

THE VISIBILITY OF THE INVISIBLE

THE VISION OF SPACE FROM NICHOLAS OF CUSA TO ALFRED HITCHCOCK¹

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Our modern understanding of science and culture builds on two key ideas: the fiction of an ‘autonomous’ observer who is by nature able to ‘determine’ his view on the world; and the concept of a ‘virtual space’ that is designed to represent the world by a mathematically generated ‘world picture’ or a computer generated 3D animation. The theoretical formulation of these concepts can be traced back to Descartes’ *Discours de la methode*, which was published together with his *Optics and Geometry* in 1637. However, both concepts had already rapidly emerged 200 years earlier after architect Filippo Brunelleschi’s public ‘demonstrations’ of the linear perspective in Florence at about 1425. The modern concepts of science and culture were not invented by scientists, but were rather the outcome of an artistic vision of space. This explains why the accompanying vision of scientific realism was successful despite its philosophical and mathematical flaws.

In 1435 Leon Battista Alberti provided in his book *De pictura* what is assumed to be the first theoretical account of the principles that stood behind Brunelleschi’s experiments. This account built on Biagio Pelacani da Parma’s mathematization of the visual space with which he had become acquainted during his study time in Padua. Nicholas of Cusa may have met Alberti as a Padua student during these lectures, and he certainly made his acquaintance later at the ‘Florentine Stammtisch’ of his close friend Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli where Brunelleschi was also present. But Cusa did not at all agree with his Florentine friends. He rather developed an alternative vision of space that displays amazing similarities to the liturgical concept of space in the north Burgundy paintings of artists such as Jan van Eyck.

The main difference between the Burgundy and the Florentine concepts of space is related to the iconographic tradition of the middle Ages: The Burgundy thinkers insisted that the invisible is visible. This feature connects Cusa and van Eyck with the deconstruction of the central perspective in modern art, such as in Cézanne, Picasso and Hitchcock. However, the modern return of the invisible appears to be uncanny

1 The following essay builds on material of my book *The Analogical Turn. Re-thinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2013). For an earlier, more comprehensive version of this text cf. Johannes Hoff, “The Visibility of the Invisible in Nicholas of Cusa“. In: Louise Nelstrop; Simon Podmore (ed.), *Between Transcendence and Immanence: Christian Mysticism and Incarnational Theology* (Oxford: Ashgate 2013). Quotations of Cusa’s writings are based on the critical edition of his works (h) in: Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera omnia, iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita* (Leipzig–Hamburg, 1932ff.). Unless otherwise indicated, English translations are based on: Nicholas of Cusa, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*. Transl. by Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Arthur Banning Press 2001). The numbering system is based on the above critical edition (h) which is meanwhile also electronically available, including a selection of German translations, and the above Hopkins translation (<http://www.cusanus-portal.de/>). Deviations in the numbering system of the translated text are indicated as “Hp”. Untitled references in the main text refer to *De visione Dei*.

and threatening; and this has a simple reason: it is still attached to the ‘virtual space’ of Descartes and Alberti.

NICHOLAS OF CUSA AND THE ‘VISUAL TURN’ OF THE 15TH CENTURY

In 1453, Cusa sent a little book to his friends in the Monastery of Tegernsee – together with an icon, and the instructions to a social experiment that visualized the *principles* of his alternative concept of space.

The icon, Cusa sent to his friends depicts a so-called *figura cuncta videns*: An ‘all-seeing figure’ whose gaze simultaneously follows the movements of all his viewers wherever they move. Cusa instructs the monks to fix this mystic icon to the wall, and to walk past it while fixing their eyes on its gaze. If the monks follow this instruction, they will discover that the gaze follows them all the time (n. 4, 6f.). If the monks start talking with each other they will discover something more exceptional still; namely that the gaze follows the movements of all viewers simultaneously, even if they are moving in opposite directions.

This leads us to Cusa’s well-known concept of the ‘coincidence of opposites’. That the gaze of his all-seeing figure is following individual movements might appear as “impossible”; but this appearance is still consistent with the law of contradiction. By contrast, the fact that the gaze moves *simultaneously in opposite directions* touches on a more rigorous ‘impossibility’: It offends the law of contradiction.

The last point is cardinal for Cusa’s concept of God. The principles of rationality require us to distinguish between opposite determinations: If something is moving to the right it cannot simultaneously move to the left; a straight line cannot simultaneously be a curved line; etc. The principles of rationality require us to demarcate – using opposing determinations. But to distinguish or to *de-fine* something is equivalent to conceiving something as limited or *finite*; and this precisely explains why human reason is pushed to its limits whenever it tries to conceive the *in-finity* of God.

The concept of God is *per definitionem* incompatible with analytic *de-finitions*. We cannot conceive what a word means when it refers to an infinite reality (pace Georg Cantor’s set theory). But we can know *reflexively* that the infinite reality of God, and only this reality, exceeds all relative determinations and oppositions by *necessity*. We are not completely ignorant with regard to God. Rather our ignorance of God possesses the paradoxical character of a *docta ignorantia*, a *knowing unknowing*.

In Cusa’s experiment, the introduction of this paradox goes along with a change in the *medium* of experience. Whereas every monk can *see* that the gaze is following him, the discovery that the gaze is doing the same thing with everyone else is dependent upon his ability to *hear*.

I can never see from my perspective what another might see from hers. But I can *perceive* that this is the case, because I have learned to *believe* what other people have revealed to me in *words*. It is for this same reason that Cusa exhorts his monks to *listen* and to *believe*: *nisi crederet non caperet* (“Unless he believed, he would not understand”, n. 3,22f.; Hp n. 4). If I am looking at someone who reveals to me that

she is seeing something that I cannot see from my own perspective, I am starting to perceive that there is something *invisible* to me. Cusa's conviction that the invisible is visible is related to this phenomenon.

Against this backdrop, we start to understand why Cusa appreciated the celebration of individuality, perspectivity, and plurality in the Renaissance Era. In appreciating these phenomena as matters of ultimate concern, we have already exceeded the threshold of modernity. However, as the art historian Hans Belting has pointed out, the all-seeing gaze of Cusa's icon is incompatible with certain features of the modern age that emerged in Cusa's time. For example, Cusa's account of the modern perspective is incompatible with the strategy of early modern portrait art to tie the gaze of a face to a fixed angle of vision from which it can be appropriated and annexed.² It is no accident that the genre of portrait art was invented simultaneously with the geometrical perspective. For, in a certain respect the geometric space of Early Renaissance paintings transformed every painting into a self-portrait of the viewer; or more precisely into a narcissistic mirror image.

In the paintings of the mathematician Piero della Francesca (1415-1492) we find the most striking examples of this new cultural technology of visualisation. Piero used a *grid floor as measuring unit*. Using this measuring unit, Piero dissected the bodies placed on this floor as though they were pillars, pilasters, columns, plinths, and capitals. At the same time, he oriented this scenario to the eye of the viewer. This point was defined as an abstract geometrical point, and corresponded to the *vanishing point* within the image to which the backwards oriented parallel lines of the floor converged like receding railroad tracks.

This compositional strategy was consistent with Alberti's theoretical innovations, that introduced the two key concepts of modern science and culture: The vanishing lines reflect the invisible eye point of the viewer before the painting, and this puts the viewer in the position of an autonomous observer who can control his perception as if it were nothing but a mirror image of his own position.

Our gaze is no longer exterior to these paintings. On the one hand, it functions as a variable that can be occupied by every single viewer, starting with the painter; on the other hand this point becomes visible in the virtual space of the image, since it is reflected by the vanishing point at the horizon of the painting.

This explains why the invention of the modern concept of space coincided with the invention of the modern concept of autonomy: The principles of the geometrical perspective require me to adopt a fixed position in relation to the physical frame of the painting; but this 'real-time scenario' is only required in order to ensure that my real position coincides with my illusionary position as an eye point in the virtual space of the image.

2 Cf. Belting, *Florenz und Bagdad*, 240.

As soon as I have got this right, the embodied space of my real world fades into the background, like the brand label at the bottom of my television screen. As soon as the viewer “immerses” in the virtual space of the image, the real world of his body evaporates like the vanishing point that mirrors his disembodied eye point in the illusionary world of the painting.

Alberti himself explicitly pointed out that this new imaginary world coincides with the world of Narcissus: The new art of painting enables the painter to ‘embrace’ (amplectere) the surface of Narcissus’ pool: “What is painting but the act of embracing by the means of art the surface of the pool [of Narcissus]”.³

According to the mythological tradition Narcissus fell in love with his mirror image, and became engulfed by its elusive reflections. For this reason, mirrors were perceived as deceptive and dangerous since antiquity: As distinct from the real encounter with living bodies, the mirroring of images was associated with the incorporeal and fugitive shadow world of death.

The unprecedented appreciation of mirrors in the Early Renaissance was partly due to the increasing distribution of concave mirrors that improved their reflective qualities. However, Alberti’s claim to have solved the dilemma of Narcissus was not based on empirical observations. It rather celebrated the new mathematical concept of space: Narcissus has no longer any reason to be afraid of his mirror image, since the new geometrical art of painting enables him to adopt a position that keeps the elusiveness of optical reflexions under control.

Similar to Narcissus, who forgot that he was watching nothing but his own mirror image, the new brand of paintings makes us forget that their deceptively realistic appearance is linked to a physical medium. But to indulge in this narcissistic habit is no longer dangerous, since the viewer’s attitude to his imaginary mirror has become frozen. The uncontrollable temporality of bodily encounters has become arrested and replaced by the encounter with an atemporal “virtual reality”.

This is the reason why Alberti rejected, other than van Eyck and Cusa, the gold background paintings of the Gothic tradition.⁴ Alberti had no objections against the use of ‘massive gold’ as long as he was talking about, what Kant later called the “accessory work” of a painting, - for example the picture frame, which is no longer part of the work but only an accessory part, not an *ergon* but a *par-ergon*. However, when it came to the “proper work of art” (*ergon*) he criticized even the use of gold with regard to golden objects.

If a painter depicted, for example, a *golden crown* he had to make it look *as if* it were golden without using a colour that exposed the painting to the lighting conditions of its real time environment. Shimmering effects were desirable in a realist tradition that appreciated the tactile presence of paintings in the real space that we inhabit.

3 Quid est enim aliud pingere quam arte superficiem illam fontis amplecti? Alberti, *On Painting*, n. 26.

4 Cf. Alberti, *On Painting*, II n. 49.

They enabled the viewer to immerse him or herself into the depicted drama *without* getting out of touch with her earthly world that recalled her distance to the invisible glory of God. However, the staging of suspense effects between our earthly reality and the glory of supernatural spheres became unacceptable as soon as the modern, representationalist tradition started to distinguish between the *ergon* and the *par-ergon* of the painting in order to celebrate the viewer's immersion in the illusory world of a virtual space.

As distinct from this new tradition, Cusa's *vera icona* had not the character of an art image in which the viewer is expected to immerse him- or herself without reservation. Rather it had the character of a liturgical image that can be approached simultaneously from a plurality of viewpoints – like a sacramental threshold that mediates between the earthly liturgical gathering of the church and the fullness of the divine glory without blurring the difference between the human and the divine.

In short, Cusa's icon was designed to recover the pre-modern, *liturgical* concept of space. However, Cusa did not simply reject the artistic innovations of his time, and this explains why there are also similarities between Cusa's liturgical and Alberti's narcissistic concept of space. If the monks follow Cusa's instructions, they will discover not only that the icon's all-seeing gaze follows every individual movement; they will also discover that the all-seeing gaze can be *controlled* like a mirror image. The gaze follows me. God looks at me as if he were subjected to my spontaneous movements. Cusa does not reject the narcissistic perspective of Alberti and Descartes; he rather includes it into a broader context.

Like van Eyck, Cusa is no longer afraid of mirroring effects; he even encourages his friends to immerse themselves into the experience of mirroring, and celebrates this possibility as a gift of grace that reveals the uniqueness of every person. Everyone is justified in following the examples of artists like van der Weyden by posing in the position of God.

However, in contrast to Alberti, the controlled immersion in narcissistic images marks in Cusa only the *first rung of a ladder* that leads to the vision of God; and this explains why his modernised *vera icona* is ultimately to be used like an archaic 'cult image' and not like a modern 'art image'.

The second step of Cusa's mystagogical ascent is crucial for this difference, since it requires us to encounter real persons in the real space that we inhabit. Alberti's "narcissistic" account of images included an account of interpersonal relationships as well. However, unlike with Cusa this account did not focus on the visibility of the invisible in the face of another person. Rather, Alberti focused on my ability *to put myself in the position* of others.

I can put myself in the position of, say, Leonardo da Vinci – apart from adopting my own position. But, of course, I can't do so simultaneously. I rather have to do it sequentially. Art images like Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* invite me to assume the position of Leonardo's eye point; everyone can enter the queue in the Louvre in order to immerse themselves, at least for a short moment, in Leonardo's narcissistic world. But the possibility of adopting the position of a dead artist does not create a social space

for real encounters. The self-enclosed world of modern art images leaves space for the interpersonal skills of a humanist 'ego' that has learned to immerse itself temporarily in the narcissistic world of 'other egos'; but this leaves no space for the emergence of the invisible in real-time encounters. And this is a crucial deficiency: As late modern philosophers, such as Emmanuel Levinas, have demonstrated, the difference between two perspectives is not reducible to the difference between two narcissistic positions that I myself, as viewer, can adopt in a time sequence.

Against this background, it might be argued that Alberti's unashamed 'narcissistic' account of interpersonal relationships anticipated the post-modern unmasking of the modern concept of autonomy. This becomes particularly evident in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic account of the modern concept of intersubjectivity in his famous essay *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I*.⁵

According to Lacan, our social skills derive from the pleasure of toddlers that enjoy imitating their own mirror image. Our ability to talk with other persons is accordingly the result of a creative act of self-deception: The infant learns to talk with other persons and to accommodate to acts of joint attention, because it confuses the facial expressions and gestures of its mother with the mirror image of its own face that it enjoys to imitate - like a toddler who imitates his mother while the mother is telephoning with his father.

Cusa, by contrast, builds on the Augustinian anthropology of the Middle Ages. According to this anthropology, the transition from the stage of the infant (*in-fans*) that it not yet able to talk, to the stage of the boy that is able to talk with and listen to others is provoked by the desire of its heart.

As Augustine puts it in his *Confessions*, the *infans* does not learn to talk by imitating its parents; it is drawn into conversation by its heart 'with gruntings, varieties of voices, and various motions.' (I 8,13). It is the *nexus amoris*, the 'bond of love' that makes the infant fall in love with its 'narcissistic' mirror image; and it is the same bond that provokes the metamorphosis into a 'boy' or 'girl' as soon as the infant falls in love with a reality that transcends the virtual space of mirroring effects.

The desire of our heart makes us aware that we are surrounded by signposts that point beyond themselves. The visible world is literally saturated with traces of an invisible reality that attracts our attention. This explains why Cusa emphasises in *De visione Dei* so firmly the erotic attraction of the all seeing gaze:

You manifest Yourself as if You were our creature, in order thus to draw us unto Yourself. For You draw us unto Yourself by every possible means of drawing by which a free rational creature can be drawn (trahi (c. 15 n. 66,1-4; Hp n. 70).

Trahe me! God looks at me as if she was nothing but my mirror image, and this is attractive. But she is also looking in the same unique manner to everyone else. And it

5 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience". In: *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Tavistock Publications 1977), 1-7.

is impossible to integrate this phenomenon in the framework of my narcissistic world. Instead, it shows me that I am not in control of the space of my visual perception.

As soon as I listen to someone who is looking at a shared focus of attention from a different viewpoint, I start to appreciate that something is invisible to me. The emergence of this blind spot marks the transition from a narcissistic to a social scenario; and it is motivated by the desire for the invisible creator of the visible world, who draws us into himself 'by every possible means of drawing'.

(POST-)MODERN ACCOUNTS OF THE SOCIAL SPACE

This leads me back to Alberti's avowedly narcissistic concepts of space and autonomy. According to Cusa's Augustinian account of the social space, my ability to communicate with my neighbour is not the outcome of mimetic acts of mirroring. We do not lean to talk by imitating our parents; rather we are drawn into conversation by an irresistible desire of our heart.

Alberti can be interpreted as pioneer of the modern alternative to this pre-modern anthropology: It supports a mimetic concept of 'intersubjectivity'. However, modern 'intersubjective' accounts of the human language acquisition are not barred from appreciating the pre-modern erotic dimension of human perception.

This again becomes most evident in Jacques Lacan's account of intersubjectivity. Lacan argues that - as soon as the infant learns to talk with and listen to others - it becomes trapped in the dynamics of human desire. Where he differs from Cusa is, that the dynamics of this desire is not mediated by a natural desire for the vision of God. It is rather borrowed from other people. As Lacan used to put it, it is mediated by the *desire of the other* in the double sense of this expression: our desire for the other is always also a desire for what the other desires.

In contrast to Cusa, the dynamic of human desire is not rooted in a teleological dynamic of nature; it is the upshot of the reflexive dynamics of social interactions: I desire what my mother desires (for example to phone with my father) because I believe that my mother believes me to desire what she desires.

This explains why we prefer to attend full cinemas and not empty ones (in economics and consumer research such phenomena are called 'information cascades'): the full cinema is more desirable than the empty one because it confirms my belief that the others believe me to believe what they believe; though some people might prefer to attend empty cinemas because they believe the others believe them to be unbelievers of course!

Post-modern talent shows like *The X Factor* (or *Germany's Next Topmodel*) that are designed to reveal the inscrutable "something" that makes a singer a "star", are arguably built on this reflexive principle. Lacan's logic of desire provided, as it were, the first theoretical account of the fact that the invisible community of Simon Cowell's (or Heidi Klum's) viewers tends to believe that others believe them to believe what Simon Cowell believes them to believe when his looking for a "star".

The crunch question raised by this socially expanded logic of mirroring might be posed as follows: what makes us believe that self-referential loops of communication are more than a self-deceptive play with mirror effects that keep us happy until the hollowness of human desire can no longer be denied? Is Augustine's "embrace of love" any more than the epiphenomenon of a socially expanded mirror? *What was first: The desire for the other, or the desire to imitate what the other desires?*

THE PARANOIAC FEATURES OF THE POST-MODERN INVISIBLE

In order to answer this questions, we might compare Cusa's account of the invisible with the modern re-emergence of the invisible after the deconstruction of the linear perspective in modern art, and particularly Paul Cézanne.

Lacan's contributions to the modern philosophical debates on this phenomenon build on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's groundbreaking publications about Cézanne. Merleau-Ponty had demonstrated that the modern linear perspective is not as realistic as it purports to be. In fact, Cézanne's paintings do more justice to our perception, though they appear at first glance to be distorted: "When our eye runs over a large surface, the images it successively receives are taken from different points of view, and the whole surface is warped."⁶

Similar to Picasso's cubistic paintings, the paintings of Cézanne and his successors appear to be warped, because they do more justice to the temporal dynamics of human perception than Alberti's fixed-viewer perspective. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: "Perspectival distortions are no longer visible in their own right but rather contribute, as they do in natural vision, to the impression of an emerging order, of an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes."⁷

This late modern concept of realism is more consistent with Cusa's ontologically realist account of human perception than the representationalist accounts that emerged in early modernity. Similar to Cézanne, Cusa's treats the emergence of our visual perception as the result of an attunement between two factors: the *intention* of colours that "address" the viewer, and the *attention* of the viewer who responds to this "address". I am not the subject of my perception; as in Cézanne's landscapes „the landscape thinks itself in me (...) and I am its consciousness”.⁸ But how does this realist account of vision relate to Cusa's account of the visibility of the invisible in the *social space*?

Up to a certain point, the all-seeing gaze of Cusa's icon only makes explicit something that characterizes *every* object of human perception: things have the power to attract my attention and arouse my desire to see because "they are looking at me" – their perceptibility cannot be controlled, the invisible is ominipresent.

6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt". In: Galen A. Johnson; Michael B. Smith (ed.), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press 1993), 59-75, 64.

7 Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", 65.

8 Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's doubt", 67.

Numerous contemporary publications confirm this account of visual perception, from Merleau-Ponty ('the things attract my look'),⁹ James Elkins ('The object stares back'),¹⁰ to Georges Didi-Huberman ('What we see is looking at us').¹¹ But Cusa's experiment in fact, goes deeper than the level of such contemporary debates. This becomes evident if we clearly distinguish Cusa's deconstruction of Alberti's concept of perspectivity from Lacan's deconstruction of the related, modern concept of "subjectivity". For, Lacan's deconstruction is still attached to Alberti's narcissistic concept of space.

Alberti reduced the position of the viewer to an inextended eye point that is reflected by the vanishing point in the painting. Descartes' distinction between extended physical and inextended mental substances built on this tradition, but moved the inextended eye point *behind* the image. Lacan harked back to Alberti and unmasked the truth of the Cartesian "subject": It is nothing but the upshot of an ineluctable, narcissistic illusion.

This means by implication, that the alter-ego of face-to-face encounters is an illusion as well. The secret of a human faces is nothing but the upshot of a self-deceptive "transference relation". What do I see when I look at the gaze of a human face, or at the gaze of a portrait? According to Alberti and Descartes I do not see two eyes. Strictly speaking there is only one eye, since the secret of the gaze is hidden in the eye point *at* the surface or the inextended soul *beneath* the (sur-)face. But according to Lacan this secret is nothing but an illusion: it is the by-product of our narcissistic obsession with mirror images. The face is a mere camouflage; the truth behind it is, as Lacan puts it in his *Séminaire XI*, nothing but 'faeces'¹² – a heap of shit.

Lacan's deconstruction of the Cartesian concept of "subjectivity" recalled the 'paranoiac critical' nightmares of his surrealist contemporaries. In the quotation, prefixed to his famous essay on Cusa, Lacan's disciple Certeau quotes a sentence of Octavio Paz' that goes to the heart of these nightmares: "I am inside the eye: the well where from the beginning a child is falling, the well where I count the time I took to fall from the beginning."¹³

Lacan's contemporary Alfred Hitchcock provided the cinematographic counterpart to this poetic nightmare when he staged in the presumably best known scene of the Western film history, the iconic (in terms of our post-modern imagination) 'Shower Scene' of his thriller *Psycho*:

In the first sequence of this scene we see the face of the victim Marion taking a shower in her motel room. A few shots later we see, through Marion's shower curtain, the

9 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. ed. by Claude Lefort. Transl. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston Ill.: Northwestern University Press 1968), 76.

10 James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back. On the Nature of Seeing* (Orland, Fla: Harcourt 1997).

11 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Was wir sehen blickt uns an. Zur Metapsychologie des Bildes*. Transl. by M. Sedlaczek (München: 1999).

12 Cf. Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (1964), 92-97.

13 Michel de Certeau, „The Gaze. Nicholas of Cusa.“ In: *Diacritics* 17.3 (1987), 2-38.

shadow of the disturbed owner of the motel, Norman Bates entering the bathroom. In the next shot, the curtain is suddenly ripped aside, though it is still not possible to identify the *face* of the perpetrator. This is followed by a sequence of *cubistic point-of-view shots* that demonstrates to us that we have lost control of our perception. After the unknown killer has left the room, the shower scene ends by revealing the truth about the victim – announced by her tearing down the curtain: We see the blood of Marion sucked into the whirlpool of the drainage pipe, which is eventually superimposed by a single eye spinning round in the opposite direction.

As Lacan used to recall, referring to Freud, dream images of drainage pipes are nothing but a symbol for the shit that hides behind the screen of our narcissistic illusions. The reverse side of Marion's *face* is exactly that, *faeces*.

TOWARDS A RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PRE-MODERN, LITURGICAL CONCEPT OF SPACE

This disturbing revelation leads us back to our starting point: in Lacan and Hitchcock the 'bond of love' that makes human faces appear attractive is nothing but an epiphenomenon of mirror effects that hide the drain beneath the surface. However, if a concept of rationality that is supposed to be realistic leads to the conclusion that what we consider to be reality is nothing but an illusion, would it then not be more reasonable to question the anti-realist prejudices that made this concept appear as conclusive?

Cusa took this step at the very moment when the narcissistic age of modern science and culture was about to emerge, and this is why the late Michel de Certeau embarked on reconstructing Cusa's liturgical concept of space in his attempts to overcome the 'paranoiac critical methods' of his surrealist artistic and philosophical friends.

Lacan's deconstruction of the Cartesian concepts of space and autonomy built on the "Art as Religion" tradition of modernity following painters like Picasso, whose work strongly resonated in the cinematic world of Hitchcock. On the one hand this artistic tradition deconstructed the modern concept of space based on the distortion and multiplication of perspectives; but on the other hand it remained attached to Alberti's most important innovation: his interpretation of the painting as a representative window.

As outlined above, this window-model requires us to adopt a fixed position in relation to the physical picture-frame in the real space of our social life. But this position is only required to ensure that our real position coincides with the illusionary position of the eye point in the space of the image. As soon as we have got this right, we start to be immersed in the virtual space of the screen, – as I do when I watch television and forget about my sitting room.

In the case of paintings like Picasso's "*Girl before a mirror*" (1932), or films like *Psycho* (1960) we are still trapped in the virtual reality of this illusionary space. The only difference is that they re-introduce the invisible by multiplying and distorting the positions of the geometrical eye point.

When Hitchcock uses “point of view shots” in order to show *what* a character is looking at without revealing *who* the character is, he too builds on Picasso’s multiplication of perspectives. In both cases, the paintings and the films, we are confronted with a rhetorical strategy of visualisation that is in at least one respect comparable with Cusa’s experiment: if you want to show me the invisible you have to show me that what appears to be real from my limited point of view is simultaneously seen from a viewpoint that is inaccessible to me.

However, as distinct from Cusa, in Picasso and Hitchcock these multiple viewpoints are no longer associated with the corporeal presence of visible faces. Rather, like Alberti’s eye point they are only *re-presented* through the reflexive medium of the picture, cinema, or TV-screen. Our viewer’s position goes, like in Cusa, off the rails, but we are (unlike in Cusa) not permitted to get a foothold in the social space of face-to-face encounters.

The multiplication of perspectives introduces a kind of madness that undermines the viewer’s trust in his position without offering him a new position: is it me who looks at this painting or is there another eye entering the virtual space of the image? In contrast to Alberti, the invisible becomes again visible, but now the lack of a social space undermines the attitude of trust that characterized the liturgical space of pre-modern thinkers like Cusa and van Eyck.

The invisible appears, but now only as a virtuality, a paranoid construct that obscures its roots in the actuality of real time encounters. In contrast to this representationalist focus on ‘virtual realities’, Cusa’s *vera icona* is more comparable with a readymade in the style of Marcel Duchamp’s landmark urinal of 1917 that evoked tactile and olfactory associations. As Georges Didi-Huberman has demonstrated, starting from this proto-typical example, artistic objects like these have more in common with medieval contact relics than with an image in which we can immerse ourselves.¹⁴ They recover the situated, real time aspects of our perception.

Cusa does something similar when he uses a *vera icona* that is not associated with a virtual space but with an actual physical object, while its mystical attraction is due to the multiplication of perspectives in the social space of the monks, and not to the representative multiplication of perspectives within the virtual space of an *image*.

Unlike Picasso, Hitchcock and Lacan, the visibility of the invisible is in Cusa associated with *visible* bodies, and our ability to see what we can hear, smell and touch. I can *perceive* the invisible in other faces due to a poetic sensitivity that is rooted in an attitude of trust.

In the 15th century Alberti distanced himself from Cennino Cennini when he insisted that the invisible is not the business of painters; five hundred years later the invisible attracted the attention of painters and artists more the ever before. But the late modern revival of the invisible was still focused on Alberti’s imaginary space, and this

14 Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ähnlichkeit und Berührung. Archäologie, Anachronismus und Modernität des Abdrucks* (Cologne: Dumont 1999).

prevented it from regaining its social and liturgical significance. It is precisely this what Cusa's critical response to the emerging narcissistic age of his time offers us – a realist awareness of the social and liturgical dynamic that underpinned the invisible in a medieval context and which thus presents a challenge to the basic assumptions of our post-Cartesian way of thinking.