to the kinds of historical studies that were realized by Cassirer in his books on the Enlightenment and on the individual and the cosmos in Renaissance thought. Further, Louis Marin has argued that Panofsky's iconological model has an even deeper structural dependence on Cassirer's philosophy. In discussing the changes and theoretical shifts between two essays by Panofsky on the Louvre version of Poussin's *Bergers d'Arcadie*--

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<sup>35</sup> Panofsky, "Introductory," 16.

"Et in Arcadia ego, on the Conception of Transience in Poussin and Watteau" (1936) and "Et in Arcadia ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition" (1955)--Marin states:

Ce que cherchait à saisir l'étude de 1936 était tout différent: construire les conditions transcendentales de possibilité historique d'une appréhension du sens immanent d'une œuvre d'art ou, pour reprendre les termes de l'étude de 1939 [the "Introductory"], comment une tendance essentielle de l'esprit humain (à savoir, en langage kantien, le jeu dans l'imagination d'un a priori de la sensibilité et d'une idée de la raison, en l'occurrence le sentiment du temps et l'idée d'immortalité heureuse) se trouvait historiquement exprimée dans des conditions historiques variables par des thèmes et des concepts spécifiques reconnus par une histoire des formes symboliques.<sup>36</sup>

If Marin is right, then it can hardly be said the Panofsky's iconology turns its back on the philosophy of symbolic forms, though at the same time it must be admitted that Panofsky's iconological studies do subordinate the visual to the textual in a way that many of his earlier works do not.

Marin's "Panofsky et Poussin en Arcadie" provides us with a good example not only of how Panofsky's later works became more directed to the textual, but also how the iconological gave way to the iconographical, and often to the philological. After a careful analysis of the differing theoretical commitments that underlie the two essays on Poussin, Marin concludes:

Non seulement l'analyse iconographique a, en 1955, pris le pas sur la description du tableau et sur son interprétation iconologique, mais encore elle se trouve réduite à un travail philologique . . . La description du tableau du Poussin et l'intuition synthétique de son sens immanent ont disparu du texte. L'analyse iconographique devenue étude de philologie historique est première: elle est le point de départ de la recherche et ce commencement est assimilé, en 1955, à ce qui, en 1936, constituait un fondement, la légitimation--au sens critique kantien--de l'immédiate adéquation de la description d'un tableau, de son effet expressif et de la formulation de son sens intrinsèque.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Louis Marin, "Panofsky et Poussin en Arcadie" in *Pour un temps/Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Jacques Bonnet (Paris: les Éditions de Minuit, 1983), 161-162. Erwin Panofsky, "Et in Arcadia ego, on the Conception of Transience in Poussin and Watteau," in *Philosophy and History: Essays presented to Ernst Cassirer*, eds. R. Klibansky and P.J. Paton (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 223-252; Erwin Panofsky, "Et in Arcadia ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 295-320.

<sup>37</sup> Marin, "Panofsky et Poussin en Arcadie", 158.



This narrowing of the art historical vision is something that Panofsky himself highlighted, as is conveyed by the title of one of his last works to be published, *Problems with Titian, mostly iconographic*.<sup>38</sup>

As an aside to this issue, there is sometimes the innuendo in discussions of iconology that Panofsky's neglect of the materiality of art was a result of an incapacity to view art as art, like a poet who can only relate to the music of German Lieder through its text. This type of *ad hominem* characterization of Panofsky seems to possess a certain attraction both for old guard visual artists and art historians who think that art history's approach to its objects is too theoretically mediated, and for certain contemporary art historians who think that its theoretical mediation is too logocentric. *Ad hominem* arguments are of course invalid in principle, but if we look behind the *ad hominem* at some of the anecdotal evidence that prompts it, we will find something that confirms from another angle iconology's neglect of the visuality and materiality of art objects. I have met art history graduate students trained in Panofsky's tradition of iconology who could not tell the difference between a factory produced simulation of an oil painting and the real thing. I have met others who have admitted that they have never once even set foot in a studio arts department. These are disturbing facts, and if there is anything behind the above *ad hominem* it is that iconology as an institutionalized academic discipline was creating art historians who were blind to the properties of art.<sup>39</sup> What may be true of Panofsky's

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<sup>38</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian, mostly iconographic* (New York: New York University Press, 1969). We could also mention *The Iconography of Correggio's Camera di San Paolo* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1961); and "The Iconography of the Galerie François I<sup>er</sup> at Fontainebleau," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* LII (1958): 113-190.

<sup>39</sup> Let us go back again to Didi-Huberman: "C'est ainsi que les objets de l'histoire de l'art subissaient l'épreuve d'une espèce de décharnement : les couleurs de la peinture y étaient requises—et pour longtemps encore—de dire *oui* ou *non* au regard du « thème », du « concept » ou « de la source littéraire » ; bref, elles y étaient requise de se décliner en noir ou blanc." This passage is followed by a sharp-tongued footnote: "Il suffit, au-delà de la métaphore, de lire l'interprétation célèbre que Panofsky a donnée de l'*Allégorie de la Prudence* du Titian ( et la plupart de celles produites après lui sur le même tableau ) pour s'apercevoir qu'il ne regarde pas le tableau—et son massif événement coloré, aussi sombre soit-il—mais une image en noir et blanc, quelque chose comme une gravure du manuel de Ripa ou une reproduction photographique. Rien de l'événement proprement pictural n'y est pris en compte" (*Devant l'image*, 150). As

iconology though was not true of the man himself; that Panofsky did have a good eye for the visual and material properties of art is evident I think in the analyses in *Perspective as Symbolic Form* and in pieces such as "What is Baroque?"<sup>40</sup> Given Panofsky's training with Wilhelm Vöge and Adolph Goldschmidt, it would be more surprising if this was something he lacked.

But let us return to more central issues. It seems clear that Panofsky shifted his intellectual alignment in the period between "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art" and the "Introductory" to *Studies in Iconology*. Some art historians however have argued that significant changes in Panofsky's philosophical commitments were in the works long before he was transplanted to the United States. Joan Hart, for instance, has attempted to make the case that Panofsky came under the sway of Karl Mannheim around the time he wrote "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art," and that it was Mannheim's influence that shaped the subsequent development of Panofsky's iconology. This would be an important assertion that would force us to rethink the character of Panofsky's early writings, if it could be substantiated; unfortunately, Hart's arguments are woefully inadequate to her claims.

Hart maintains that the connection between the two scholars was strong:

"Panofsky's early theoretical writings are interdependent and each essay builds on the previous one, as if he were engaging in a monologue with himself, as well as in a dialogue primarily with Mannheim."<sup>41</sup> But the textual evidence for this dialogue is quite slim:

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a partial response, consider this passage from Silvia Ferretti: "One of the recurring criticisms made of Panofsky is that he is too theoretical and attaches little importance to such a pivotal element in aesthetic thought as sensibility. It is exactly in the light of his most essentially theoretical writings that this criticism betrays all its weaknesses. In fact, what is defined as extreme conceptualization is nothing but the intellectual reproduction of the manifold meanings sensible expression can take on. Panofsky tries to make conceptual, that is, expressible according to an order, the totality of historical factors that lie at the base of the work of art, including the perceptive ones (Ferretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg: Symbol, Art, and History*, 227).

<sup>40</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "What is Baroque?" in *Three Essays on Style*, ed. Irving Lavin (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 19-88. See as well: Allister Neher, review of *Three Essays on Style*. *RACAR* XXI, 1-2 (1994): 131-137.

<sup>41</sup> Hart, "Erwin Panofsky and Karl Mannheim: A Dialogue on Interpretation," 541.

Panofsky does not mention Mannheim in any of the essays that we have examined in the preceding chapters, except for "On the Relationship between Art History and Art Theory," in which he cites (*cites*, not discusses) Mannheim's "On the Interpretation of *Weltanschauung*."<sup>42</sup> "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art" and the "Introductory" to *Studies in Iconology* are more promising for Hart's case, because in both the tripartite model of interpretation that we discussed above does appear to have been borrowed from a similar model offered by Mannheim in "On the Interpretation of *Weltanschauung*." Without doubt this is an significant fact, but it doesn't demonstrate that Panofsky was taking his theoretical lead from Mannheim. Intellectuals, as everyone knows, borrow ideas from their contemporaries, and when they do it doesn't indicate that they have adopted the other person's theoretical outlook. Panofsky appropriated Mannheim's distinctions between Phenomenon Sense, Meaning Sense, and Documentary Sense, and turned them to his own purposes; after that, I can't see how Mannheim's sociology of knowledge comes into play in Panofsky's art history. The discussions that follow should secure this point.

Usually someone will only borrow an idea from someone else if there is a compatibility and commonality of drift in the theoretical directions that they are following, and it is at this general level that the case that Hart wants to make is most plausible (though of course it then also becomes much less consequential). Mannheim and Panofsky were both Jews living in Germany, they were of the same age, their families had the same class ideals about the primacy of *Kultur*, they attended some of the same universities and had some of the same professors, they belonged to similar social groups, and they held certain similar political opinions. These are some of the common qualities that Hart hopes will make us more inclined to accept the connection that she wants to forge between Mannheim and Panofsky. But, if such general considerations have any weight it is principally

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<sup>42</sup> Kari Mannheim, "On the Interpretation of *Weltanschauung*," in *From Karl Mannheim*, trans. Paul Kecskemeti, ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York, 1971). The German original is "Beiträge zur Theorie der Weltanschauungs-Interpretation," *Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 1 (1921-22): 236-274.

rhetorical, for it seems to me very easy to imagine two people who share such a background and differ in their philosophical orientations. If we put these common generalities aside, what Hart's case comes down, its focus, is that Mannheim and Panofsky had kindred notions about the nature of interpretation in the human sciences. This may well be so, but Hart is less than successful in establishing it; in fact, this is where her arguments are weakest.

The case that Hart wants to make does not succeed for two principal reasons: either her arguments fail to make distinctions and avoid equivocations, or her claims are asserted without support. Let us look at one of the latter genre first. Hart maintains, and I agree with her, having argued the same point in Chapter XI, that Panofsky was deeply adverse to psychologistic approaches to the foundations of the human sciences. Mannheim was so too, and, according to Hart, he came to this position mainly through the works of Dilthey. Now, since the goal is to relate Mannheim and Panofsky philosophically, Hart continues and informs us that Panofsky became confirmed in his anti-psychologism by reading Husserl, and that Husserl was Dilthey's foremost inspiration. It was news to me that Husserl's philosophy was the one that "had the greatest impact on Panofsky's thought."<sup>43</sup> So, alerted to this surprising new possibility, and unable to bring to mind any references to Husserl in Panofsky's early essays, I went through Hart's text looking for support for this novel claim, but I found nothing--no footnotes, no textual references, no explanations.

Let us now examine some arguments that fail because of distinctions that are not made and equivocations that are. In Hart's mind, what ultimately connects Mannheim and Panofsky is that they both employ a hermeneutical method for historical interpretation. The problem is that Hart does not seem to be aware that the word 'hermeneutics' is used in a wide assortment of ways, that vary considerably between disciplines and that refer to everything from well-defined philosophical positions to loosely understood interpretive directives. Thus we find, which surprised me as much as the pairing of Panofsky and

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<sup>43</sup> Hart, "Erwin Panofsky and Karl Mannheim: A Dialogue on Interpretation," 544.

Husserl, Dilthey and Panofsky mentioned in the same breath as though they were taking about the same thing: "Panofsky gave special emphasis to this term [*Erlebnis*] by leaving it in German in his English text. Dilthey used the word *Erlebnis* to refer to this re-experiencing of the original conditions of the historical subject."<sup>44</sup> *Erlebnis* is a technical term in Dilthey's philosophy. It is also an ordinary German word that does not translate well into English. For what reason should we believe that Panofsky is using *Erlebnis* in Dilthey's sense? Because Panofsky, like Dilthey, has a hermeneutical approach to historical interpretation? But this is obviously circular, for this is precisely the point that Hart is obliged to establish. There is in fact no reason at all to believe that because Panofsky doesn't translate the word he means to use it as it is used in Dilthey's philosophy. If something more than this needs to be said, consider a parallel with *Weltanschauung*, which is as well a specialized term for many writers that typically goes untranslated, as well as a common German word: what possible justification could I have for assuming that because two intellectuals use the word *Weltanschauung* they are using it to say the same thing?

Let us look at another argument that is suppose to cement the relation between Mannheim, Panofsky and hermeneutics:

The interpretive theory Panofsky delineated was, like Mannheim's, that of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics was that part of philology concerned with the interpretation of texts. . . . Anyone educated in Germany prior to World War I would have studied philology in depth. Panofsky testified to his love of his teachers of Latin and Greek, recalling that they were both renowned scholars in their own right, although they taught in the high school, and both demanded literal translations of texts, which Panofsky also preferred. But most of all, he said he learned "method" from them, and that method was hermeneutics.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 554. I take exception to the claim that "Dilthey used the word *Erlebnis* to refer to this re-experiencing of the original conditions of the historical subject." This is a long-standing misrepresentation of Dilthey, who must be represented in much more nuanced terms. Space does not allow for such a discussion, though see the already mentioned Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Sciences*, especially Part Two, section 3 "Aesthetic Norms and Poetic *Erlebnis*," subsection "Poetic Imagination Structurally Defined in Terms of *Erlebnis*."

<sup>45</sup> Hart, "Erwin Panofsky and Karl Mannheim: A Dialogue on Interpretation," 554.

There are two substantial problems with this passage. The first concerns the partial identification of hermeneutics and philology in the sentence "Hermeneutics was that part of philology concerned with the interpretation of texts." The problem is, to return to a point made earlier, that Hart is treating hermeneutics and philology as though they were single, unified, clearly articulated approaches that are related to each other as sub-discipline to discipline. But historically both terms are so diverse that such a blanket statement is practically meaningless; one has to specify which philological tradition and whose hermeneutical approach one is talking about, as one would when speaking about, for example, Schleiermacher.

The second problem is linked to the first. While it is true in some general and unspecified sense that hermeneutical approaches originated in the traditions of philology, it is ludicrous to claim that because Panofsky received some training in philology he *ipso facto* possessed a hermeneutical approach, that is like saying that because I studied Lévi-Strauss' structuralism I was trained in deconstruction. To give her claim credibility, Hart would have to show us how Panofsky's training led directly to a hermeneutical approach, which she doesn't do.<sup>46</sup>

Let us then turn to the question of what, according to Hart, is involved in Panofsky's hermeneutics?

A summary of a hermeneutic theory of this sort includes the following ideas: The goals of such a theory are meaning and understanding, not explanation, and are attained through "interpretation," which is usually a multi-level process; the theory utilizes a circular method of explication; it is empirical in that objective elements are compared in an attempt to verify the interpretation; the theory assumes the relativity in space and time of the interpreter and object of interpretation; it emphasizes the reconstructive process of understanding and, therefore, the subjectivity of the

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<sup>46</sup> It is not even clear that Hart is familiar with aims of hermeneutical studies: "When philosophers, like Dilthey, realized that psychology was not capable of providing a basis, a foundational science, for the cultural studies, then the traditional method of *studying the contents of the mind -- hermeneutics* -- became salient again" (Hart, *op. cit.*, 555-556, my emphasis). This inappropriate characterization is I think part of a rhetorical maneuver to make the Panofsky-Mannheim connection more plausible by strengthening the Dilthey-Husserl one on which it supposedly depends, given that Husserl too is said to focus on the "contents of consciousness."

interpreter. Panofsky gradually implemented Mannheim's explication of his hermeneutic method, but its full adoption and revision took sixteen years.<sup>47</sup>

Leaving disagreements aside for the moment, I think that most of these general statements apply to Panofsky's method as it developed from "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art" to the "Introductory" to *Studies in Iconology*. The more important issue is what follows from them about Panofsky's purported hermeneutical method and Mannheim's influence on it. The first matter that I would like to raise is one that has already been considered twice: the word 'hermeneutics' is used in a wide assortment of ways, that vary considerably between disciplines and that refer to everything from well-defined philosophical positions to loosely understood interpretive directives. Dilthey and Gadamer are two figures who represent what we might call hermeneutics proper: they have elaborate and highly articulated doctrines about the nature of historical understanding. Someone such as Panofsky, I submit, represents the other extreme: he is guided by generally conceived directives that are not derived from a grander philosophical doctrine (though they are consonant with broader principles that are generally referred to as hermeneutic). Panofsky's method instantiates hermeneutics in its most imprecise and popular sense, which is why it is misleading to refer to Dilthey and Panofsky in the same breath. This is borne out by the characterization of hermeneutics that Hart herself gives, which is exceedingly superficial, and which even so doesn't apply to Panofsky without qualifications (for instance, the sentence, "it emphasizes the reconstructive process of understanding and, therefore, the subjectivity of the interpreter," does not obviously apply to the method Panofsky discusses in the "Introductory" to *Studies in Iconology*, especially if it is compared with, for example, Gadamer's approach in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Hart, "Erwin Panofsky and Karl Mannheim: A Dialogue on Interpretation," 548.

<sup>48</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

The reader will recall from Chapter VIII that Hart employed the same tactic with Wölfflin and, by extension, Panofsky. In that discussion, by equivocating on stronger and weaker uses of the word 'hermeneutics,' Panofsky unwittingly became a Diltheyan just because he was cognizant of the "hermeneutic circle" involved in historical interpretation. Now we have Panofsky becoming a bona fide member of the hermeneutical tradition just because he accepts certain broadly conceived interpretative principles; and once more Hart returns to his familiarity with the hermeneutic circle to clinch her point:

For Panofsky, as for Mannheim, the hermeneutic circle was unavoidable; there had to be an interaction between the whole and the part by which each gave the other meaning, a kind of gestalt thought process. He called this an "organic situation." He extended the organic situation, or methodological circle, beyond a given problem like the authenticity of the altarpiece, to the interpenetration of the subjective and objective (or purely archaeological) in art history, and finally to all knowledge, in both sciences and humanities."<sup>49</sup>

But the argument against this serving Hart's purposes is the same as it was in Chapter VIII: recognizing the inescapability of what has come to be called the "hermeneutic circle," or more simply the circle of interpretation, does not make one's approach hermeneutical; most historians admit its existence in some form.<sup>50</sup> This might be why, to borrow Hart's words, "neither Mannheim nor Panofsky ever stated that their theory was equivalent to hermeneutics."<sup>51</sup> If there is a connection between Mannheim and Panofsky that is stronger

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<sup>49</sup> Hart, "Erwin Panofsky and Karl Mannheim: A Dialogue on Interpretation," 554.

<sup>50</sup> By trading on stronger and weaker senses of 'hermeneutic,' Hart is also able to enlist writers who would not normally come to mind in such discussions to validate her case. Even Cassirer finds his way in as she approvingly quotes this sentence from *An Essay on Man*: "the rules of semantics, not the laws of nature, are the general principles of historical thought. History is included in the field of hermeneutics, not in that of natural science." Robert Klein also makes an appearance in this curiously self-defeating passage: "Panofsky and Klein were friends, and Panofsky read ["Thoughts on Iconography"] . . . and commented favorably in a letter to Klein. However, even in this response he never used the word 'hermeneutics,' and I have not found the word in any of his letters or writings to date" (Hart, op. cit., 560). I wonder what this indicates?

<sup>51</sup> Hart, "Erwin Panofsky and Karl Mannheim: A Dialogue on Interpretation," 560.



than the one that I have suggested, and if Panofsky's method deserves to be called hermeneutic, the case still remains to be made.

Let us conclude this chapter by returning to a philosophical environment that is without doubt pertinent to the background of Panofsky's approach. "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art" was initially delivered to the Kiel Kant Society, and it is worth our while to consider why this talk would have been appropriate to this audience. Recall that in "On the Relationship between Art History and Art Theory" Panofsky discussed the reconciliation of the *a priori* principles of artistic formation, that are the concern of art theory, with the congeries of particularities that provide the material for art history. In the realm of art, this reconciliation parallels the resolution Kant achieved between understanding and sensibility for empirical knowledge. Now, when the interpretation of an art object is undertaken, the judgments that the art historian makes reflect this opposition in that he or she is concerned with either the categories of artistic formation or the arrangement of the relevant historical particularities under the natural and necessary restraints of time and space. Panofsky's essays have worked at shaping our understanding of both, and in "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art" he takes up the question of interpretation itself in its most elementary relation to them.

Without recapitulating our earlier discussion of this essay, we know that Panofsky argues that there is no such thing as description independent of interpretation, that all description already involves interpretation, even at the most basic formal level. In this respect Hart was correct in saying that Panofsky's method "emphasizes the reconstructive process of understanding and, therefore, the subjectivity of the interpreter," for Panofsky is intent on disclosing how the historian's cultural viewpoint mediates what is seen. In retrieving the past through a contemporary order of understanding the interpreter necessarily, as Heidegger said in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, does violence to the order of the past. Heidegger's book on Kant was published in 1929, two years before Panofsky's lecture, and its themes certainly would have been topical for the Kiel Kant

Society. Most Kant scholars saw Heidegger's book as a willfully idiosyncratic, if not irresponsible, interpretation of Kant that ignored textual and historical constraints. It is the question of the constraints on interpretation that Panofsky had come to Kiel to discuss.<sup>52</sup>

If we think back to the tripartite scheme that summarizes Panofsky's interpretative model, we will recall that the first level of "Phenomenon" sense is restrained by our knowledge of the history of formal configurations, the second level of "Meaning" sense has as its corrective the history of types, and the third level of "Documentary" sense is constrained by the general history of ideas. All of these constraints are "factual," even the world views that comprise the general history of ideas, for factuality is a *modality* that varies with the kind of objects and relations that one is engaged with, just as time and space are modalities that vary with the symbolic form under consideration. Panofsky's use of the term 'modality' comes directly from Cassirer and the philosophy of symbolic forms, as does his understanding of the internal unity found in the configurations of facts that act as the correctives to interpretation. Silvia Ferretti has captured this in a particularly well-conceived passage, which I will not attempt to improve:

One must discover in historical data that energy which sets them in relation to one another, which constitutes areas of validity, and which removes representation from the level of a mere inventory of fragments of images and makes it an autonomous and significant creation per se. . . . In the modality by which a work of art comes to light, past and by now inert objects are set in motion, and they are viewed in a connective force by means of the categories of judgment. This basic unity, which is elusive at first glance, becomes a constant once it is found again, and it confirms the validity of the categories and conceptual schemes, revealing their genesis in history itself and at the same time showing how history, through such an inquiry, takes on form beginning with those schemes. At this point the vicious circle becomes a methodical circle, since the violence worked by the interpreter is opposed by a no less efficacious violence--that of the dynamic energy of the data.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> For this reason, the emphasis that Didi-Huberman places on Panofsky's quotation of Heidegger on the violence of interpretation is something of a rhetorical overstatement, for while it is true that this reference does sharply distinguish the "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art" from Panofsky's later texts on iconology, the shared central interest of all of the texts is in finding the appropriate constraints for interpretation in art history.

<sup>53</sup> Ferretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg: Symbol, Art, and History*, 227-228.

At the level of Document sense, or what later will be called iconological synthesis, the dynamic energy of the data is articulated in terms of world views. Panofsky's way of relating the object of art historical inquiry to a world view and the world view to the general history of ideas is again decidedly Cassirerean. What is Cassirerean as well is his way of placing art objects and their relations to world views within the greater problematic of the development of the subject-object relation in the history of Western culture. This is especially clear in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, which we are now prepared to discuss.

The principal aim of this chapter was to offer a critical exposition of "The Problem of Historical Time" and "The Problem of the Description of Works of Visual Art and the Interpretation of Their Content." The questions addressed in both works complete the pattern of issues that serves as the background for *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. Examining these works has also allowed us to make further links between Panofsky's German and English language writings, and to discuss some contemporary evaluations of these links and the essays that were the focus of this chapter. So, then, on to our main topic.

## CHAPTER XIII

### *PERSPECTIVE AS SYMBOLIC FORM: THEMATIC EXPOSITION*

I would like to divide my analysis of *Perspective as Symbolic Form* into two chapters. This chapter will be an exposition of the principal themes and arguments that compose the book; the following chapter will relate these themes and arguments to the discussions that have preceded, and explain what it means to say that perspective is a symbolic form. I have decided on this approach because the mere exposition of *Perspective as Symbolic Form* is something of an undertaking. The work is convoluted and often perplexing, and the reader's task is made more onerous by Panofsky's mode of presentation: the text is overwhelmed by references to the endnotes--indeed, even in a smaller typeface, the number of pages devoted to endnotes is longer than that taken up by the main body of the text, and some of the notes are miniature chapters in themselves. The argument often oscillates between the two levels, and it requires a certain amount of agility to keep all of its threads in hand and to present it as continuous. The thought of providing an exegesis of all this, while at the same time relating it to the issues of chapters that have come before, seemed to invite needless complications.

The book is divided into four sections, which approximately mark four stages in the greater argument it advances. As he should, Panofsky opens the first section by telling us what for the purposes of his discussion he means by the term 'perspective':

We shall speak of a fully 'perspectival' view of space not when mere isolated objects, such as houses or furniture, are represented in 'foreshortening,' but rather only when the entire picture has been transformed . . . into a 'window,' and when we are meant to believe we are looking through this window into a space. The material surface upon which the individual figures or objects are drawn or painted

or carved is thus negated, and instead reinterpreted as a mere "picture plane." Upon this picture plane is projected the spatial continuum which is seen through it and which is understood to contain all the various individual objects.<sup>1</sup>

In employing Alberti's comparison of a picture to a window Panofsky is not suggesting that the system of perspective assumed by his study is the one we find in *Della pittura*, or that it has the same theoretical articulation. All that he has in mind is this:

I imagine the picture--in accord with the 'window' definition--as a planar cross section through the so-called visual pyramid; the apex of this pyramid is the eye, which is then connected with individual points within the space to be represented. Because the relative position of these 'visual rays' determines the apparent position of the corresponding points in the visual image, I need only draw the entire system in plan and elevation in order to determine the figure appearing on the intersecting surface. The plan yields the width, the elevation yields the height; and if I combine these values on a third drawing. I will obtain the desired perspectival projection.<sup>2</sup> (See Figure 3.)

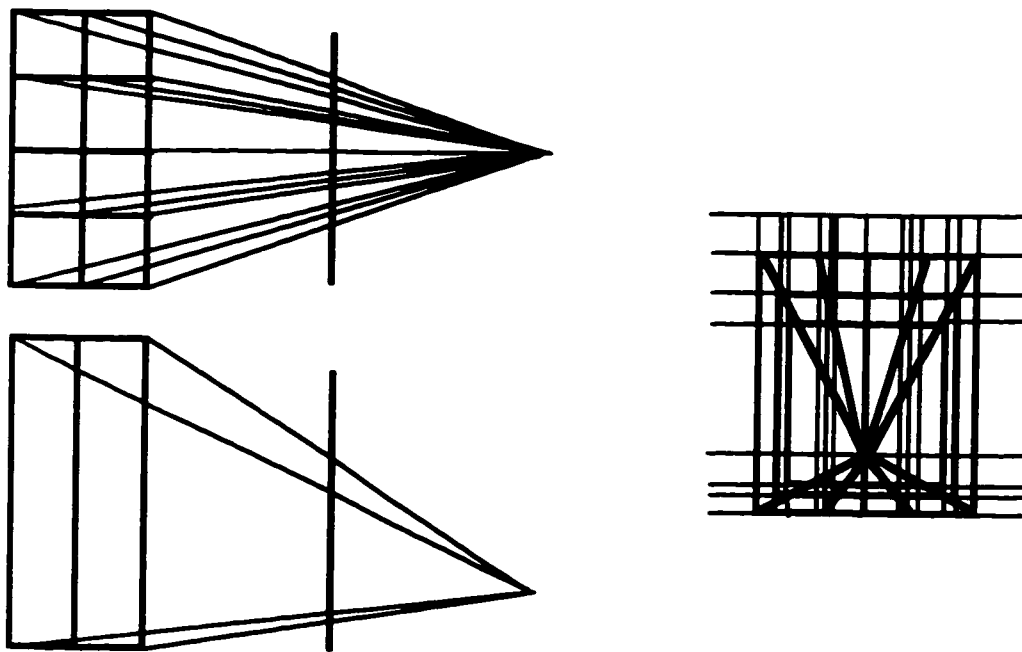


FIGURE 3. Linear perspective construction of a shallow, rectangular interior. Left above: plan. Left below: elevation. Right: perspectival image arrived at by combining the segments marked off on the projection line (after Panofsky).

<sup>1</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

Panofsky's explanation is probably a little too sketchy for those not familiar with the terminology and procedures of perspective construction; so, before we proceed, we should furnish ourselves with a fuller explanation of how an image in perspective is created. For this purpose, I will use a procedure derived from Alberti's *costruzione legittima*; the terminology though is more modern and includes, for example, the concept of a vanishing point, even though Alberti did not use it and it did not exist until 1600.<sup>3</sup> I have taken this approach because Panofsky makes reference to vanishing points, distance points, and other terms common to modern discussions of perspective. As my aim is only instructional, I think that this kind of "up-dating" is inoffensive.

As Panofsky suggested in the passage quoted from page 28, in Alberti's era vision was explained through the idea of a visual cone. The eye of the viewer was the apex, from which spread a conical arrangement of visual rays. When an object was seen, visual rays ran to every part of it that was beheld by the viewer, and the distances and locations of the facets of the object in relation to the viewer were measured through the lengths and positions of the visual rays. So, then, Alberti argued, if the visual cone is intersected by a plane, perpendicular to the apex, the arrangement of the visual rays on the plane will replicate a view of the object seen from a certain distance (the distance would be determined by the placement of the intersecting plane). If the points where the visual rays passed through the plane are then joined, one will have a perspective drawing of the object. Thus, for artists the intersecting plane was the picture plane, and the blank canvas or piece of

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<sup>3</sup> Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective*, 8. The definition that Panofsky is proposing cannot be identified with any one artist or theoretician. In the text he mentions figures as diverse as Alberti, Piero della Francesca, Dürer, and Lessing. He also adds that "we accept late Hellenistic and Greco-Roman paintings as already authentically 'perspectival.' For us perspective is, quite precisely, the capacity to represent a number of objects together with a part of the space around them in such a way that the conception of the material support is completely supplanted by the conception of a transparent plane through which we believe we are looking into an imaginary space" (77). Panofsky's aim is to set out a general model of perspective that incorporates the salient features of modern approaches. However, Elkins makes the important point in *The Poetics of Perspective* (see especially chapters 1 and 2) that, contrary to popular belief, there is no common mathematical core, no basic geometrical logic, shared by the varieties of Renaissance perspective. It is not clear that Panofsky is labouring under this illusion. But even if he isn't, the procedure that he has chosen to follow further diminishes the historical value of his work.

paper was the material stand-in on which an illusion of the view through that plane would be captured. It was this view that was to be thought of as seen through a window. Given though that the surface on which this view is to be rendered is two-dimensional, and the viewed world is three-dimensional, the trick is to come up with a system that would transpose the three-dimensional fullness of experience into a two-dimensional image of it. This is in essence the end that linear perspective is intended to realize.

The basics of my neo-Albertian system for realizing the illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface are encapsulated in the drawing below (Figure 4), which I will explain.<sup>4</sup>

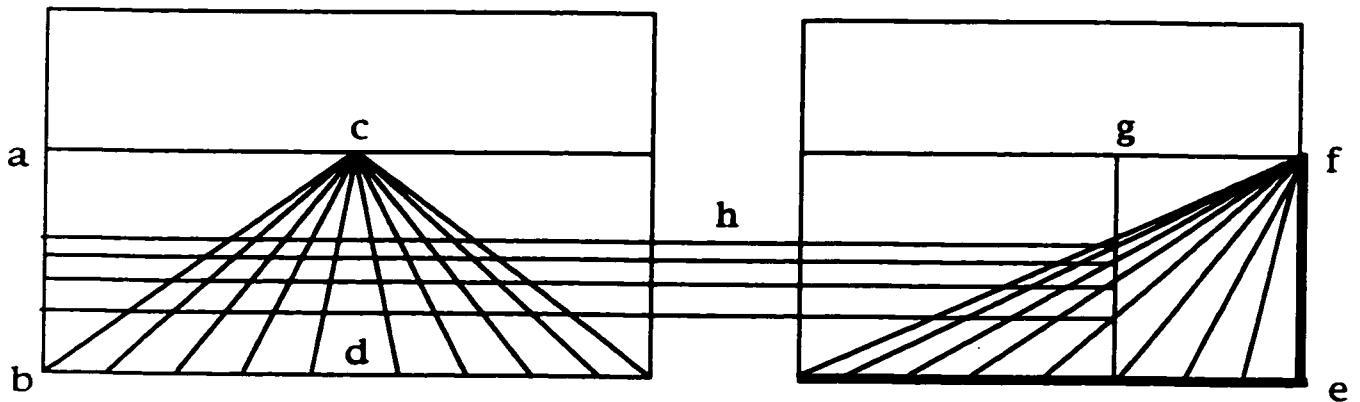


FIGURE 4. Simple model of linear perspective: a=horizon line, b=base line, c=vanishing point, d=orthogonals, e=second base line, f=distance point, g=intersecting vertical, h=transversals.

The rectangle on the left represents the surface on which the image is to be created. Imagine it then as a blank sheet of paper. The artist we assume already has a fairly definite conception of the scene he or she wants to depict; the question is how to construct the space in which it takes place. Let us say that the artist begins by determining where the horizon will be. This is accomplished by drawing a horizon line *a* across the paper at a height appropriate to the image (the horizon line does not necessarily appear in the finished

<sup>4</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, translated with introduction and notes by John Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966). See especially Book I.

picture; it marks the division between earth and sky for the constructional system, whether the scene is exterior or interior). The next step would be to fix a vanishing point  $c$  somewhere along the horizon line. The vanishing point, like the horizon line, will be set at a position that suits the composition the artist has in mind (for example, Tintoretto often set his principal vanishing point very close to the right or left side, thereby creating a long and dramatic oblique recession). After this is done, the base line  $b$  will be evenly divided into as many divisions as the artist deems necessary or useful, and from these divisions orthogonals  $d$  will be drawn to the vanishing point. With just this, a recession effect has already been created, but what is wanted is a more systematic demarcation of the space to be represented. Hence, a way needs to be found to generate the transversals  $h$ , that in conjunction with the orthogonals will produce an accurate grid of space that will allow the artist to determine exactly how far any object is from any other object, and how large or small an object should be in proportional relation to others.

It is at this juncture that the rectangle on the right hand side enters the procedure. Think of it as a separate piece of paper. The first thing that the artist will do will be to draw a second base line  $e$ , the length of which will be guided by the composition envisaged. At the end of this base line, and perpendicular to it, a distance point  $f$  will be raised. After this, the base line will be divided into equal divisions in the same fashion as the base line in the composition, and these will be joined to the distance point. The next step will be to drop a perpendicular line  $g$  through the array of lines that runs from the base line to the distance point. The perpendicular represents the plane that intersects the visual cone, and once the location of this intersection is chosen it is easy enough to determine where the transversals should go: wherever the perpendicular intersects a line, from that point a straight line will be drawn across to the rectangle on the left. The transversals will cross the orthogonals and create a recession grid, thereby allowing for the proper spatial orientation of the objects in the image. This recession grid is often left apparent in early Renaissance paintings, where it is transformed into a tile floor or the paving stones of a public square.



It should be pointed out, as has been intimated in the above explanations, that the placement of elements in a perspective construction is open to manipulation by the artist. We know already that the horizon line and the vanishing point allow for a wide range of movement, and that in combination they can create a variety of effects. Equally important for the composition is the placement of the distance point, for it represents the apex of the visual cone and, thus, the eye of the beholder; a higher or lower setting will completely change one's relation to the image. The same is true for the perpendicular line, which, as already said, stands for the plane that intersects the visual cone, and thus governs, amongst other things, the degree to which one is removed from or brought near to the subject.

The passage from page 28 that prompted this excursion into the more technical side of perspective should no longer pose a problem for us, though there is a further point of clarification that should be made. Although it may not be immediately apparent, the diagrams in Figure 3 that illustrate the rudimentary conception of perspective that provides the basis for Panofsky's study achieve the same ends as the Albertian model in Figure 4. The difference between them is that the perspectival image in Figure 3 is not rooted in a particular constructional procedure, and, although it presupposes a theory of vision, it does not depend upon a specific one, such as Alberti's.

Having settled his definition, Panofsky introduces two significant qualifications that must be attached to such a conception of perspective. The second will play a pivotal role in the book's main argument:

In order to guarantee a fully rational--that is, infinite, unchanging and homogeneous--space, this "central perspective" makes two tacit but essential assumptions: first, that we see with a single and immobile eye, and second, that the planar cross section of the visual pyramid can pass for an adequate reproduction of our optical image. In fact these two premises are rather bold abstractions from reality, if by "reality" we mean the actual subjective optical impression. For the structure of an infinite, unchanging and homogeneous space--in short, a purely mathematical space--is quite unlike the structure of psychophysiological space.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 30-31.

To further clarify what is being maintained here, Panofsky follows this passage with a page-long quotation from Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2: *Mythical Thought*, that addresses the differences between the scientific conception of space and the space of immediate perception. As we have already discussed the grounds for this distinction in Part I (see especially Chapter III), I will only summarize the principal points that Panofsky is appealing to. Cassirer argues that, unlike scientific space, psychophysiological space knows nothing of the concept of infinity; perception is always confined by the limits of our faculty of perception. Furthermore, immediate perception is completely at odds with the homogeneity of mathematical space, which understands all locations as equivalent, in that all points in space are devoid of content and exist only in the relations they have to each other. In psychophysiological space however differences in location are always charged with different values: in a dangerous situation what is going on behind one's back differs from what is happening in front of one's face by more than just its place in a relational system of directions.

Exact linear perspective is then a systematic abstraction from the space of immediate perception; it aims at realizing in the representation of space the homogeneity and boundlessness alien to lived experience. What is more, and here we have another critical passage in Panofsky's argument,

It takes no account of the enormous difference between the psychologically conditioned "visual image" through which the visible world is brought to our consciousness, and the mechanically conditioned "retinal image" which paints itself upon our physical eye. . . . Finally, perspectival construction ignores the crucial circumstance that this retinal image--entirely apart from its subsequent psychological interpretation," and even apart from the fact that the eyes move--is a projection not on a flat but on a concave surface. Thus already on this lowest, still prepsychological level of facts there is a fundamental discrepancy between "reality" and its construction.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 31.

The time for the critical evaluation of these claims will come later, for now let us just note Panofsky's distinction between the "visual image" and the "retinal image," and the implied distinction between a curved retinal image and an image in linear perspective projected onto a flat surface. There is no doubt there are differences between projections onto flat and onto curved surfaces, but Panofsky wants to bring our attention to one in particular: the marginal distortions that can occur in linear perspective and in photography, and that are reduced when an image is projected onto a curved surface rather than a flat one. This is clearly revealed in Figure 5, in which a line is divided so that it has three sections A, B, and C that subtend equal angles  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$ . It will be noted though that while the angles are equal the sections are not, and this is even more evidently so when they are projected in a larger scale as D, E, and F, with corresponding angles  $d$ ,  $e$ ,  $f$ . However, the marginal distortions are significantly reduced when the projection is on a curved surface, which is quite apparent on the left-hand side of the drawing.

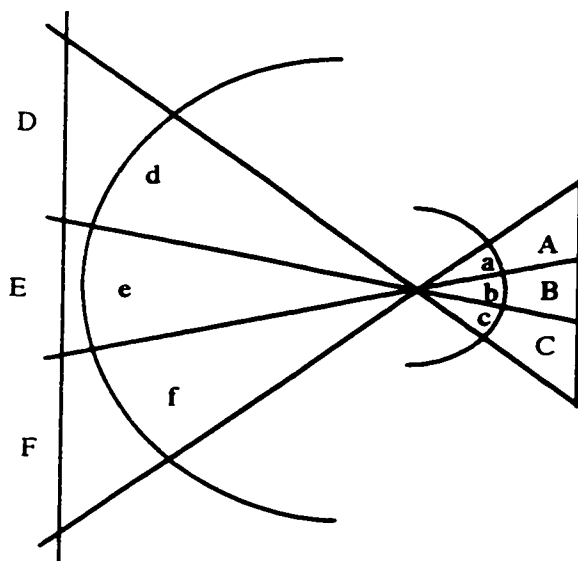


FIGURE 5. Comparison of marginal distortions on flat and curved surfaces (after Panofsky).

What Panofsky intends to make of this geometrical fact becomes clearer when he ties it to its supposed counterpart in the realm of lived experience: "alongside this purely quantitative discrepancy between retinal image and perspectival representation, which was recognized already in the early Renaissance, there is as well a formal discrepancy. This latter follows, in the first place, from the movement of the gaze, and in the second place, once again, from the curvature of the retina: for while perspective projects straight lines as straight lines, our eye perceives them (from the center of projection) as convex curves."<sup>7</sup> Curvatures in the optical image have been noted by writers throughout history, but, Panofsky argues, because of the overwhelming influence that linear perspective has had on our modern habits of vision (it is the basic representational model for everything from photography to virtual reality) we tend to compensate for and overlook them. However, there is reason to believe that the ancients did not. Antique works on optics commonly note that straight lines are seen as curved and curved lines as straight, and art theoretical texts often state that entasis should be added to the columns of buildings, and that epistyles and stylobates should be curved (as has been observed in the remains of Doric temples) apparently in order to counteract the curvatures in vision.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, and here we reconnect with the question of marginal distortions, "antique optics maintained, always and without exception, that apparent magnitudes (that is, projections of objects onto the spherical field of vision) are determined not by the distances of the objects from the eye, but rather exclusively by the width of the angles of vision. The relationship between the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>8</sup> Entasis refers to a slight convex curvature introduced into columns. A stylobate is the top level of the stepped platform (crepidoma) of a Greek temple on which the columns rest. An epistyle, in general, is the lower part of the entablature that runs along the top of the columns and is supported by them. As art historians know, there are long standing disputes about why there are these curvatures in temples. Panofsky takes up the battle in an extraordinarily long endnote (op. cit., 87-92). We will not enter the debate.

magnitudes of object is, strictly speaking, expressible only in degrees of angle or arc, and not in simple measures of length [as in linear perspective]."<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Panofsky ends Section I having argued that antique optics was based on a different, we might even say closer, evaluation of the experience of vision, and that the principles it evolved for the representation of sight were incompatible with those that govern linear perspective. In Section II he poses the question of whether the ancients might not have also developed a form of geometrical perspective that was based on their understanding of optics. 'Geometrical' is the operative word here, for it is evident that they were quite capable of foreshortening figures and objects and combining them in scenes; the question is, did they have something akin to linear perspective? Panofsky thinks that they did.<sup>10</sup>

But how would such an approach be stated and what would the images that it created look like? If the ancients held that apparent magnitudes are measured by angles and not by distances, "antique painting cannot very well have contemplated a projection upon a [flat] surface, but rather would have had to adhere to a projection upon a spherical surface. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that antique painting was even less prepared than was the Renaissance to work in practice with 'stereographic' projection, for example in

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<sup>9</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 35. In support of this, Panofsky provides a brief history of how Euclid's eighth axiom was systematically transformed (or eliminated) in translations of the *Optica* to fit the tradition of linear perspective. Elkins contests this, though without argument (*The Poetics of Perspective*, 199).

<sup>10</sup> Elkins makes an unusual remark about Panofsky's aims in sections I and II when he states that certain writers have tried to "prove" perspective, and that "a proof was attempted in a seminal twentieth-century essay on perspective, Erwin Panofsky's *Die Perspektive als 'Symbolische Form'*" (*The Poetics of Perspective*, 11). What Elkins means by 'prove' is not exceptional: "The idea of automatic translation makes it clear we mean to require that versions of the true perspective are compatible with one another and that the vehicle of that compatibility is mathematical analysis. If perspective methods are unified in this sense, then it should be possible to show how they proceed from other mathematical propositions: that is, it should be possible to *prove* perspective rigorously and properly" (*Ibid.*). The general idea behind this is a commonplace in mathematics and logic (only one does not speak in this context of "proving" perspective, but rather of proving *that* it is derivable from some other system). The problem is that Panofsky does not do anything like this in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. It may be though, taking into account the discussion that surrounds this passage, that what Elkins is getting at is that Panofsky aims at proving that perspective is tied to, and can be used to, replicate perception.

Hipparchos's sense."<sup>11</sup> In other words, to take the last point first, like Renaissance practitioners they would have had a method that worked from the assumption that the viewer was a single, stationary eye. But, because they knew that projections based on distance measurements create marginal distortions when recorded on a flat surface (thereby falsifying what is given in vision), projections would have to have been based on angles and therefore would have assumed a spherical surface of projection, that is, they would have employed the idea of an intersecting half sphere rather than an intersecting plane (as in figures 3 and 4).<sup>12</sup> Hence, "We might imagine such a construction founded on the notion of a 'sphere of projection'--or, in plan and elevation, a circle of projection--with, however, the arcs of the circle replaced by their chords. This would achieve a certain approximation of the depicted magnitudes to the widths of the angles, without posing any more technical problems than the modern procedure."<sup>13</sup> Now, because an image constructed in such a fashion would be realized on a surface such as a wall, and because a sphere cannot be unrolled on a flat surface and maintain its geometrical integrity, what we would expect to find would be that when the sphere, or more accurately the half sphere, is unrolled the arcs would detach from the centre of projection, their "vanishing point," and their cords would create what Panofsky calls a "vanishing axis" that suggests a fishbone pattern (see Figure 6, on the next page, in contrast with Figure 3). As evidence that the ancients had such a method, Panofsky argues that the well-known section in Vitruvius on scenography is

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>12</sup> At this point, simply for the sake of clarity, something has to be said about Panofsky's use of phrases such as "projection upon a spherical surface" and, more troubling, "projections of objects onto the spherical field of vision." On a literal reading this last phrase seems very odd indeed, as though Panofsky believed that in the process of vision what is seen is projected in front of one on a type of screen. But this is not what he means, as the structure of the argument in the text does not support such a view. Panofsky is expressing himself infelicitously, but we will have to wait until the next chapter before sense can be made out of this phrase. In the present context it seems that he is speaking elliptically, for what he is discussing is not the process of vision but how the ancients represented it: if you accept that magnitudes can only be related through degrees of angles, then the representation of that fact demands a visual model with a spherical surface of projection.

<sup>13</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 37.

compatible with the idea of angle perspective,<sup>14</sup> and, more importantly, that there are surviving images that use the vanishing axis approach for the creation of spatial depth, though none are geometrically rigorous.<sup>15</sup>

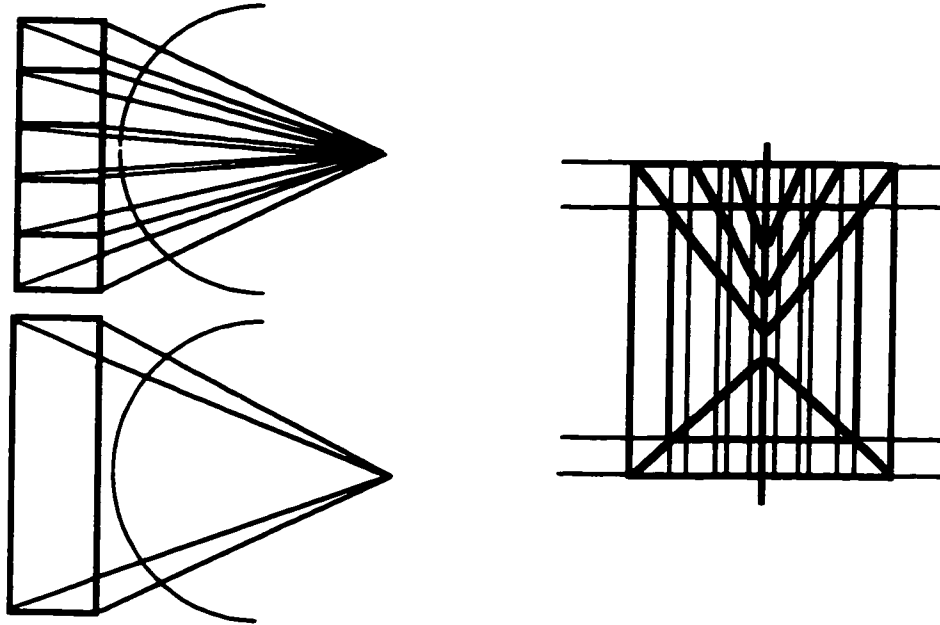


FIGURE 6. Antique "angle-perspective": construction of a shallow, rectangular interior space. Left above: plan. Left below: elevation. Right: perspectival image arrived at by combining the segments marked off on the "projection circle" (after Panofsky).

In one respect rigor is a problem for the alleged extant examples of the vanishing axis method, for unlike instances of modern linear perspective, which distort in constant proportion, these distort without proportional relations.<sup>16</sup> Though this lack of rigor somewhat weakens the case for the existence of a system of angle perspective, from an aesthetic point of view it does not, Panofsky is quick to add, indicate that either the method

<sup>14</sup> Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. M. Morgan (Cambridge, Mass., 1914), 1.2.2.

<sup>15</sup> See *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, ill. 1, fragment of a wall decoration in stucco and paint from Boscoreale, in the "fourth style," first century AD. Naples, Museo Nazionali.

<sup>16</sup> It is not clear whether Panofsky believes that only the surviving images have this problem or that this is something that would afflict any vanishing axis approach. I am inclined to rule out the later, as I cannot see what would prevent one from developing a systematic method for transferring images from a curved surface to a flat one.

(if it existed) or the images are in some way "failed" or artistically inferior (remember that Panofsky was writing for an era in which many still thought that linear perspective was an "advance" on previous methods), for "if perspective is not a factor of value, it is surely a factor of style. Indeed, it may even be characterized as (to extend Ernst Cassirer's felicitous term to the history of art) one of those 'symbolic forms' in which 'spiritual meaning is attached to a concrete, material sign and intrinsically given to this sign.' This is why it is essential to ask of artistic periods and regions not only whether they have perspective, but also which perspective they have."<sup>17</sup> This rather oblique reference to the term 'symbolic form,' we might note in passing, is the only one in the book, apart from the title.

Having reached this stage of his argument, Panofsky now begins to move to tie the history of art to intellectual history, especially the history of philosophy, and set out what internally unites an era's understanding of space and its representation of it. In general, the antique "artistic imagination remained attached to individual objects, to such an extent that space was still perceived not as something that could embrace and dissolve the opposition between bodies and nonbodies, but only as that which remains, so to speak, between the bodies."<sup>18</sup> There is nothing like the "quantum continuum" of modern perspective that unites and absorbs all the contents of space into a higher order:

Antique perspective is thus the expression of a specific and fundamentally unmodern view of space (although it is certainly a genuinely *spatial* view, Spengler notwithstanding). Antique perspective is furthermore the expression of an equally specific and equally unmodern conception of the world. . . . Why did the ancients fail to take the apparently small step of intersecting the visual pyramid with a plane and thus proceed to a truly exact and systematic construction of space? To be sure, that could not happen as long as the angle axiom of the theoreticians prevailed. But why did they not simply disregard the axiom, as would happen a millennium and a half later? They did not do it because that feeling for space which was seeking expression in the plastic arts simply did not demand a systematic space. Systematic

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<sup>17</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 40-41.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.



space was as unthinkable for antique philosophers as it was unimaginable for antique artists.<sup>19</sup>

After a brief discussion of how in the philosophies of Democritus, Plato, and Aristotle the "totality of the world always remained something radically discontinuous," Panofsky ends Section II with a passage that provides a good summary of its principal idea. Although no commentators have noticed it, the passage has a remarkably Cassirerian tone:

For, just as for Aristotle there is no 'quantum continuum' in which the quiddity of individual things would be dissolved, so there is for him also no *energeiai apeiron* (actual infinite) which would extend beyond the *Dasein* of individual objects (for, in modern terms, even the sphere of fixed stars would be an 'individual object'). And precisely here it becomes quite clear that "aesthetic space" and "theoretical space" recast perceptual space in the guise of one and the same sensation: in one case that sensation is visually symbolized, in the other it appears in logical form.<sup>20</sup>

While Section II ends with a passage in a Cassirerian tone, Section III begins with one that is Rieglian:

When work on a certain artistic problem has advanced so far that further work in the same direction, proceeding from the same premises, appears unlikely to bear fruit, the result is often a great recoil, or perhaps better, a reversal of direction. Such reversals . . . create the possibility of erecting a new edifice out of the rubble of the old; they do this precisely by abandoning what has already been achieved, that is, by turning back to apparently more "primitive" modes of representation. These reversals lay the groundwork for a creative reengagement with older problems, precisely by establishing a distance from those problems.<sup>21</sup>

A great recoil then was needed in order for antique perspective to be transformed into modern perspective, and that recoil was the Medieval period, "the greatest of all recoils,"

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 43. This line of argument, and other general ideas behind *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, can be found in less developed form in Panofsky's *Die deutsche Plastik des elften bis dreizehnten Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Wolff, 1924).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 47.

whose "art historical mission" was to find a new unity for the pictorial elements of antiquity and prepare them for the true unity of modern, that is, Renaissance, art. Thus, the unity of antique art had to be broken: objects once bound by palpable physicality, gesture, and perspective once again became isolated; the picture ceased to be a plane to be seen through and changed instead into a surface to be filled; and juxtaposition and superposition replaced depth in a new pictorial logic that flatten forms and oriented objects to the plane. The new pictorial logic of early Christian art had of course its own unity, the unity of pattern, colour and light, which also found "its theoretical analogue in the view of space of contemporary philosophy: in the metaphysics of light of pagan and Christian neoplatonism. 'Space is nothing other than the finest light,' according to Proclus; here just as in art, the world is conceived for the first time as a continuum. It is also robbed of its solidity and rationality; space has been transformed into a homogeneous and, so to speak, homogenizing fluid, immeasurable and indeed dimensionless."<sup>22</sup>

The next transformational step was provided by Byzantine art, even though, as Panofsky claims, it never fully separated itself from the antique tradition. Still, it did bring the element of line to the fore, which was the one feature that could give measure, substance, and stability to the elements in the luminous world of early Christian art. "Thus Byzantine art . . . managed, for all the disorganization of the whole, nevertheless to preserve the individual components of antique perspectival space, and so to hold them in readiness for the Western Renaissance."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 49. The quote from Proclus comes from the *Elements of Physics*, 142a. Elkins maintains that Panofsky's vocabulary for describing space is anachronistic because it is modern: "All Panofsky's descriptive terms for artistic spaces from ancient to Renaissance art are themselves modern: the 'spiritual' space of the *Odyssey Landscape*, the 'unifying fluid' of early Christian painting, the 'suppressed space' in the Romanesque, the 'individual spaces' of Gothic sculptures, and the 'structural space' of the Renaissance (*The Poetics of Perspective*, 22). While true, it is not clear how consequential this is, for there are qualifications that need to be made. Here are two: Panofsky always lets the writers of the period speak for the period (as is evident in the passage above that cites Proclus); Panofsky speaks of the writers of the period from within the philosophical apparatus that is the framework for his investigation (which seems unavoidable).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 50.

The Carolingian and Ottonian periods kept even tighter ties to antiquity than did the Byzantine tradition, and hence could do little to effect the changes that would allow for the emergence of a modern conception of pictorial space. The same was not true for the Romanesque era, which both left behind antique conventions more completely than Byzantine art, and developed line to its fullest capacity for circumscription and decoration on an unconditionally flat, material surface. Hence, Panofsky tells us, "With this radical transformation, so it would appear, all spatial illusionism was abandoned, once and for all. And yet this transformation was precisely the precondition for the emergence of the truly modern view of space. For if Romanesque painting reduced bodies and space to surface, in the same way and with the same decisiveness, by these very means it also managed for the first time to confirm and establish the homogeneity of bodies and space. It did this by transforming their loose, optical unity into a solid and substantial unity."<sup>24</sup>

The gradual realization of this solid and substantial unity is clearest in the history of Medieval sculpture, and again it is in Romanesque art that it is most completely achieved. Figure and ground are very intimately connected physically and spatially, as the sculpted figure becomes "a direct 'efformation' or development out of the building material itself. The Romanesque portal statue is a plastically developed door post, the Romanesque relief figure a plastically developed wall."<sup>25</sup> It isn't until high Gothic art that the two begin anew to separate: bodies exist in their proportioned parts of space, and the parts of space now seem capable of being united into a greater, homogeneous space; but figure and space are now also part of a greater unity that subsumes them both, as in the Gothic cathedral, which recognizes the independence of its elements while binding them together in a higher order. Once again this artistic transformation is mirrored in a philosophical one, for it is at this time that Aristotle's conception of space, tied as it was to his understanding of a finite cosmos, is being modified by Scholastic philosophy's doctrine of the infinity of divine

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 52.

existence, which opens the door for a parallel conception of the infinity of the natural world.

"At this point," Panofsky tells us, "we can almost predict where 'modern' perspective will unfold: namely, where the northern Gothic feeling for space, strengthened in architecture and sculpture, seizes upon the architectural and landscape forms preserved in fragments in Byzantine painting, and welds them into a new unity. And in fact the founders of the modern perspectival view of space were the two great painters whose styles, in other ways as well, completed the grand synthesis of Gothic and Byzantine: Giotto and Duccio."<sup>26</sup> It is in the era of Giotto and Duccio that we see the disintegration of the opaque painting surface and the reemergence of the picture plane as a window. True, the space seen is still essentially limited on all sides, a "space box," like the spatial environments of Gothic sculptural groups, but it is on its way to becoming a section excised from the 'quantum continuum.' This is worked out through the trecento by artists such as the Lorenzetti, who gradually unify all of the planes in the space box until a coordinate system of tiles and architectural elements is achieved, thereby approximating a "modern 'systematic space' in an artistically concrete sphere, well before it had been postulated by abstract mathematical thought. And in fact the projective geometry of the seventeenth century would emerge out of perspectival endeavors: this, too, like so many subdisciplines of modern 'science,' is in the final analysis a product of the artist's workshop."<sup>27</sup> The image of all orthogonals converging in a common vanishing point is "the concrete symbol of infinity itself," and this final and conclusive step was achieved empirically in the north, following the van Eyck's, by Dirk Bouts, and theoretically in the south by Brunelleschi's demonstration panels and Alberti's *costruzione legittima*. "Thus the great evolution from aggregate space to systematic space found its provisional conclusion. Once again this perspectival achievement is nothing other than a concrete expression of a contemporary

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 58.

advance in epistemology or natural philosophy. . . . Actual infinity, which was for Aristotle completely inconceivable and for high Scholasticism only in the shape of divine omnipotence, . . . , has now become *naturanaturata*. . . . And yet this view of space, even with its still-mystical coloring, is the same view that will later be rationalized by Cartesianism and formalized by Kantianism."<sup>28</sup> Panofsky then closes Section III with this noteworthy parenthetical remark: "(One could even compare the function of Renaissance perspective with that of critical philosophy, and the function of Greco-Roman perspective with that of skepticism.) The result was a translation of psychophysiological space into mathematical space; in other words, an objectification of the subjective."<sup>29</sup>

In Section IV Panofsky concludes his study with some reflections on what contemporary art theory would loosely call the epistemological status of modern perspective. As a structure that mediates the subjective and the objective, perspective has two aspects that are apparently contrary but are actually related. Perspective objectifies the

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<sup>28</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 65-66.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 66. In "Picturing Vision," Joel Snyder takes exception to Panofsky's claim that Renaissance perspective effects an "objectification of the subjective." But in doing so I think that his target is not as well-defined as it could be, for he takes Panofsky as offering a commentary on the theoretical basis of Alberti's system of linear perspective, whereas I would argue that Panofsky's remarks are directed to linear perspective as a more general epistemological structure (a symbolic form). Furthermore, in making his case Snyder says that "For Panofsky, the notion of 'visual experience' is an inherently subjective affair, one that defies rationalization without a corresponding distortion of the 'facts' of experience. . . . Central to Panofsky's analysis is the principle that the depiction of what we see can follow only from a redefinition of experienced space—by hypostatizing space it becomes possible to find a rational pictorial expression for the inherently subjective experience of seeing" ("Picturing Vision," in *The Language of Images*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980], 243). The sticking point is I believe Snyder's claim that for Panofsky visual experience is an inherently subjective affair. When Panofsky speaks of the objectification of the subjective he is referring to how psychophysiological space was supplanted by modern mathematical space. Snyder seems to believe (the same is true of Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective*, 196 and 203) that Panofsky grants psychophysiological space a greater primacy, that it is somehow the "true" experience of space. But, if Panofsky is following Cassirer, this is not how his statements should be understood: the psychophysiological experience of space is more basic, more primordial, because it is the space of mythic apprehension that survives in our subjective engagement with the world. However, it is not for that reason the standard of reality against which all other spatial experiences must be judged as "distortions of the 'facts' of experience." All apprehensions of space are equally "real," though based on different formative principles, which is what Panofsky is conveying in speaking of linear perspective as the objectification of the subjective. As for Snyder's claim that for Panofsky depiction follows from a redefinition of experience, I think it would be more accurate to say that the two develop in tandem, which will be made clear in the following chapter. Although I think that Snyder's article is an excellent one, and should be required reading for all art history students, I don't share W. J. T. Mitchell's evaluation that it is "The best critique of Panofsky's argument in the perspective essay" (*Picture Theory*, 18).

world by making it submit to a quantificational account of its relations, and by so doing it sets a distance between the viewer and the viewed. But at the same time, it does away with this distance by having what is seen dependent upon the subjective conditions of the observer's eye, upon its chosen point of view and its physical and psychological determinants. "Thus the history of perspective may be understood with equal justice as a triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real, and as a triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control; it is as much a consolidation and systematization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self."<sup>30</sup> We can see the history of Western art after 1450 as a set of varying resolutions about which should be given primacy, and to what degree. This is part of what distinguishes stylistically Italian Renaissance art from Italian Baroque art, and both of these from the art of the Netherlands. Yet even the most subjectively oriented form of post-Medieval art originated in a time when the prevailing worldview had taken from theoretical space all of its subjective attributes. The variety of pictorial orientations that we find in Western art fits with this indifference toward direction in the modern theoretical understanding of space, which culminated in Desargues's projective geometry, "when perspective, replacing for the first time the simple Euclidean 'visual cone' with the universal 'geometrical beam,' abstracted itself completely from the line of sight and thus opened up all spatial directions equally."<sup>31</sup>

The two seemingly opposed aspects that characterize perspective also allow us to better understand how, throughout history, it could be questioned from two very different standpoints. Thus we have those, in the tradition of Plato and Book X of *The Republic*,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 70. The most complete discussion to date of the relationship between Renaissance art and Renaissance mathematics is Judith Field's *The Invention of Infinity: Mathematics and Art in the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Amongst other things, Field details how artistic practice contributed to the development of concepts, such as infinity, that are fundamental to modern mathematics. Field's book will be tough going for those without a background in mathematics; indeed, it will probably be of use only to those with a specialized interest in the topic (the art historical questions that are usually associated with a discussion of perspective are not its principal concern, which is why, I assume, there is not even one reference to Panofsky in the text and *Perspective as Symbolic Form* is not listed in the bibliography).

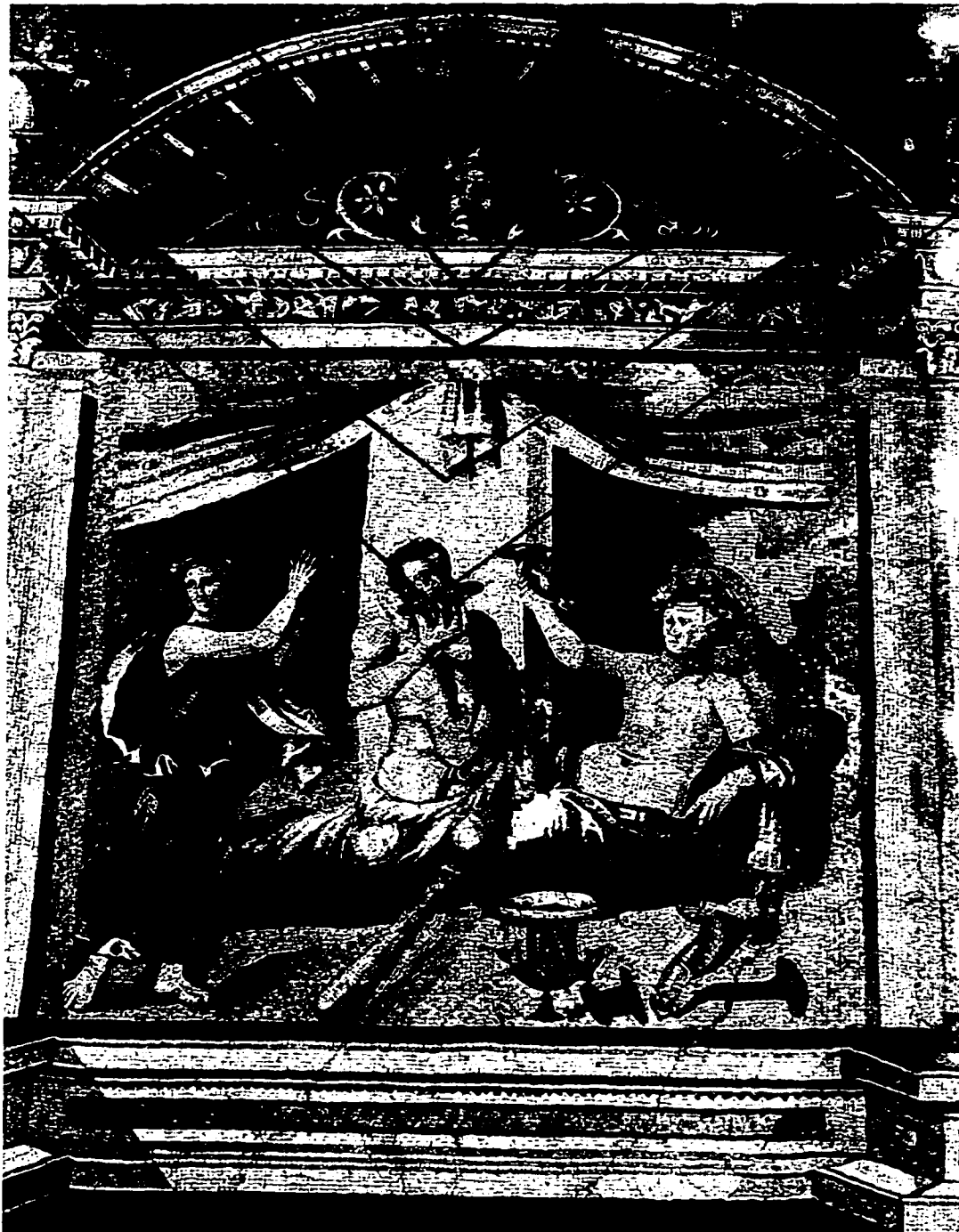
who accuse it of distorting the true measure of things by not revealing their actual forms and proportions; and then we have the legions of twentieth century artists who have spurned it because of its constrictive rationalism. However, Panofsky maintains, both of these criticisms have the same root: "the perspectival view, whether it is evaluated and interpreted more in the sense of rationality and the objective, or more in the sense of contingency and the subjective, rests on the will to construct pictorial space, in principle, out of the elements of, and according to the plan of, empirical visual space (although still abstracted considerably from the psychophysiological "givens"). Perspective mathematizes this visual space, and yet it is very much *visual* space that it mathematizes; it is an ordering, but an ordering of the visual phenomenon."<sup>32</sup>

The ascendancy of perspective also marks or corresponds to a transformation of spiritual or religious understanding in modernity. The structure of perspective's relation to the viewer makes it difficult for an image to be an *object* for religious veneration, but it does permit something new in the history of Western art: it allows the religious event to become a direct experience of the viewer. "Perspective, finally, opens art to the realm of the psychological, in the highest sense, where the miraculous finds its last refuge in the soul of the human being represented in the work of art; . . . Perspective, in transforming the *ousia* (reality) into the *phainomenon* (appearance), seems to reduce the divine to a mere subject matter for human consciousness; but for that very reason, conversely, it expands human consciousness into a vessel for the divine."

With our exposition of the main ideas and principal lines of argument complete, let us now take up the much more difficult task of explicating what Panofsky means by calling perspective a symbolic form.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 71.



**FIGURE 7. The Drinking Contest between Dionysos and Herakles. Mosaic panel from Antioch-on-the-Orontes, Turkey.**



## CHAPTER XIV

### CONCLUSION: HOW PERSPECTIVE IS A SYMBOLIC FORM

We can now begin relating the arguments and themes of the last chapter to the discussions in the previous ones and address the question posed by Panofsky's title. Let us start with the broader intellectual orientation that is directing his study.

I argued in Chapter VII that Hegel's philosophical vision influenced Cassirer's account of how symbolic forms are related to each other and how they develop internally. Like Hegel, Cassirer states that the truth is the whole; the truth about humanity and its institutions is not something static and absolute that can be laid bare once and for all; it is rather the progressive unfolding of the totality of the forms of human culture. This unfolding is to be understood as a dialectical development wherein each stage provides the basis for the one that follows--the previous stage is sublated (*aufheben*), picked up, canceled and at the same time preserved in the next. This model holds not only for the relations between greater cultural forms, such as myth, language, science, and art, it holds as well for the internal development of the cultural forms themselves.

As it is obvious that Panofsky did not concern himself with the entire history of human culture, there is no point looking in *Perspective as Symbolic Form* for a parallel to the grand programme of the philosophy of symbolic forms. What we do find though is a parallel to the kind of account that Cassirer gives of the development of individual symbolic forms. It is clear for instance that Panofsky's argument is one of dialectical presupposition: in the movement from antique to modern perspective a series of stages have to be obtained and worked through before a later one, which is built out of the preserved but transformed

elements of earlier ones, can be achieved--this transitional series of reformulations we will remember is what Panofsky referred to as "the historical mission" of the Medieval period. Thus the unity of antique perspective was smashed by early Christian art and its elements forged into a set of relations that would allow for a new type of spatial order. This permitted Byzantine art to both isolate line, the one feature that could serve as the basis for further developments, and attain a unity that would hold the elements of antique perspective "in readiness for the Western Renaissance." Then came Romanesque art, which made the final break with the conventions of antique art, and used line to its fullest potential to fashion body and space into a new homogeneous whole. After this it was up to Gothic art to reparate body and space, but on new terms, and, "At this point," I quote the passage again, "we can almost predict where 'modern' perspective will unfold: namely, where the northern Gothic feeling for space, strengthened in architecture and sculpture, seizes upon the architectural and landscape forms preserved in fragments in Byzantine painting, and welds them into a new unity."<sup>1</sup> To my mind, there is nothing in this type of account in its general aspect that distinguishes it from, for example, Cassirer's discussion of concept formation in the history of science and its movement from an analysis based on substances and their attributes to one conceived in terms of functional relations, or from his investigation of the transition from Euclidean to non-Euclidean space in modern mathematics; in fact, as we shall see, Panofsky's account owes something to them both.

Cassirer's mature theory of the internal development of symbolic forms was presented in the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: The Phenomenology of Knowledge*. As I stated in Chapter IV, in this work Cassirer argued that each symbolic form passes through three (ideal) stages of development: a mimetic, an analogical, and a purely symbolic stage. Although this conception was not fully articulated until the publication of the third volume in 1929, it seems to have been available to Panofsky in a penultimate version, perhaps through conversations with Cassirer when they were

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<sup>1</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 54.

colleagues at the University of Hamburg. I say this because although *Perspective as Symbolic Form* was published in 1925, and thus could not have made full use of this theory in its final form, it nevertheless appears to employ the three general developmental stages that distinguish Cassirer's doctrine, especially if they are referred to Cassirer's discussions of the history of the concept of space in Western civilization. This can be easily discerned as a matter of fact in Panofsky's text. In speaking of the characteristics of space in Antiquity, Panofsky emphasizes the fact that Antiquity attributed to space features that are derived from the human experience of space:

Aristotle, finally, with a basically quite unmathematical transfer of qualitative categories to the realm of the quantitative, attributed six dimensions . . . to *topos koinos* or general space (up and down, front and back, right and left), even though individual bodies were sufficiently defined by three dimensions (height, width, depth). . . . Perhaps this Aristotelian doctrine of space illustrates with special clarity the inability of antique thought to bring the concrete empirical 'attributes' of space . . . to a common denominator of a *substance étendue*: bodies are not absorbed into a homogeneous and infinite system of dimensional relationships, but rather are the juxtaposed contents of a finite vessel.<sup>2</sup>

This evaluation of Antiquity's understanding of space comes directly from Cassirer's historical investigations and his greater analysis of the differences between perceptual or psychophysiological space and modern theoretical space, which we will recall Panofsky himself introduced in Section I through a page-long quotation from *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*.<sup>3</sup> This "personalization" of space is characteristic of the mimetic stage in the development of symbolic forms where understanding fashions its concepts in close relation to the concrete sensory world; in this way, antique perspective fits the first stage in the development of perspective considered as a symbolic form.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>3</sup> See further: Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*, 79-108. See especially: Cassirer, "Mythic, Aesthetic and Theoretical Space."

Panofsky's account of the view of space in the Medieval period also seems to fit with what Cassirer says about the second stage, the analogical stage, of the evolution of symbolic forms. At this level concepts are understood on analogy with psychological processes, which gives them some distance from the concrete world of psychophysiological perception, but not enough to be wholly abstracted from it. Consequently, "Aristotle's doctrine of space, enthusiastically taken up by Scholastic philosophy, was fundamentally reinterpreted, in that the premise of the finiteness of the empirical cosmos was replaced by the premise of the infinity of divine existence and influence."<sup>4</sup> In other words, space was reconceived in terms of God's capacity to act and love, which was something that could be comprehended through the analogical extension of human abilities and psychological characteristics.

As for what Panofsky has to say about linear perspective and the modern conception of space, this comes so directly from Cassirer, without mediation (as the passages he quotes attest), that there is no reason to even recapitulate what he says, though it should be mentioned that linear perspective is an excellent example of the final, the purely symbolic, stage in the development of symbolic forms, for at this level space is abstracted from the concrete sensory world and presented solely as a system of relations that is indifferent to the existential apprehension of direction.

We will return to the question of linear perspective and the modern conception of space later in this chapter under another heading, at the moment I would like to turn briefly to an ancillary matter connected to the topic of developmental stages. There are a number of works in Panofsky's *œuvre* that depend upon a three step, dialectical model. Some of these we have already discussed, such as "The History of the Theory of Human Proportions as a Reflection of the History of Style," which was published in 1921, the year Panofsky arrived at the University of Hamburg. In this essay, we will recall (see Chapter XI), Panofsky begins by distinguishing between objective and technical proportions and then

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<sup>4</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 54.

proceeds to map out the general history of Western art in accordance with how different periods resolved the relation between the two (Egyptian art serves as a kind of foundation for the dialect because it was the only artistic tradition that treated technical and objective proportions as identical). What we discover as the essay progresses is that Antiquity had one type of resolution, the Medieval period had a resolution that was antithetical to Antiquity's, and that the Renaissance was able to take up both in a new dialectical unity that found a way of accounting for the two types of proportions at the same time. In comparing this to the narrative in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, we see that although the same three historical periods are under consideration, the schema of development and the outcome are somewhat different, which is in part because the theory of human proportions is not being presented as a symbolic form--in 1921 Panofsky's long acquaintance with Cassirer was just beginning.<sup>5</sup> That Panofsky made use of this kind of a dialectical model before he met Cassirer is something that we already know from our examination of his earlier essays. In his review of *Perspective as Symbolic Form and Three Essays on Style*,<sup>6</sup> E. H. Gombrich attributes this inclination to Panofsky's inveterate attachment to Hegelianism, though perhaps it would be better to say, and Gombrich implicitly acknowledges this, that it was due more to Panofsky's enduring attachment to Riegl and his idiosyncratic brand of Hegelianism. Regardless of where we want to put the emphasis, it would seem that Panofsky's acceptance of Cassirer's developmental model in the 1920's was facilitated by an already well-established penchant for dialectical explanations.

It is interesting to note that this penchant was not given up after he arrived in the United States. Consider the two essays "What is Baroque?" (1934) and "The Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls-Royce Radiator" (1936) from the *Three Essays on Style*. In

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<sup>5</sup> There is little doubt that from the beginning Panofsky took an intense interest in Cassirer's research: by sitting in on Cassirer's lectures Panofsky broke a long-standing German academic tradition wherein one professor did not attend another's courses.

<sup>6</sup> "Icon," review of *Perspective as Symbolic Form and Three Essays on Style*, by E. H. Gombrich, *The New York Review of Books* (February 15, 1996): 29-30.

"What is Baroque?" Panofsky constructs a developmental history relating Renaissance, Mannerist, and Baroque art; at the base of this history rests a dichotomous tension internal to the artistic ambitions of the quattrocento: "The Renaissance movement itself, based as it was on both a classical revival and a quite nonclassical naturalism, and enforcing these tendencies within the limits of an essentially Christian civilization, had given rise to a style that, with all its merits, reveals a certain inner discrepancy."<sup>7</sup> This discrepancy was resolved in late Renaissance art, but was later forced out into the open by Mannerist artists who first stressed one side of the dichotomy and then the other. It is only with Baroque art that there is "a reaction against [Mannerist] exaggeration and over-complication, and that is due to a new tendency towards clarity, natural simplicity, and even equilibrium."<sup>8</sup> Thus the dichotomy is resolved anew at a higher level.

A similar dialectical evolution is outlined in "The Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls-Royce Radiator." Here Panofsky's concern is with the evolution of English art in general, and his aim is to set out the principles that have guided the creation of English art since England was a recognizable social entity. The following passage encapsulates his argument:

In short, the English eighteenth century stands, at one and the same time, both far to the right and far to the left of contemporary developments on the Continent: a severe formal rationalism, tending to look for support to classical antiquity, contrasts but coexists with a highly subjective emotionalism, drawing inspiration from fancy, nature, and the medieval past, which, for want of a better expression, may be described as "Romantic." And this antinomy of opposite principles--analogous to the fact that social and institutional life in England is more strictly controlled by tradition and convention, yet gives more scope to individual "eccentricity" than anywhere else--can be observed throughout the history of English art and letters.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "What is Baroque?" in *Three Essays on Style*, ed. Erving Lavin (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "The Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls-Royce Radiator," in *Three Essays on Style*, ed. Erving Lavin (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 142.

In this case the story is not about opposing principles being restated and resolved at a higher level, but about what Panofsky calls, somewhat misleadingly from a Kantian point of view, an "antinomy of opposite principles," whose conflict propels a cultural tradition.

Both essays were written not long after Panofsky's arrival in the United States (1931), and one might be forgiven for surmising that his use of this type of unfashionable explanation was just a vestige of the ways of the old country that had yet to be purified by American positivism; but interestingly enough it persists as late as 1951, which is when *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* was published:

To reach its classic phase the Gothic style needed no more than a hundred years--from Suger's St.-Denis to Pierre de Montrereau's; and we should expect to see this rapid and uniquely concentrated development proceed with unparalleled consistency and directness. Such, however, is not the case. Consistent the development is, but it is not direct. On the contrary, when observing the evolution from the beginning to the "final solutions," we receive the impression that it went on almost after the fashion of a "jumping progression," taking two steps forward and then one backward, as though the builders were deliberately placing obstacles in their own way. . . . The "final" solution of the general plan was reached, we remember, in a basilica having a tripartite nave . . . . [The path to it though was not direct.] Instead, we find a dramatic struggle between two contrasting solutions each of which seems to lead away from the ultimate result.<sup>10</sup>

Panofsky is fully aware that this type of evolutionary model is not acceptable, for as he concludes his study he comments somewhat apologetically on the questionability of evolutionary Hegelian doctrines: "The gentle reader may feel about all this as Dr. Watson felt about the phylogenetic theories of Sherlock Holmes: 'It is surely rather fanciful.' And he may object that the development here sketched amounts to nothing but a natural evolution after the Hegelian scheme of 'thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.'<sup>11</sup> If the gentle reader thought this, he would surely be correct.

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<sup>10</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (New York: New American Library, 1951), 60-61. The repeated use of the phrase "final solution" by a German Jew just after World War II is a bit disconcerting. I have no comment on what lies behind it.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

This last passage is the only one that I can bring to mind in which Panofsky makes explicit reference to Hegel, but it seems clear to me that Kantianism was not the only philosophical influence that followed Panofsky across the Atlantic and attempted to remain in America under another guise, though, as I have previously suggested, it is not really Hegel himself who is kept alive in Panofsky's writings; rather, it is the Hegelianism of Panofsky's tradition of art history. We can see from the diverse ways in which Panofsky structures his dialectical arguments--the schema they have and elements that are related in them--that his Hegelianism is only a pseudo-Hegelianism that is molded to fit varying interests. In the case of *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, those interests are both supplied and shaped by Cassirer's philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

Another idea we have discussed that is allied with Hegelianism and important to both Panofsky and Cassirer is the idea that historical periods have an internal unity, and a cultural unity, that stems from a common formative principle or principles. In *An Essay on Man* Cassirer writes:

A philosophy of culture begins with the assumption that the world of human culture is not a mere aggregate of loose and detached facts. It seeks to understand these facts as a system, as an organic whole. . . . Its starting point and its working hypothesis are embodied in the conviction that the varied and seemingly dispersed rays may be gathered together and brought into a common focus. The facts are reduced to forms, and these forms themselves are supposed to possess an inner unity. . . . Man is no longer considered as a simple substance which exists in itself and is to be known by itself. His unity is as a functional unity."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> We might speculate that one reason Panofsky was so attracted to Cassirer's work was that Cassirer used Kantian and Hegelian elements to the same kind of ends as Panofsky did, i.e., Kant provided the general structure through which a form of experience could be understood, and Hegel was used to supply the model for how that form of experience should be comprehended historically.

<sup>13</sup> Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 222. Michael Ann Holly, when commenting on Panofsky's efforts to link art with the philosophical, religious, and scientific doctrines of the Antique world, makes this statement: "he is attempting to link these changing methods of depiction to changing modes of intellectual expression. His scope is ambitious, to be sure, but it involves a number of concealed premises that should not be allowed to escape notice. In no way has Panofsky justified linking perception, depiction, and expression" (Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, 137-138). If one is familiar with the philosophy of symbolic forms, this premise is in no way concealed; it is one of the most explicit tenets of the doctrine that Panofsky is claiming to employ, and therein lies the justification.



So, from the vantage point in the modern era that is given to us by the philosophy of symbolic forms, we can see that the unity we find in the heterogeneity of human activities is a functional unity, and that the function that unifies them is the symbolic function. But not only does the entirety of human culture possess a unity, each cultural form does as well; thus, science is comprehensible as science and art is comprehensible as art because each has its own set of defining presuppositions. Furthermore, each historical period has its own unity because at different moments in history consciousness engages the world in different terms, in relation to different formative principles shared at that moment by diverse cultural forms. For example, at the end of "Structuralism in Modern Linguistics," which discusses the intellectual environment that surrounded the development of structural linguistics (and the philosophy of symbolic forms) at the beginning of the twentieth century, Cassirer states "that structuralism is no isolated phenomenon; it is rather, the expression of a general tendency of thought that, in these last decades, has become more and more prominent in almost all fields of scientific research."<sup>14</sup> This in turn for Cassirer can be seen as part of the greater shift away from theoretical constructions that refer to substances to those that are based on functional relations. Hence, Cassirer would claim that the first half of the twentieth century, especially in Western Europe (remember what Panofsky said about historical time), is a recognizably distinct period because mathematics, the natural and social sciences, and the humanities conceived the world of experience in new terms. If we refer back to the text of *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, it is clear that Panofsky is thinking of historical periods in the same fashion, which I think is evident from the frequent occurrence of passages such as this one, where he is talking about the relation between various forms of space that are found in modern Western European art: "nevertheless, these very forms, as paradoxical as it may sound, belong to the moment when space as the image of a worldview is finally purified of all subjective admixtures,

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<sup>14</sup> Ernst Cassirer, "Structuralism in Modern Linguistics," *Word* 1, no. 2 (August 1945): 120. "Structuralism in Modern Linguistics" was a lecture delivered to the Linguistic Circle of New York on February 10, 1945, shortly before Cassirer's death.

both by philosophy (Descartes) and by perspective (Desargues). . . . The arbitrariness of direction and distance within modern pictorial space bespeaks and confirms the indifference to direction and distance of modern intellectual space . . . ."15 As further confirmation of Panofsky's belief that the modern conception of space is unified with the greater intellectual attitude that defines modernity, we need only recollect his discussion in Section IV of *Perspective as Symbolic Form* on the epistemological status of perspective, which I outlined at the end of Chapter XIII.

We should remind ourselves that Panofsky's belief that historical periods possess an internal unity is not specific or confined to the era in which he collaborated with Cassirer. It is quite obviously guiding the argument in "The Problem of Historical Time," and is assumed by or invoked in most of the writings we have discussed. Moreover, it extends well into his American years and is explicitly appealed to in the first sentence of *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*: "The historian cannot help dividing his material into 'periods,' nicely defined in the *Oxford Dictionary* as 'distinguishable portions of history.' To be distinguishable, each of these portions has to have a certain unity; and if the historian wishes to verify this unity instead of merely presupposing it, he must needs try to discover intrinsic analogies between such overly disparate phenomena as the arts, literature, philosophy, social and political currents, religious movements, etc."<16 A shared belief in the unity of historical periods was probably though one of the factors that facilitated Panofsky's interest in Cassirer's philosophy. It was after all a belief that played a central role in Panofsky's understanding of his discipline, for if we refer back to our discussion of the concept of style in Chapter IX, we will remember that the history of art's privileged position amongst the human sciences was based on the belief that its special relation to questions of style presented it with the unique opportunity to directly divine the formative forces that defined historical periods. This was a belief that Panofsky held in common with

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<sup>15</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 70.

<sup>16</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, 1.

his predecessors from Winckelmann to Riegl, but unlike his predecessors, who often did not use the philosophical resources available to them to best advantage, Panofsky saw in the philosophy of symbolic forms a powerful vision of the entirety of human culture that could articulate just how the diverse products of a civilization are united in common principles.

Let us now turn to the more specific features that are pertinent to understanding how perspective could be a symbolic form. There is a passage in Panofsky's book that is of singular importance, but which to my knowledge has been completely overlooked by commentators. I drew attention to it earlier, but for convenience I will quote it again:

For, just as for Aristotle there is no "quantum continuum" in which the quiddity of individual things would be dissolved, so there is for him also no *energeiai apeiron* (actual infinite) which would extend beyond the *Dasein* of individual objects (for, in modern terms, even the sphere of fixed stars would be an "individual object"). *And precisely here it becomes quite clear that "aesthetic space" and "theoretical space" recast perceptual space in the guise of one and the same sensation: in one case that sensation is visually symbolized, in the other it appears in logical form* (my emphasis).<sup>17</sup>

For anyone reading through Panofsky's text, alert to material that indicates that he knew exactly what was involved in calling perspective a symbolic form, this last sentence is a crucial one. To see how, let us return to Chapter II. I devoted the better part of that chapter to the doctrine of symbolic pregnance and to the question of whether Cassirer could legitimately distinguish between "the simple presence of the phenomenon" given in experience and the symbolic orders through which it is apprehended. I argued that such a distinction is not only conceptually possible in Cassirer's philosophy, but that he can also show how it can be made in actuality. I concluded that it can be made because Cassirer is able to distinguish between the meaning generating functions of consciousness and that which is the object of their activity; this can be done because these functions operate in different modes and at different levels of articulation, and through their differences they

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<sup>17</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 44-45.

disclose to us their formative principles and the matter that they form. This argument was presented in relation to experiments involving the perception of colour phenomena; the central problem of how to refer to "the simple presence of the phenomenon" was overcome by finding a discourse, which in this case was the physical description of colour, that allowed us to speak intelligibly about the "same phenomenon" while being able to discuss the different formative principles that characterized the symbolic orders that were brought to it.

The doctrines supported by these arguments are fundamental to the idea of symbolic form, and anyone who claims that a certain domain of human expression is a symbolic form will understand how his or her account is grounded by symbolic pregnance, the transcendental condition of meaning. It is very clear that Panofsky does understand this, for recall how he argues, in another important passage that I earmarked earlier for further discussion, that the differing symbolic orders of angle perspective and linear perspective are addressed to "the same phenomenon" given in experience, which we have in fact already identified in Chapter XIII:

[Linear perspective] takes no account of the enormous difference between the psychologically conditioned "visual image" through which the visible world is brought to our consciousness, and the mechanically conditioned "retinal image" which paints itself upon our physical eye. . . . Finally, perspectival construction ignores the crucial circumstance that this retinal image--entirely apart from its subsequent psychological "interpretation," and even apart from the fact that the eyes move--is a projection not on a flat but on a concave surface. Thus already on this lowest, still prepsychological level of facts there is a fundamental discrepancy between "reality" and its construction.<sup>18</sup>

The "retinal image" is the phenomenon that remains the same for both angle and linear perspective (or, to speak more precisely, it is the retinal image acting as the causal basis of what I will call the "optical image," a relation which will be specified shortly). As was the case for colour perception, the discourse that allows us to speak intelligibly about the "same

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 31.

phenomenon," while being able to discuss the different formative principles of the symbolic orders that are brought to it, is once again physiological, though guided by the theory of curvilinear perspective created by Guido Hauck in *Die subjektive Perspektive und die horizontalen Curvaturen des Dorischen Styls* and in "Die malerische Perspektive."<sup>19</sup> At the basis of vision is the retinal image that, as Panofsky remarks in an aptly ambiguous turn of phrase, "paints itself upon our physical eye." When I look at the world, what I see, for lack of a more precise way of stating it, is derived from the retinal image. If I pay careful enough attention to the experience of seeing, what I will notice is that there are curvatures in my field of vision; supposedly, these curvatures exist--in what we will call the "optical image"--because the retinal image from which the optical image is derived is a projection onto a curved surface. This is why, if I am standing perpendicular to a rectangular wall, with my line of sight directed to its approximate centre, I will see its upper edge as slightly convex and its foundation line as slightly concave, and I might also notice that the outer edges have a convex curvature. It seems though that what is given by the retinal image in perception, in the optical image, can be overridden, for this is apparently what happened with linear perspective: as the mode for the visual representation of space in the extraordinarily powerful world view of modern science, linear perspective has gradually habituated us to ignoring the subjective curvatures in the optical image.<sup>20</sup> This is why Panofsky says of linear perspective that "already on this lowest, still prepsychological level of facts there is a fundamental discrepancy between 'reality' and its construction." Reality,

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<sup>19</sup> Guido Hauck, *Die subjektive Perspektive und die horizontalen Curvaturen des Dorischen Styls* (Stuttgart, 1879), and Guido Hauck, "Die malerische Perspektive," *Wochenblatt für Architekten und Ingenieure* 4 (1882). Hauck was a mathematician who took a special interest in the visual arts in general and perspective in particular. He achieved a certain distinction during his lifetime for his mathematically consistent system of curvilinear perspective.

<sup>20</sup> Panofsky goes to some length to try to demonstrate that historical figures in the dawning of the modern era of science were aware of the discrepancies between the curvatures in the optical image and the symbolically mediated visual image. He cites Kepler, for example, who noted "the possibility that the objectively straight tail of a comet or the objectively straight trajectory of a meteor is subjectively perceived as a curve" (34). "What is most interesting," Panofsky continues, "is that Kepler fully recognized that he had originally overlooked or even denied these illusory curves only because he had been schooled in linear perspective" (34).

which he here places in quotation marks, does not refer to some pre-Kantian absolute reality, but to what we earlier referred to as "the simple presence of the phenomenon," in other words, to the retinal image as the causal basis of the optical image. So far then Panofsky's account is in harmony with Cassirer's doctrine of symbolic pregnance.<sup>21</sup>

Damisch however believes that Panofsky's appeal to the retinal image is a clear indication that he does not fully understand the philosophical issues he has brought into play by invoking the philosophy of symbolic forms: "In truth, these questions do not seem to have interested Panofsky, whose intention was, as he says quite openly, 'to extend Ernst Cassirer's felicitous term [i.e., 'symbolic form'] to the history of art.' The fact is, however, that far from making reference to it from the start, he only introduces it after extended developments, supposedly based on psychophysiology, that directly contradict Cassirer's arguments because they take the retinal image, which has nothing to do with the symbolic order, to be the touchstone of perspective construction."<sup>22</sup> I hope that the argument I have given demonstrates that Damisch's evaluation of Panofsky needs to be reconsidered.

To further our investigations we should look more closely at the notions of the retinal image, the optical image, and the visual image, so that we can set out their roles in

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<sup>21</sup> The following passage seems to indicate that André Chastel's thinking, if he had pursued the question, would have taken a direction similar to my analysis: "L'arrière-plan de cette position [on form and content] est, on le sait, à chercher du côté de la philosophie 'néo-kantienne' et ouverte à l'anthropologie d'Ernst Cassirer. Leur connivence est mise en évidence par le titre même de l'essai *Die Perspektive als symbolische Form* (1925) dont il ne me revient pas de parler ici davantage. Le troisième volume de la *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* du philosophe parut en 1929; mais l'essai: *Das Symbolproblem und seine Stellung im System der Philosophie* contenait 'in nuce' l'essentiel d'une démonstration qui était devenue familière à tous les membres de l'Université de Hambourg. Elle consistait à bien dégager le rôle de la *représentation*, fondé à tout niveau sur une 'forme symbolique', par où la conscience se sépare du monde de l'expérience brute pour le dominer, l'expliquer ou le rendre 'jouissible'. E. Cassirer n'a jamais proposé de théorie de l'art complète, mais ses essais en offrent les prolégomènes dans l'analyse étage par étage de la fonction *d'expression*, *Ausdruckfunktion*, et amorcent tous les points de doctrine qui allaient devenir indispensables aux historiens de la culture et des formes artistiques. La réflexion sur la simple ligne tracée par une plume ou un pinceau, *Linienzug* en Chine ou en Occident, permet déjà de rendre compte du jeu constant d'exclusion et de construction qui caractérise la conscience artistique au travail" (André Chastel, "Erwin Panofsky: rigueur et système," in *Pour un temps/Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Jacques Bonnet [Paris: les Éditions de Minuit, 1983], 16-17).

<sup>22</sup> Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 11.

Panofsky's speculations about the existence of an antique angle perspective. The retinal image is the image that is registered on the retina by the outside world; the optical image is the physiologically created, unmediated experience of sight (which is caused by the retinal image, or more accurately, by the pattern of stimulation that corresponds to the retinal image); and the visual image is the mediated experience of sight--what we would report, if we were asked to describe what we were seeing. Panofsky employs these distinctions but does not explicate them.

Many people with whom I have discussed *Perspective as Symbolic Form* have believed that the retinal image is a fiction, invented by misguided souls such as Hauck and Panofsky who were suffering under quaint and artlessly naive late nineteenth century theories (there is little reason though to disparage the quality of scientific thinking in that era, as even a quick perusal Helmholtz's *Popular Lectures on Scientific Subjects*, especially "The Eye as an Optical Instrument," would reveal).<sup>23</sup> There is no doubt that there is a retinal image. On the simplest mechanical level the human eye functions just like a camera obscura, which means that there are viewable images in constant transformation on the backs of our eyes, or, more accurately, on the retinal areas that cover the greater interior surface of our eyeballs (a thought that I find quite attractive).<sup>24</sup> However, the existence or nonexistence of retinal images is not what has been most contentious in Panofsky's speculations; what has proved more bothersome is the function he assigns to them. Unfortunately, the precise role that Panofsky believes the retinal image fulfills in the process of vision is not directly addressed in the text, and this difficulty is compounded by the fact that he does not explicitly set out the distinctions between the retinal image, the optical image, and the visual image that I have maintained are at work in his argument and

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<sup>23</sup> Hermann von Helmholtz, *Popular Lectures on Scientific Subjects*, First Series, trans. E. Atkinson (London: Longmans, 1873).

<sup>24</sup> When one looks into someone's eyes and sees a tiny image of oneself in their pupil that is not (unfortunately) a glimpse of the retinal image, which wouldn't have that kind of colouration, but rather a reflection from the tear film that covers the outer surface of the cornea.

essential to making sense of it. This leads to considerable confusion amongst his commentators. Michael Ann Holly, for example, is only alert to the distinction between the retinal image and the visual image, which greatly hampers her efforts at providing a coherent exposition of the text, and an explanation of what is novel and compelling in Panofsky's approach.<sup>25</sup>

Following from this difficulty is another that has proved to be an even greater impediment to the interpretation of *Perspective as Symbolic Form*: there are a number of commentators, and this appears to include even such astute readers as Damisch and M. H. Pirenne, who believe Panofsky thinks that vision involves seeing what is on our retinas.<sup>26</sup> Such an idea is quaint and artlessly naive in the face of contemporary physiological optics, and it comes close to refuting itself: as the clear-headed Pirenne succinctly puts it, "the retinal image is not what we see: what we see is the external world."<sup>27</sup> I do not believe though that either Hauck or Panofsky thought that we see our retinal images, and I think that we can already discern this from our discussion of the passages that we have so far

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<sup>25</sup> "Panofsky distinguishes between a 'retinal image' (*Netzhautbild*) and a 'visual image' (*Sehbild*) . . . and he challenges perspective first on the ground that it claims to represent the world as our eyes see it (Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, 134). Holly then goes on to put herself in quandaries of her own making: "At this point, Panofsky seems in doubt as to which question he should ask. How accurate is perspective, or is verisimilitude not in question?" Holly, 136). Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Holly seems in doubt as to which question she should attribute to Panofsky, for the question of verisimilitude as it is usually framed is not what concerns him; his three way distinction, with the optical image as its pivoting middle term, allows him to raise a different set of questions about the relations between the experience of vision and the systems used to represent it that cannot be expressed through the twofold distinction between the retinal image and the visual image. More will be said about this later.

<sup>26</sup> "Il n'est que trop vrai que l'auteur de *La perspective comme 'forme symbolique'* a confondu les conditions effectives de la vision avec le procès optique qui aboutit à la formation d'une image sur la surface interne, et concave, de la rétine" (Hubert Damisch, "Panofsky am Scheidewege," 103. M. H. Pirenne, *Optics, Painting, & Photography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). See especially the discussion in the section "Systems of 'curvilinear perspective,'" 148-149.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* In the Introduction I quoted this statement from Pirenne about *Perspective as Symbolic Form*: "While the present writer has considerable misgivings with regard to a number of Panofsky's arguments and conclusions, it must be pointed out that he does not always find it easy to understand what, from an optical, physiological and psychological standpoint, Professor Panofsky, and the other art historians who have been influenced by his thesis, do exactly mean." I think that this is so because Pirenne is not familiar with the philosophy of symbolic forms. This probably effects his understanding of what Panofsky is saying about the role of the retinal image.



considered.<sup>28</sup> But the same cannot be said for Panofsky's epigones. Indeed, Pirenne, who was Lecturer for the University Laboratory of Physiology at Oxford, and an enthusiast of the visual arts, wrote *Optics, Painting, & Photography* in part out of impatience with the sort of things that conceptually incautious artists and art historians have said about the process of sight.<sup>29</sup> Happily they are not our concern. The question we have to address, before we can say anything about Panofsky's hypothesis of an antique angle perspective, is what place does the retinal image have in visual experience?

To get clear on this we have to look at two excerpts, the first of which immediately follows a by now familiar passage:

[Linear perspective] takes no account of the enormous difference between the psychologically conditioned "visual image" through which the visible world is brought to our consciousness, and the mechanically conditioned "retinal image" which paints itself upon our physical eye. For a peculiar stabilizing tendency within our consciousness--promoted by the cooperation of vision and the tactile sense--ascribes to perceived objects a definite and proper size and form, and thus tends not to take notice, at least not full notice, of the distortions which these sizes and forms suffer on the retina.<sup>30</sup>

The second passage comes shortly after, on the following page:

But alongside this purely quantitative discrepancy between retinal image and perspectival representation, [i.e., marginal distortion], which was recognized already in the early Renaissance, there is as well a formal discrepancy. This latter follows, in the first place, from the movement of the gaze, and in the second place,

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<sup>28</sup> For example: "[Linear perspective] takes no account of the enormous difference between the psychologically conditioned 'visual image' through which the visible world is brought to our consciousness, and the mechanically conditioned 'retinal image' which paints itself upon our physical eye." It doesn't seem to me that the mechanically conditioned retinal image, which is part of the physical process of sight, is what we see; I read this passage as saying that what we see is "the visible world." There are other reasons as well for not attributing this idea to Panofsky: it is after all a rather unsophisticated conception of the visual process, and Panofsky is not an uninformed theoretician; this idea has been under fire since at least Descartes' *Dioptrique*, and it is likely that Panofsky was aware of both the controversy and Descartes' book.

<sup>29</sup> Damisch appears to concur, for in speaking of the same matter he remarks: "Si naïveté il y a, elle semble malheureusement de règle quand l'histoire de l'art en vient à s'ouvrir à des considérations qui excèdent son domaine propre (*Ibid.*).

<sup>30</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 31.

once again, from the curvature of the retina: for while perspective projects straight lines as straight lines, our eye perceives them (from the center of projection) as convex curves. A normal checkerboard pattern appears at close range to swell out in the form of a shield; an objectively curved checkerboard, by the same token, will straighten itself out. The orthogonals of a building, which in normal perspectival construction appears straight, would, if they were to correspond to the factual retinal image, have to be drawn as curves. . . . This curvature of the optical image has been observed twice in modern times: by the great psychologists and physicists at the end of the last century; but also (and this has apparently not been remarked upon until now) by the great astronomers and mathematicians at the beginning of the seventeenth century.<sup>31</sup>

We can understand how someone working through such passages, encountering repeated references to vision and the retinal image, might come to the conclusion that Panofsky thinks that sight involves a visual image and a retinal image, and that what we see is the retinal image. But the last sentence in our second quotation implies that more is involved--there is as well the optical image to be considered; in fact, as I stated earlier, the optical image is crucial to the formal model that Panofsky is relying upon.<sup>32</sup>

The optical image fits, so to speak, between the retinal image and the visual image. In the first passage Panofsky refers to a process of psychological interpretation that mediates the relation between the retinal image and the visual image, such that the deformations that images of objects projected onto the retina undergo are compensated for, and we see objects as having relatively stable shapes. There are two types of deformation that occur in this circumstance, and while Panofsky doesn't explicitly differentiate them, it seems that he has both in mind: first, images of objects are deformed because they are projected on to a spherical surface; secondly, they are deformed when the eye changes position or the object changes position in relation to the eye. In both cases the deformations are quite severe--think of the reflection of an object passing over the surface of a spherical mirror. Obviously we don't take note of these deformations, for if we did the experience of

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>32</sup> Elkins is alert to these distinctions (*The Poetics of Perspective*, 191-195), but does nothing with them.

vision would without doubt be much more dramatic and dynamic than it already is.<sup>33</sup> Are they though the source of the subjective curvatures that we earlier discussed and that Panofsky mentions in the second passage quoted above? Although Panofsky does not say so, I believe that this is what he has in mind when he speaks of how "a peculiar stabilizing tendency within our consciousness--promoted by the cooperation of vision and the tactile sense--*ascribes to perceived objects a definite and proper size and form, and thus tends not to take notice, at least not full notice, of the distortions which these sizes and forms suffer on the retina.*" The full distortions are not transferred, if you will, to the visual cortex and registered in sight, though they persist to a certain degree and are noticeable in our field of vision. Panofsky's unstated hypothesis is then that the curvatures in the optical image are ultimately derived from the retinal image.<sup>34</sup> This is where the optical image enters Panofsky's model. If we are standing perpendicular to a rectangular wall, we evidently don't see anything like what would be given in the retinal image, which involves very pronounced curvatures. The average person in fact would claim that they see the outline of the wall as composed of straight lines--that is the truth of their visual experience, and that is what Panofsky would refer to as their visual image. However, we can always try to aid the person in noticing the subjective curvatures of the visual field, which are not as pronounced as those in the retinal image; if we succeed, then we have brought that person to an awareness of the optical image, that is, to the unmediated, pre-theoretical visual experience offered by the human apparatus of sight. Of course one can also come to the discovery by oneself, like the scientists that Panofsky referred to earlier.

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<sup>33</sup> "Of someone who stated that the Impressionists 'painted their retinal images,' a psychologist, the late Professor George Humphrey, said: 'He believes that he sees his retinal image; he would have a shock if he could' "(Pirenne, *Ibid.*, 9).

<sup>34</sup> Subjective curvatures are apparently not noticeable to everyone; some people claim that they are not aware of any such phenomenon. Perhaps I have read *Perspective as Symbolic Form* once too often, but I find this difficult to comprehend, for I have become very much aware of subjective curvatures and I cannot understand how they could be overlooked.

If what I have said is correct, we can now more clearly state what, at this level, distinguishes Panofsky's two types of perspective. Even though we all have the same retinal image and the same optical image when looking at the same rectangular wall, the visual image of a modern citizen of the Western world will be distinctly different from what would have been experienced by an ancient Greek or Roman. While Renaissance linear perspective and the modern conception of science has led us to overlook curvatures in the visual field, the ancients noted them, and, according to Panofsky, attempted to incorporate them into representations of the world viewed. We deny what they stress, though our optical images are derived from the same retinal image.<sup>35</sup>

With this clarified, let us try to do the same for Panofsky's hypothesized system of angle perspective. The following sentence, which has already been cited in Chapter XIII, provides us with a good point of entry: "Because it conceived of the field of vision as a sphere, antique optics maintained, always and without exception, that apparent magnitudes (that is, projections of objects onto that spherical field of vision) are determined not by the distances of the objects from the eye, but rather exclusively by the width of the angles of vision."<sup>36</sup> To begin with, what does Panofsky mean by saying that angle perspective "conceived of the field of vision as a sphere"? He means more, it appears, than the commonly acknowledged fact that the "frame" of our field of vision, considered only in terms of its length and width, is spheroid; he means as well that its outer boundary, projected into depth from the centre of the eye, is spherical. In support of this he cites a anonymous Greek theorist who states that "The point of the cone of vision is within the pupil and it is the point of a sphere," in other words, the cone of vision is rounded at its

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Ann Holly is thus off on the wrong path when she says that "As a geometrical system, at least, linear perspective is internally consistent and in no sense arbitrary, as Panofsky would have it" (Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, 132). We can see from the above discussion that Panofsky is not arguing that linear perspective is arbitrary (nor has he said anything about it being an inconsistent geometrical system). Rather, the point is that it is not exhaustive. It captures and emphasizes certain fundamental features of visual experience and overlooks others (which would make it inconsistent).

<sup>36</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 35.

extremity, like the commercial icon of an ice cream cone.<sup>37</sup> Now, it seems that Panofsky assumes that the ancients were brought to this realization through the phenomenon of marginal distortions:<sup>38</sup> when we stand perpendicular to the centre of the pillared facade of a temple and attempt to represent this visual relation, what we discover is that if the cone of vision is conceived of as a bundle of straight lines, as in linear perspective, and the distances between the eye and the pillars is expressed in terms of lengths of lines, and this is represented on a flat surface (which is equivalent to the plane established by the front of the temple), then the pillars will have to be represented as increasing in thickness the further they are away from the centre of projection. This obviously does not represent the state of the pillars in reality; hence, the ancients supposedly concluded that this cannot be an adequate model for vision. The end of the cone of vision must be curved rather than flat, for when the facade is projected onto a curved surface, and distances measured by degrees of an angle, then the distortions in the margins of the field of vision are negligible.<sup>39</sup> At this point it appears that Panofsky makes another unexpressed assumption and presumes that the ancients found this model doubly satisfactory because it also seems to fit with the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>38</sup> I say "it seems" because it is often extremely difficult, especially in Section I, to determine what Panofsky is claiming. On page 35 he states: "*Because* it conceived of the field of vision as a sphere, antique optics maintained, always and without exception, that apparent magnitudes . . . are determined not by the distances of the objects from the eye, but rather exclusively by the width of the angles of vision" (my emphasis). What force the 'because' that begins the sentence is suppose to have is completely unclear, for in the previous sentence Panofsky says that if antique optics "did understand so clearly the spherical distortions of form, *this only follows from (or at least corresponds to)* its still more momentous recognition of the distortion of magnitudes [when measured by distances from the eye]" (my emphasis). Which is it? Does comprehending the spherical form of vision follow from the recognition that distortion in magnitudes is reduced through measurement by angles, as the second sentence suggests? Or is it the reverse, as the first sentence suggests?

<sup>39</sup> Pirenne states that "Various systems of perspective have been proposed, by Hauck (1875) and Panofsky (1927) among a number of others, according to which the representation on a plane of objectively straight lines should, for most of the lines, be curved. Now according to the argument developed in the present book the *Optics* of Euclid does not lead to such a conclusion. The theory of central perspective which has been discussed rests upon principles contained in Euclid's *Optics* and *Elements*--which, contrary to what Panofsky argued, are definitely *not* in disagreement with the perspective theory of the Renaissance" (op. cit., 148). I am admittedly not a specialist in the history of optics, but I cannot see how Pirenne can say this. It seems undeniable that if, as Panofsky argues, Euclid's eight axiom is changed so that it speaks of measurement by distance rather than measurement by degrees of an angle, then a very different system of representation results, for, as everyone including Pirenne acknowledges, the problem of marginal distortions is prominent in one case but not the other.

presence of subjective curvatures in vision: the curvatures in the outline of the facade will be bent in a way that will resemble what that outline would look like if were projected onto a spherical surface.

If this line of argument as I have constructed it is sound, then we should be better placed to make sense of the answer Panofsky offers when he asks what it would look like if the ancients had attempted to represent objects in accordance with these considerations.

This familiar, but cardinal, passage gives us the essentials of his answer:

The ancients, as far as we know, never swerved from the principle that apparent magnitudes were determined not by distances but by angles. On the one hand, it is clear that as long as it respected this principle, antique painting cannot very well have contemplated a projection upon a surface, but rather would have had to adhere to a projection upon a spherical surface. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that antique painting was even less prepared than was the Renaissance to work in practice with "stereographic" projection, for example in Hipparchos's sense. We thus have to consider, at most, whether or not antiquity managed to work out an artistically serviceable approximation. We might imagine such a construction founded on the notion of a "sphere of projection"--or, in plan and elevation, a circle of projection--with, however, the arcs of the circle replaced by their cords.<sup>40</sup>

Now that we know what Panofsky means by a sphere of vision, we can more readily grasp the constructional approach that he is suggesting for antique angle perspective: if the ancients wanted to represent what was given to them in sight, they would have realized that this could only be accomplished through a projection onto a spherical surface; however, as images are usually made for flat surfaces, such as walls, they would have had to come up with, as Panofsky says, "an artistically serviceable approximation." Panofsky thinks that this approximation is hinted at in a famous section on scenography in Vitruvius's *Ten Books on Architecture*, where Vitruvius states that *Scenographia*, that is, the perspectival representation of a three-dimensional structure on a surface, is based on an "*omnium linearum ad circini centrum responsus*."<sup>41</sup> Panofsky claims that this *circini centrum* does

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<sup>40</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 37.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 38. Vitruvius, *op. cit.*, 1.2.2. Evidently, one of the foundation stones upon which Panofsky's case rests is his interpretation of the sources he invokes. It is not however part of my enterprise to try to evaluate the legitimacy of Panofsky's interpretations, as my concern is not with whether it is "true" that

not refer to a vanishing point, as so many theorists have suggested it does, but rather to a centre of projection standing for the eye of the beholder. Panofsky notes that in this part of Vitruvius's text *circini centrum* is most accurately rendered as "compass point," and thus he suggests that we consider this point to be coincident with the beholder's eye, at which a compass point would be set and a section of a circle drawn that would stand for the intersection of the visual cone, in the same way that in the linear perspective a vertical line is drawn to represent the picture plane that intersects the visual rays (see Figure 6). This intersecting section of a circle is what Panofsky was speaking about when he said that "We might imagine such a construction founded on the notion of a "sphere of projection"--or, in plan and elevation, a circle of projection--with, however, the arcs of the circle replaced by their cords." Imagine then an image, projected onto a half sphere, in which there is a coffered ceiling or a tile floor the principal lines of which meet at a vanishing point. Now imagine trying to transfer the image onto a flat surface. Since, geometrically speaking, a half sphere cannot be "unrolled" onto a plane, we would have to conceive of a procedure that would give us an approximation of what we wanted to represent. One way of achieving this would be to have the converging orthogonals of the tile floor or coffered ceiling break apart from the vanishing point, as the image is "unrolled," thereby transforming themselves from arcs into cords that create what Panofsky calls a "fishbone" effect. What would result would be a vanishing axis approach to spatial representation where orthogonals do not meet at a single point but converge in pairs along a common line (see Figure 6 in relation to Figure 7).<sup>42</sup>

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there was an antique angle perspective. Besides, the battles over Vitruvius and the other sources still rage unresolved.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Ann Holly makes a very peculiar pronouncement about Panofsky's demonstrations: "Because Panofsky wants to stress that perspective is a 'mythical' structure (possibly emphasizing the 'artificiality of a symbolic form more than Cassirer would), his optical and mathematical demonstrations (the essay contains more than thirty diagrams) can be viewed as curiously unnecessary for his principal point. His use of mathematics might be seen as the recourse of a person who is insecure with the direction in which his imagination is taking him, and therefore he resorts to a rationalistic accounting of a problem that his particular impulse to theorize on perspective suggests is basically irrational" (Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, 135). I have tried to get by without diagrams when I thought that for my

This "artistically serviceable approximation," it should be noted, need not be an *ad hoc* approach: it seems possible that one can come up with a repeatable procedure for transferring an image from a round surface to a flat one, especially when one is working from within a consistent geometry and optics.<sup>43</sup> This is important for Panofsky's claim that perspective is a symbolic form, because, as I argued in Chapter VII, a symbolic form has to be a structurally conceived semiotic system, and an *ad hoc* non repeatable procedure is neither. We of course do not know what kind of system could be behind an antique angle perspective because it exists only as a speculative hypothesis, based on certain differences between antique images and writings and their modern equivalents. Nevertheless, it is not farfetched to imagine that there could have been one, given that the vanishing axis principle is evident in a large number of surviving antique images, and given that, as Panofsky maintains, antique texts on optics always and without exception chose to measure apparent magnitudes not by distances but by degrees of an angle.<sup>44</sup>

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purposes a verbal explanation would be sufficient, but Panofsky's case is different because in most instances he is "demonstrating" (Holly uses the word herself) a geometrical point that might not be evident or compelling to a layperson. As for Panofsky's motives, I hope that by now enough has been said about the project of *Perspective as Symbolic Form* that we can see that "his particular impulse to theorize on perspective" is *not* "basically irrational." I have no explanation for what Holly might mean in saying that Panofsky understands perspective as a "mythical structure."

<sup>43</sup> It seems possible because, on a associated front, systems of curvilinear perspective have already been invented (Hauck's was mentioned earlier). There have been other related efforts as well, e.g., Hermann von Helmholtz developed a mathematical model for representing the subjective curvatures in vision (*Helmholtz's Treatise on Physiological Optics*, vol. 3, trans. Southhall [Rochester: Optical Society of America, 1925]).

<sup>44</sup> This is a good point at which to evaluate an assertion by Elkins. Speaking of Panofsky's appeal to Hauck's curvilinear perspective in Section I, Elkins tells us that Hauck's system cannot support Panofsky's claims about methods of perspective in Antiquity because "Hauck's construction presupposes a rigorously mathematical, continuous space consistent with the infinite and homogeneous mathematical space of linear perspective" (*The Poetics of Perspective*, 195). This is true, but it misses the point of Panofsky's argument. Panofsky is not claiming that Hauck has revealed the angle perspective of the ancients; rather, he appeals to Hauck to demonstrate that it is possible to incorporate subjective curvatures into a system of representation. It is quite clear, for a number of reasons, in what has been set out above that Panofsky is not maintaining this relation between Hauck's work and antique angle perspective: first, Panofsky does not even indirectly refer to Hauck (it is Vitruvius who is the locus of the discussion); secondly, Panofsky repeatedly states that the ancients did not have our conception of a mathematical, infinite and homogeneous space (thus, Hauck's approach could not be theirs); thirdly, the vanishing axis model he is hypothesizing has nothing to do with what Hauck was trying to realize. There is another, related, misunderstanding that is worth mentioning at this juncture. Elkins and others seem to believe that Panofsky thinks that antique perspective captured the psychophysiological experience of space, at least in its visual aspect, which is why it is important to Elkins to point out that Hauck does not do this: "[Hauck's construction] is just as insensitive as linear perspective to the . . . traits of psychophysiological space" (*Ibid.*). Antique perspective



We are now poised to enter the final stages of our argument for what it means to call perspective a symbolic form. Before we begin, recollect that in Chapters II and III we discussed how to identify and individuate symbolic forms, and that one of our conclusions was that the term 'symbolic form' does not have a clear and unique application. As Carl Hamburg's studies have shown, Cassirer used symbolic form to refer to cultural forms, the symbol function itself, and to more general symbol relations such as space, time, and causality. Predominately, he used it to refer to the greater cultural forms of myth, language, science, art, and so on, but these general categories are themselves problematic and not readily individuable. Thus we came to the conclusion that any extensive symbolic system that has its own principles of formation and aims at grasping an area of human experience can be spoken of as a symbolic form. Perspective, which aims at representing the experienced spatial world, fulfills this general characterization. Symbolic forms though are never instantiated singularly. There are different mythologies that are prompted by the same natural phenomena, different cosmologies for the same astronomical observations, and, as Panofsky would argue, different perspectival representations of the same visual situation. What distinguishes the different perspectives is that each is a coherent system that has its unique principles through which it apprehends and forms the phenomena that it is designed to represent. As we are familiar with the representational principles of both linear and angle perspective, let us see if we can be more precise and more concrete about how perspective could be conceived in structural and semiotic terms, which is the next requirement that it must meet if it is to be considered a symbolic form. As antique angle perspective exists only as a hypothesis, we will have to use linear perspective as our representative case. We will consider two approaches that are related but distinct in their aims and foundations; in

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insensitive as linear perspective to the . . . traits of psychophysiological space" (Ibid.). Antique perspective however did not aim at capturing the entirety of this visual space but only its subjective curvatures; this is why Panofsky says, when discussing the optics behind it, that the optics "fit its theory *more* snugly to the factual structure of the subjective optical impression than did Renaissance perspective" (*Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 35; my emphasis). In *this* regard antique perspective was closer to our subjective visual impression, though in other respects, like linear perspective, it failed to capture or did not aim at capturing what was given in experience.

neither case, it must be emphasized, am I saying that the model suggested is one advanced in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, for Panofsky does not make any such model explicit. The argument that I am operating upon is that if Panofsky was serious in calling perspective a symbolic form (and he was always scrupulous in his intellectual commitments), then he would have been familiar with Cassirer's semiotics (which is further reinforced by the fact that he worked with Cassirer for years and attended his lectures). And if this is accepted, then it is a likely conjecture that he would have developed his account in harmony with the kind of semiotic approach that Cassirer's philosophy is based on, in which case the approach implicit in his study cannot be markedly different from the models I will be suggesting, especially the second, which I think is very close to what such a model would have to be.

Some people might argue, given both the generality of Cassirer's semiotics and the indirect use Panofsky makes of it, that there is not much reason to speak of *Perspective as Symbolic Form* as an investigation with semiotic concerns. This is true if one's paradigm of semiotics is the work of someone such as, say, Greimas. But semiotics is defined by its aims, not the elaborateness of its theoretical machinery, and I am inclined to agree with Damisch that it is the aim that distinguishes this work from the iconographical studies (in the wide sense) that some might feel it too closely resembles: "But semiotics, in so far as its object is taken as the 'life of signs' and the functioning of signifying systems, establishes itself on another level. Whereas iconography attempts essentially to state what the images *represent*, to 'declare' their meaning (if we accept Wittgenstein's assertion of the equivalence between the meaning of an image and what it represents), semiotics, on the contrary, is intent on stripping down the mechanism of signifying, on bringing to light the mainsprings of the signifying process, of which the work of art is, at the same time, the locus and the possible outcome."<sup>45</sup> As general as Panofsky's use of semiotics is, there can

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<sup>45</sup> Damisch, "Semiotics and Iconography," 29. Note further the historical role that Damisch assigns to *Perspective as Symbolic Form*: "The iconographic project is thus linked in its principle to a representational structure which implies the erasing of the externality of the signifier, and, first of all, the obliteration of the actual substance of expression, as long as the signified seems to be directly attainable,

be little doubt that his aim in this work was to bring to light the mainsprings of a signifying process central to visual representation.<sup>46</sup> On then to our semiotic models.

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before any attention is to be paid to the figurative system. It is consequently easy to see the value of all those attempts made at breaking down the naturalist prejudices which cling to images conceived in the illusionist mode. In this way, in the field opened by Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, the now classical study of B. A. Uspenskij on ancient Russian icons sets about demonstrating the existence of a primary level of articulation of the painted image corresponding to the phonological level in natural language: that is the level of figuration corresponding to the most general processes (non-significant in themselves?), which allow the painter to represent relations of time and space and on which are superimposed semantic (figurative), grammatical (ideographic), even idiomatic (symbolic) levels" (Ibid., 34-35).

<sup>46</sup> There have been a number of art historians who have argued that some of Panofsky's other works, particularly "Iconography and Iconology," are compatible with a semiotic approach. Giulio Carlo Argan, for example, has made this statement: "If it is possible to do iconological history of perspective, proportions, anatomy, representational conventions, symbolic references of color, and even of rituality and gestuality in technique, no one has said that it must stop there and that it is not possible to study historically, like so many other iconologies, line, chiaroscuro, tone, penstrokes, and so forth. It certainly would be possible and it would be a very useful kind of research, one to recommend to young art historians desirous of exploring new fields. The name would change, however, and this research would no longer be called iconology but, following modern terminology, semantics or, more exactly, semiotics" (Giulio Carlo Argan, "Ideology and Iconology," trans. Rebecca West, in *The Language of Images*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980]). It is interesting how divergent interpretations of the same methodology can be; whereas Damisch sees iconology and semiotics as fundamentally different because of their aims, Argan sees them as essentially the same. Perhaps though the disparity can be accounted for by the non-typical nature of Argan's views. He sees iconology as "an historical method because it forms series, not classes; that is, it reconstructs the development and the continuation of traditions of images (Ibid., 16). This is fine, in that it is compatible with Panofsky's statements about iconology; the difficulties arise with what Argan says shortly after: "[The image in an iconological investigation] is a *signifiant* to which may be attributed, as to the words of a spoken language, many *signifiés*. For this reason iconologism, much more than Wölfflinian formalism, confronts the problematic of art as that of linguistic structures. Panofsky, not Wölfflin, was the Saussure of art history" (Ibid., 17). Given that Argan believes iconology is an historical study that goes "back to the original seeds of the image" (Ibid., 17), there is something odd about the association he is trying to forge with Saussurean linguistics, for what Saussure did for modern linguistics was break the hold of a diachronic approach to language by stressing its existence as a synchronic structure; he also helped sink the nineteenth century belief that all languages are connected in an historical development from a ,or a few, *Ur*-languages. Since Argan believes that iconology is defined by both of these characteristics perhaps he should rethink his claim that Panofsky is the Saussure of art history. Christine Hasenmueller (formerly, Christine Hasenmueller McCorkel, the woman who wrote that fine article, discussed in Chapter IX, "Sense and Sensibility: An Epistemological Approach to the Philosophy of Art History") has made a very useful contribution to the question of to what extent "Iconography and Iconology" represents a semiotic approach to art. She argues at length that there is little basis for suggesting such a relation and that the resemblances are for the most part superficial. To summarize her results: "Iconography, then, has a generally 'semiotic' character, but there are two problems with considering iconography a 'semiotic of art.' First, the semiotic function assigned to the units in question are very limited. . . . They are uniquely defined, and patterned relationship with like units is of relatively small importance in interpretation. . . . Second, *iconography* is concerned with only a narrow dimension of the meaning of art. Much of its appeal as a method is based on the epistemological advantages of this limitation to literary content" (Christine Hasenmueller, "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36, no. 3 [Spring 1978]: 295). As for iconology, "it is not easy to specify precisely what is done in *iconology*, much less the relationship of this to semiology. . . . The parallels between *iconology* and semiology concern not method and concepts but assumptions" (Ibid., 296), assumptions, that is, about the underlying unity of the phenomenon being investigated, but then we have noted such assumptions in Cassirer and the *Geistesgeschichte* school of art history.

The first is more elementary. At the most basic level, in order to have a signifying structure one needs to have elements, rules of combination, and an interpretation (a syntax/semantics distinction is not going to be delineated here, in part because at this stage it is not clear how one would make it, but also because giving in to this distinction in its familiar form would be to prematurely surrender to standard semiological models).<sup>47</sup> What could be the elements of a system of linear perspective such as the one that was outlined in Chapter XIII? Speaking broadly, and not very exactly, we could suggest lines and shapes. This is a rather large and open class, but I think it can be used to at least indicate the direction in which we might go in conceiving of perspective semiotically. The next step will make this clearer. Consider the notion of a semantic field. By semantic field I mean an arrangement in space or time or both in which a symbol takes on a different meaning depending on its location in the field, depending on its place in the arrangement.<sup>48</sup> A good example of a semantic field is a musical staff, where a circle, which stands for a whole note, represents a different tone depending on its placement on the staff (or above or below it). This seems to have an immediate application to perspective constructions. In musical notation the staff is the structure that determines the value of the note; similarly, the determining structure in a painting in linear perspective results from the interrelation of the bounded painting surface, the horizon line, the vanishing point, the distance point, and the intersecting vertical. The choice of configuration involving these five conceptually primordial components constitutes the structure that will give value to an element placed on

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<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of this question from a point of view very different from my own see Norman Turner, "The Semantics of Linear Perspective," *The Philosophical Forum* Volume XXVII, No. 4 (Summer 1996): 357-380.

<sup>48</sup> The general idea behind the notion of a semantic field is not foreign to Cassirer's conception of the symbol and I think implicit in his semiotics: "Understood in this light, space is by no means a static vessel and container into which ready-made "things" are poured; it is rather a sum of ideal functions, which complement and determine one another to form a unified result. Just as in the simple temporal "now" earlier and later are expressed as the basic temporal directions, similarly in every "here" we posit a "there." The particular place is not given prior to the spatial system but only in reference to it and in correlation with it. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume 1, Language*, 101. See the discussion surrounding this passage.

the flat painting surface (and will transform the painting surface into a picture plane). The same line placed in different locations can assume very different meanings, e.g., in being lower or higher than the horizon line it is either above or below the beholder's eye level and can be interpreted as closer to or further away from the ground plane in the image. Obviously, the same could be said for the employment of other lines: a line starting at the top right hand corner and reaching the vanishing point will be taken as being above the beholder's head and extending to ground level, whereas the same line starting in the lower left hand corner and reaching the vanishing point will be taken as running parallel to the ground surface, and so on. Likewise for the placement of a shape, which will be evaluated as nearer to or further from the beholder depending on its location on the painting surface within the structure that has been set up. The five conceptually primordial components are not all that there is though to the determining structure, for positing them immediately induces a grid that maps the entire painting surface. This grid is not a secondary feature imposed on the conceptually primordial elements but is, as I said, immediately induced by them; it literally materializes with their positing, an evident inference from visual axioms. It is of course the gradient created by the grid that provides the finer determining structure that allows an exact estimation of how far a group of similar shapes are from each other and from the beholder, or allows similar shapes of different sizes to be seen as resting at different distances.<sup>49</sup>

In this brief explanation I have run together structure and sense, as I said I would. We can see though how the elements, the rules of combination, and the semantic interpretation could be distinguished: the elements, as already suggested, could be lines and shapes; the rules of combination could specify relations such as, for instance, that any two

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<sup>49</sup> For a general discussion of some of the semiotic properties of the image field and in the format of the image-sign see Meyer Schapiro's "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs, in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society*, vol. 4, *Selected Papers* (New York: Braziller, 1994), 1-32. The semiotics of art has become an area of study with an very large bibliography. I cite Meyer Schapiro because of my attachment to what he does. However, locally, I could mention Fernande de Saint-Martin's *Les fondements topologiques de la peinture* (Montréal: HMH-Hurtubise, 1980), and the many other notable efforts of our colleagues at UQÀM.

parallel lines drawn within the bounded surface will have to converge, unless they run at right angles to the boundary; the semantic interpretation would concern the establishment of relations between designated elements that will serve as conventions for the representation of three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface. From this interpretation would be derived the rules that govern perspective construction and our reading of it, e.g., all receding lines that are in nature parallel to one another, and not perpendicular to the beholder, will be drawn to converge at an implied vanishing point; all lines that are receding level lines in nature will be drawn so as to end on the horizon line; and so on for all the rules that regulate determinations of depth and scale. These, and the further principles they logically imply, are the rules that govern the semantic field. So we would have then the basic features of a signifying structure, and a way of specifying how in this regard linear perspective could be a symbolic form. I don't think that it is impossible in principle to imagine a similar arrangement for a system of angle perspective.

Although I don't think that it is what Panofsky had in mind in calling perspective a symbolic form, this restricted system of meaning is certainly compatible with the general structural principles that underlie Cassirer's philosophy, which we identified in Chapter VI: without doubt it is true that the signs at work in a construction in linear perspective get their "meaning and objective reality" through their functional relation to the other constructs with which they form an organic whole; it is also the case that linear perspective discloses a thorough going unity in the organization of its signifying elements, and that the system as a whole is presupposed by them and constitutes the condition of possibility of their nature and being; and, finally, the signs that compose a perspectival image provide particularly good examples of what Cassirer has in mind when he speaks of symbols as irreducible unities of the sensible and the intellectual.

The second approach that I would like to propose for perspective as a structurally conceived semiological system is even a better fit with Cassirer's philosophy, for it is closely allied to group theory, and the theoretical orientation offered by group theory was

fundamental to shaping Cassirer's thought.<sup>50</sup> Although the concept of group had its origins in the development of modern mathematics, it is applicable to a much wider range of studies. Cassirer thought that "There must be a reason for this universal applicability of the concept to so many fields of inquiry that, at first sight, seem to have little in common, or even to deal with quite disparate subjects."<sup>51</sup> He never formally articulated what the reason is, but the entirety of the philosophy of symbolic forms stands as a testimony to his faith in the explanatory power of this orientation.

The basic ideas that define group theory are, or so it seems to me, most readily graspable when they are presented through mathematics, and that is thus how I would like to introduce them. The most fundamental idea is that of a group of transformations. What is studied as a group are not mathematical objects or elements, but transformative operations to which elements are subjected. A group then is defined as the totality of unique operations  $a, b, c, \dots$ , so that from the combination of any two operations  $a$  and  $b$  there results an operation  $c$  which also belongs to the totality, i.e., a group is a set of operations that has the property that when one executes two operations in succession, what is created is something that would be obtained by a single operation of the set. For example, if a circle is projected onto a flat surface at an angle of  $10^\circ$  as an ellipse, and then this figure is itself projected at an angle of  $20^\circ$ , a new figure will be created that will be equivalent to the operation of projecting a circle at  $30^\circ$  as an ellipse. The consequences of group theory for our concerns can be made more concrete, and we can at the same time advance in a direction required by our topic, if we look at how the concept of group effected the geometrical study of space.

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<sup>50</sup> On the first page of "Reflections on the Concept of Group and the Theory of Perception," 271, Cassirer says "the subject of this paper was one of the first to arouse my philosophical interest; I began to ponder on it when still an undergraduate in philosophy. I took, however, a very long time before I found the courage to publish the results to which I had been led." It apparently was also one of the last subjects that Cassirer pondered. He delivered the paper to the Philosophy Club in April 1945 while he was a visiting professor at Columbia. He died from a heart attack on the campus of Columbia (while talking to a student) on April 13, 1945. Toni Cassirer, his wife, reports in her book *Aus meinen Leben mit Ernst Cassirer* (New York: Privately issued, 1950), 308, that Cassirer was working on the introduction to the paper the morning of the day of his death.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

With the creation of non-Euclidean geometries in the latter half of the nineteenth century by figures such as Lobachevsky and Riemann, space became a highly problematical concept for philosophers, for while it was true that philosophers argued over questions such as whether space should be given a realist or an idealist interpretation, all agreed that space was unique and that its structure had a Euclidean description. When Lobachevsky's and Riemann's work became known to philosophers everything suddenly became very perplexing; if all of these geometries were equally valid how could it be decided which one was the true description of reality? For Cassirer the way out of the philosophical paralysis that followed the creation of non-Euclidean geometries was provided by Felix Klein in a short paper that later came to be known as his *Erlanger Programm*.<sup>52</sup> In this work Klein set out the basis for a new and more fundamental way of conceiving of geometrical thought, one that distinguished the true subject matter of geometry from other types of study that might also have an interest in space. This was made possible through the mathematical concept of group. Klein argued that what distinguishes geometrical concerns from, say, topological ones is that geometry studies properties of space that remain invariant under certain groups of operations; every geometry studies a specific manifold in relation to a definite group of transformations, which Klein calls its *Hauptgruppe*. From this point of view, different geometries become not only possible but inevitable. Geometry is thus also relieved of the belief that it describes a realistically or idealistically conceived thing called space, and can think of itself instead as a mode of understanding that organizes experience, which its practitioners control by choosing the group that will do the organizing. No geometry is then truer than another, though some will be more powerful or more general and will include others as special cases.

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<sup>52</sup> Felix Klein, "Vergleichende Betrachtungen über neuere geometrische Forschungen," *Gesammelte mathematische Abhandlungen*, vol. 1, (Berlin, 1921). It was called the *Erlanger Programm* because it was Klein's inaugural address as professor of mathematics in Erlangen in 1872.



To make all of this even more concrete, and more directly related to our topic, consider the case of projective geometry, to which linear perspective has strong affinities. Take a Euclidean object such as a circle and imagine it drawn on a sheet of rubber which can then be deformed in any number of ways. In Euclidean terms any such deformation results in a new figure (an ellipse for example) because Euclidean geometry recognizes similarity only in terms of congruence. Under such deformations however some properties are not destroyed, for on another level, the level of projective geometry, one can continue to consider the two figures as the same. This is possible because the *Hauptgruppe* of operations in projective geometry is larger than that of Euclidean geometry, and it accepts these kinds of central projections as invariant.

Such deformations are also familiar to us from linear perspective. As a simple example think of a receding tile floor. From a Euclidean point of view, each tile is a different object because it has a unique shape that is not congruent with any of the others. Nevertheless, we take each tile as being the same as all the others because we view the represented figures through the transformation group of projective geometry, within which they remain invariant. Now, even though linear perspective is not projective geometry, it is nevertheless a consistent system of spatial representation that is based on a subset of the principles that govern projective geometry; indeed, it is worth remembering that projective geometry came into existence in part out of the desire to provide a geometrical account of linear perspective. Strictly speaking though linear perspective is not a geometry at all--it is one of the studies of space that Klein wanted to distinguish from geometry proper. Cassirer offers this useful comment on what differentiates them: "The transition from mere 'topographical' to genuinely geometrical properties may be characterized as a progress from merely *local* to truly *spatial* determinations. All those determinations that can be given only by 'pointing,' . . . in Aristotle's sense, are 'local.' These determinations refer to a simple *hic et nunc* which can only be pointed at; their meaning derives from a concrete intuitive situation. From this viewpoint all individual differences between figures are equal in value

and importance."<sup>53</sup> The purpose of projective geometry is to abstract as much as possible from local conditions in order to obtain a generalized system of spatial transformations; the aim of linear perspective is to employ certain principles about spatial transformations in order to represent the *hic et nunc* of a local visual experience. But even though linear perspective and projective geometry are not the same thing, their substantial commonality can be used to make a powerful argument by analogy for Panofsky's thesis, for if anything is a good example of what Cassirer would consider to be a structurally conceived semiotic system projective geometry is (one need only think of Cassirer's analysis in *Substance and Function*), and once this is acknowledged, what prevents the same characterization from being extended to linear perspective?

Damisch believes that there are reasons why such an extension should not be granted:

At first glance the "strong" hypothesis [that perspective is a bona fide symbolic form] . . . 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.<sup>54</sup>

Damisch is without doubt right that perspective is not a language in Saussure's sense, but then that is not a concern for the philosophy of symbolic forms. It has been stressed at a number of junctures that natural language does not provide the model for Cassirer's

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<sup>53</sup> Ernst Cassirer, "The Concept of Group and the Theory of Perception," trans. Aron Gurwitsch *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* V, no. 1 (September 1944): 8. "The Concept of Group and the Theory of Perception" is Cassirer's longer, more philosophically elaborate, presentation of the theses in "Reflections on the Concept of Group and the Theory of Perception." It was originally published in French as "Le concept de groupe et la théorie de la perception," *Journal de Psychologie* (July-Dec. 1938), 368-414.

<sup>54</sup> Damisch, *The Origins of Perspective*, 23.

semiotics, and consequently does not determine what can be thought of as a symbolic form (but even if language did supply the model, what would we say of art itself, which is always cited in the canonical list of symbolic forms? is it too not a symbolic form? or are we to understand that art is a language in Saussure's sense?). The stumbling block is the idea that one has to have a system of distinct signs that correspond to distinct ideas; in other words, a lexicon. But having a lexicon, and having it operate within a structure modeled on natural language, is far too restrictive a constraint to place on the definition of a symbolic system. Consider again music. Although music does not communicate propositional content (not even programme music, notwithstanding Schopenhauer's remark that music is the true metaphysics), and although it does not have a lexicon and does not derive its structure from language, it is nevertheless a symbolic system. Its symbols (as Cassirer would say) are not based on discrete correspondences between distinct signs and distinct ideas, but by the interaction of a semantic field (the musical staff, including key signatures) and the variety of sign-tokens that stand for notes and get their value through their placement in the semantic field; it is the interaction of the two that is required for the creation of sense. The same thing could be said about perspective. I proposed earlier that the elements of the semiotic system could be lines and shapes; let us make our case even more definite by using Damisch's example of architectural objects. Aediculae, columns, cornices, the panels in coffered ceilings, and so forth can be represented as shapes created by different arrangements of lines. Each shape can be related to all the others in its class through a group of transformations. When a specific configuration of shapes is placed in the semantic field, which is the drawing surface governed by the formative principles of linear perspective, what is conveyed to the viewer, if the viewer knows the symbolic system, is an architectural structure in recession. I don't see why--apart from the fact that there is no lexicon and the model is not drawn from linguistics--such a creation should not be considered a symbolic system.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Given his discussion of the transformations involved in the "Urbino Perspectives" or "Ideal City"

This is perhaps the best place to deal with another concern expressed by Damisch. Reflecting on the prima facie evidence for calling perspective a symbolic form, he states that the very conditions that "favour this assignation increase the difficulty of situating perspective within the symbolic order."<sup>56</sup> In explaining what he means by this he provides an argument that I find perplexing:

But the crucial consideration remains the following: that a single network of lines can create an effect of depth that implies the negation, or--as the phenomenologists would put it--the "*néantization*," of the plane onto which it is projected, to the gain of the image inscribed there, or it can be regarded as a figure of plane geometry, in accordance with the tenets laid down, long before Gérard Desargues, by Piero della Francesca in his *De prospectiva pingendi*. And this holds for countless perspectival sketches and studies: each is reducible to a principle of construction that can vary within certain parameters but that nonetheless conforms to a single design principle (the one designated by the term "perspective"), the same network of relations correlating, in the one case, with the realm of the imaginary and, in the other, with the realm of the concept. And it is just this that makes it difficult, if not impossible, where perspective is concerned, to establish a clear distinction between aesthetic determinations and logical ones.<sup>57</sup>

The force of this argument is utterly lost on me, for I am unable to understand how such considerations could count against "situating perspective within the symbolic order." It may be that we are operating with different conceptions of the symbolic, but one wouldn't think so, given that the subject is Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms. Furthermore, it seems to me that the situation Damisch describes is not unique; in fact, I think that it is rather common in art. A writer can come across a text, in an instruction manual for example, and present it as a poem. The text is a set of instructions and a literary artifact at

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paintings in chapter 14 of *The Origin of Perspective*, it is interesting that Damisch does not take up the question of the relation between perspective, group theory, and symbolic form. Perhaps this is because structural transformation for him has always been most immediately and evidently connected to the work of Lévi-Strauss (on this connection see the interview with Damisch in *October* 85 [Summer 1998]: 3-17, especially 6-8). That Damisch does not take up this relation is even more interesting when one considers his long-standing interest in the association between Panofsky and Cassirer, which was the topic suggested to him for his *diplôme* by his advisor Merleau-Ponty, and his interest in Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry* (4 and 11).

<sup>56</sup> Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

one and the same time; indeed, we would probably want to say that its success as the kind of poem it is depends upon its being seen as both simultaneously, with, to use Damisch's words, "the same network of relations correlating, in the one case, with the realm of the imaginary and, in the other, with the realm of the concept" (snow shovels and urinals hold a similar position in the visual arts). We could easily expand on our example and imagine a technologically oriented cult adopting the set of instructions as a mantra in one of their religious ceremonies, or a group of linguists studying it to determine the direction that compositional principles are taking in contemporary practical English. It appears to me that, contrary to working against situating the text in the symbolic order, this situation enforces it, for isn't it the case that this is just a more complex instance of what Cassirer calls symbolic pregnance? Isn't the text like the simple line that can be taken in one way or another depending upon the set of formative principles that are brought to bear on it?

Let us continue to build our case for perspective as a symbolic form by making a slight shift in emphasis, and looking further at Cassirer's theory of the symbol. "The Concept of Group and the Theory of Perception" reveals just how important the concept of group is to Cassirer's thought and the philosophy of symbolic forms. At what appears to be the end of a discussion of invariants in perception, Cassirer poses this pregnant question: "Is there any logical connection between the subject of our discussion and the question discussed by Kant in the chapter on the Schematism, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*?"<sup>58</sup> "To be sure," Cassirer immediately adds in qualification, "the two problems cannot really be identified with each other, since they belong, methodologically speaking, to different dimensions. . . . The fact, however, that there is nonetheless a point of contact between Kant and modern psychology has been noted and commented upon by investigators interested in the philosophical foundations of a theory of perceptual constancy."<sup>59</sup> What then is their relation?

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<sup>58</sup> Ernst Cassirer, "The Concept of Group and the Theory of Perception," 31.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

We may venture to answer this question, reminding ourselves of Kant's characterization of the schemata as "monogrammata of pure imagination." . . . The schemata are *monogrammata* because they express an original function of unification. The "images" which we receive from objects, the "impressions" which sensationalism tried to reduce perception to, exhibit no such unity. Each and every one of these images possesses a particularity of its own; they are and remain discrete as far as their contents are concerned. But the analysis of perception discloses a formal factor which supersedes this particularity and disparity. Perception unifies and, as it were, concentrates the manifold of particular images with which we are supplied at every moment. Perception fits this stream of images into definite channels. It cannot be reduced to a mere manifold of impressions, the "polygrammata" of sensibility, in any more satisfactory manner than to a mere reproductive function in terms of "engrammata" of memory. Beyond these "polygrammata" and "engrammata" there appears a specific function of perception: the "monogram of imagination." Each invariant of perception is in fact such a "monogram," a schema toward which the particular sense-experiences are oriented and with reference to which they are interpreted.<sup>60</sup>

One of the connections amongst diverse phenomena that group theory makes apparent to us is that everyday visual experience, like geometry, depends very much upon invariants. We know from our discussions in Chapter II, and we see it again in the passage above, that Cassirer is a fierce opponent of sensationalism and the kind of empiricist epistemology with which it is aligned (the same is true of Panofsky). Cassirer never tires of pointing out that the experiments of Gestalt psychologists have dealt a fatal blow to this atomistic approach to experience. What the Gestalt psychologists revealed is that perception depends upon the apprehension of patterns that, in our words, can be treated as invariants. This is perhaps most obvious in questions of perceptual constancy, where for example a circle can be moved closer to a viewer, further away from the viewer, or even tilted so that it looks like an ellipse, and still be perceived by the viewer to be the same circle. We attribute to the objects in our environment certain comparatively consistent qualities that are not only psychologically important but epistemologically important as well, for without the constancy that invariants deliver to experience "it would be impossible to segregate 'things'

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 32.

or 'properties' from the stream of becoming. To use Heraclitus' metaphor, we would be unable 'to step twice in the same river'.<sup>61</sup>

Apart from reaffirming these important epistemological points, the passage above makes the interesting suggestion that invariants in perception can be understood as similar in function to schemata. This is an idea that can help us clarify how linear perspective can be a semiotic system, for not only is Cassirer's concept of the symbol based on a reinterpretation of the doctrine of schemata, as was discussed in Chapter VI, but as well the symbols that perspective uses to create a two-dimensional illusion of three-dimensional space are derived from the invariants in perception.<sup>62</sup> To see how, let us return to our model of the Cassirerian symbol, which for convenience has been reproduced below as figure 1.

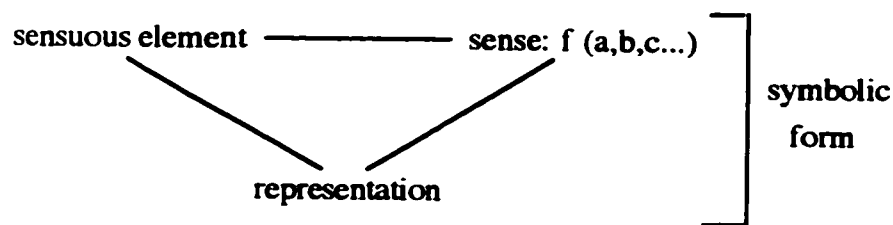


FIGURE 1.

Consider now how this might apply to a drawing whose spatial effect is based on a receding floor composed of square tiles that are of equal size. Let each tile be a symbol. The sensuous element will be the bounded shape of the tile; the sense will be the group of transformations that determine that this figure is equivalent to a square; the relation of representation will be the viewer's understanding that this figure, familiar from deformations in the objects of everyday experience, is to be taken as square; and the

<sup>61</sup> Ernst Cassirer, "Reflections on the Concept of Group and the Theory of Perception," 288.

<sup>62</sup> Because linear perspective only creates representations derived from the constants in experience, and is not lived experience itself, we do not run the risk of doing what Cassirer warned us of above, i.e., conflating philosophical problems with psychological ones, because our concern is solely with the epistemological possibilities of perspective as a signifying system.

symbolic form will be the set of formative principles through which the viewer sees the figure, along with the others, as representing three-dimensional spatial properties. The invariants familiar from perception will be built into this complex at the level of sense, because the group of geometrical transformations that will have been chosen will have been those that are consonant with the deformations encountered in visual experience. But it is at the level of symbolic form that the figure becomes a symbol, for it is only then that its two-dimensional configuration is read as indicating something beyond itself, in other words, as representing recession and depth. The square tile is a straightforward example of a Cassirerian symbol, for like the concept of schema from which it is derived, it is a form in which sensibility and understanding are united through the greater formative principles of a symbolic order.<sup>63</sup>

This aspect of how perspective could be a symbolic form has been overlooked even by art historians who have commented on the importance of the concepts of schema and symbol in Panofsky's writings. Alain Roger's "Le Schème et le symbole dans l'œuvre de Panofsky" provides us with an instructive example.<sup>64</sup> After making the customary remarks about how Cassirer never wrote his intended volume on art for *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Roger suggests: "Mais ne serait-ce pas, justement parce que Panofsky s'y était employé? Il est remarquable, en effet, que *La Perspective comme Forme symbolique* s'insère entre les premier et troisième volumes de Cassirer, faisant ainsi, de cette trilogie, une tétralogie. . . . D'où l'espoir que Panofsky nous donne une authentique

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<sup>63</sup> Concerning Panofsky's use of Cassirer's conception of the symbolic, Damisch states: "And as for the definition he uses, which holds that perspective is one of those 'symbolic forms' by means of which 'intellectual meaning becomes so closely linked to a concrete sign as to be indistinguishable from it,' it is sufficiently vague and generalized to justify any interpretation one would like" (*The Origin of Perspective*, 11-12). If this passage is taken in isolation this is true, but it is more important that the analysis given in the text fulfill what is implied by the definition, and I think that I have shown that Panofsky has done this. Although I disagree with Damisch on a number of points, I think that the first chapter of *The Origin of Perspective* is nevertheless the best introduction to the issues that frame *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. The same discussion is also available in "Panofsky am Scheidewege," in *Pour un temps/Erwin Panofsky* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou/Pandora Editions, 1983), 101-116, which is an initial version of the chapter in *The Origin of Perspective*.

<sup>64</sup> Alain Roger, "Le Schème et le symbole dans l'œuvre de Panofsky," in *Pour un temps/Erwin Panofsky* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou/Pandora Editions, 1983), 49-59.



histoire, 'transcendantalo-scientifique,' des schèmes de vision. Mais tel est bien le paradoxe: tout se passe comme si le concept de forme symbolique, au lieu de nous rapprocher de Kant, nous en détournait au contraire."<sup>65</sup> What Roger expected from Panofsky was a transcendental treatment of art that would have been a counterpart to the analyses of the three volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Panofsky failed because "l'orientation transcendantale fait le plus souvent place à l'investigation méticuleuse des configurations artistiques et spéculations scientifiques, c'est-à-dire, qu'on le veuille ou non, à la philologie."<sup>66</sup> Roger sees the matter in this way because he does not wholly grasp how Cassirer's Neo-Kantianism is a transformation of Kant's original project, and correspondingly how Panofsky's initial approach to a transcendental analysis of art, which in "The Concept of *Kunstwollen*" was guided by Kant's *Prolegomena*, has changed under the influence of the philosophy of symbolic forms. The passage that immediately follows the one just quoted reveals this: "Ce n'est sans doute pas un hasard, si, à la différence de Hegel, et, surtout, de Heidegger, Cassirer ne s'intéresse pas à la doctrine du Schématisme comme *verborgene Kunst* [a concealed art], tandis que la notion de symbole, si l'on veut à tout prix la rapporter à Kant, renvoie à la Troisième *Critique*."<sup>67</sup> Considering the arguments that were developed at length in Part I, particularly in Chapter VI, to demonstrate that Cassirer's transformation of Kant is in fact *based* on a rethinking of the concept of schemata, the claim that Cassirer is not interested in the doctrine of schematism can only met with pointed incredulity (or worse, considering that Roger's claim is as well unsubstantiated). Kant was led to his doctrine of schematism, as "an art concealed in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover,"<sup>68</sup> in part because the division that he had effected between sensibility and

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>68</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 183.

understanding allowed him no way of satisfactorily reunifying them. Cassirer achieved this reunification through his concept of the symbol, and with it came a different way of pursuing a Kantian analysis, one that looked into the formative principles of symbolic orders. All of this is apparently lost on Roger, who, though he claims to understand Cassirer's philosophical enterprise and the way in which Panofsky could contribute to it, cannot see past Panofsky's scholarly "philological" studies to the principles beyond them, and is consequently not in a position to discern how the elements of a perspective drawing can be taken as Cassirerian symbols, and how a system of perspective can be a symbolic form.

If we have been able to see, through the discussions of linear perspective that have preceded, how we could call perspective a symbolic form, we should now ask ourselves how Panofsky's hypothesis of an Antique angle perspective might fit in with the characterization already given. This is an important question because, to repeat a familiar refrain, symbolic forms are ways of apprehending the world and not simple reflections of a pre-established reality, and thus are never instantiated singularly. We know how different cosmologies can be derived from the same astronomical observations, but how can different perspectives be derived from our visual experience when it is so strongly determined by forces such as perceptual constancy?

Linear perspective seems so securely grounded in the actual invariants of visual experience, and by the authority of group theory, that it might seem difficult to seriously imagine any alternatives. But the stability that we give to our world is not inalterable. For instance, we take the reality of colours to be that which is conveyed to us in a neutral environment under natural light, and not, say, in a darkened room lit by an orange/red gas flame, though nothing prevents us from making the latter, or some other option, our preference. Similarly, as Cassirer writes, "Impressions received by peripheral parts of the retina are translated into those that would result from direct perception of the object by

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means of the center of the retina. It is on such translations and transformations that the awareness of an 'objective' world depends. Reference to typical configurations is one of the essential conditions of the process of spatial objectification."<sup>69</sup> But here too it could be otherwise:

[William] James expressed the same idea in speaking of "the choice of the visual reality." The free choice of a certain transformation group proved to be one of the outstanding features of modern geometrical thought--and this free choice accounted for the possibility of different systems of geometry. But the same free choice appears already--although much less distinctly--in the act of sense perception. Even here we constantly make selections from among the the vast manifold of utterly heterogeneous sense data. We give preference to certain phenomena which hence assume a privileged position.<sup>70</sup>

One can see where this is leading: if Cassirer believes that in visual perception we can freely select our transformation group for the construction of reality from the vast manifold that is given to us, even "Impressions received by peripheral parts of the retina," then in advancing the theory of Antique angle perspective Panofsky is yet again in complete accord with the basics of Cassirer's epistemology. In stressing the curvatures in visual experience the ancients chose a different, but equally valid, transformation group. They chose it because their greater common culture, as is revealed to us in their philosophical and scientific texts, possessed a different understanding of the spatial world, one incompatible in its fundamentals with our own. And if Cassirer is right that we are free to choose our transformation group, then we can also say that these are not the only two possibilities, and that there are as many spatial realities as there are coherent symbolic articulations of what is given to us in sensibility.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ernst Cassirer, "Reflections on the Concept of Group and the Theory of Perception," 288.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>71</sup> This I believe is sufficient to negate the claim made by W. J. T. Mitchell and others that "at some very fundamental level of discursive figuration, Panofsky does believe in the universality of [linear] perspective" (*Picture Theory*, 18). It is also sufficient to undermine the opposite claim made by James Elkins that Panofsky's work was "the logical consequence of pursuing the questions of cultural relativism and pictorial realism" (*The Poetics of Perspective*, 11). The assertion that perspective is a symbolic form rests on the

With this we have a complete and detailed answer to the question of what it could mean to call perspective a symbolic form. The answer is too long to recapitulate, but we can at least summarize the characteristics that define the concept of symbolic form, and that Panofsky's account draws upon in order to make his case: first, the analysis of a symbolic form proceeds in accordance with the transcendental method; second, a symbolic form is individuated by the formative principles through which it orders a certain realm of experience; third, the symbols by which it does this are sensuous/intellectual forms that are understood functionally and are grounded in the doctrine of symbolic pregnance; fourth, the greater symbolic order in which these symbols enter into sense-making relations is conceived in structuralist terms; fifth, the *a priori* elements that constitute the symbolic order are historically determined; sixth, the symbolic order embodies a certain relation that consciousness takes toward the world, and this relation develops dialectically through different stages. All of these features are present in Panofsky's account, as I hope I have demonstrated. So now, when an eminent art historian such as Damisch says that the term symbolic form is used, at best, only loosely by Panofsky and without consequence, or when a distinguished scholar such as Pirenne suggests that perhaps Panofsky's claims are at bottom unintelligible, or when writers such as Edgerton and Kubovy resort to clichés and speculations to capture the sense of Panofsky's arguments, we have something to say in reply to them, because for the first time since the publication of this influential text, there is an answer to what it means to call perspective a symbolic form.

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doctrine of symbolic pregnance and Cassirer's transcendental analysis of meaning; given the difference in motivation, it only superficially resembles contemporary doctrines of cultural relativism.

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