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## THE VISIBILITY OF THE INVISIBLE FROM NICHOLAS OF CUSA TO LATE-MODERNITY AND BEYOND<sup>1</sup>

*Johannes Hoff*

Our modern understanding of science and culture builds on two key concepts: a concept of subjective ‘autonomy’ that suggests that everyone is by nature able to ‘determine’ herself; and a representationalist concept of space that suggests that the world we inhabit can be exhaustively represented by a mathematically generated ‘picture of the world’, for example as in a computer generated 3D animation. The theoretical formulation of these concepts can be traced back to Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*, which was published together with his *Optics* and *Geometry* in 1637.<sup>2</sup> However, both

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<sup>1</sup> The following essay builds on material of my forthcoming book, Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn. Re-thinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 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”. References in the main text refer to *De visione Dei*.

<sup>2</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*. Translated, with an introduction, by Paul J. Olscamp (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett 2001).

concepts had rapidly emerged 200 years earlier after architect Filippo Brunelleschi's public "demonstrations" of the linear perspective in Florence in 1425.<sup>3</sup>

On the artistic level, these experiments led to the introduction of the virtual reality of the modern picture, as well as of TV and of computers and the internet; but they also provoked, on the scientific level, the emergence of a digital conceptual space that informed philosophers and scientists such as Descartes, Newton and Einstein. Briefly, the modern concepts of science and culture were not invented by scientists, but were rather the outcome of an artistic vision of space and autonomy. This explains why the accompanying vision of scientific realism was successful despite its counter-intuitive presuppositions and mathematical flaws.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For a genealogical reconstruction of the emergence of these two concepts, cf. part II of my forthcoming book (see Fn. 1). As for the 'visual turn' in Northern Italy after Brunelleschi's public experiments, cf. Hans Belting, *Florenz und Bagdad. Eine westöstliche Geschichte des Blicks* (München: C.H. Beck 2008) (transl. Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad. Renaissance Art and Arab Science* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2011)); and Samuel Y. Edgerton, *The Mirror, the Window, and the Telescope. How Renaissance Linear Perspective Changed our Vision of the Universe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2009).

<sup>4</sup> These mathematical flaws are related to the modern 'solution' of the medieval conundrum of the squaring of the circle. I have discussed Cusa's philosophically more rigorous, apophatic solution to this problem in Johannes Hoff, *Kontingenz, Berührung, Überschreitung. Zur philosophischen Propädeutik christlicher Mystik nach Nikolaus von Kues* (Freiburg/Br.: Alber 2007), 84-143. My above genealogy of the emergence of the modern concept of autonomy and the related, 'virtualized' concept of space builds on this research (see Fn. 3).

### **Cusa, Alberti, and the Emergence of the Modern Age**

Leon Battista Alberti provided what is assumed to be the first theoretical account of the principles that stood behind Brunelleschi's groundbreaking experiments in his book *On painting* of 1435.<sup>5</sup> But Alberti was less innovative than it is frequently assumed, since his mathematical account of the 'visual turn' in Florence built heavily on the theories of Biagio Pelacani da Parma.

Biagio taught at the University of Padua, and developed a mathematical theory of visual space that is almost forgotten today. Nicholas of Cusa was acquainted with Biagio's philosophy from the beginning of his career as a student in Padua in 1417, where he attended the lectures of Biagio's disciple Prosdocimus de' Beldomandis. It is here that Cusa may have first met Alberti. Whatever the case, Cusa certainly made his acquaintance later, at the 'Florentine Stammtisch'<sup>6</sup> of his close friend Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli, at which Brunelleschi was also present. Significant research has been done

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture. The Latin Texts of De pictura and De statua*. Ed. by Cecil Grayson (London: 1972). For an English translation, cf. Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*. Transl. by Cecil Grayson, with an introduction and notes by Martin Kemp (London: Penguin 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Tom Müller, *Perspektivität und Unendlichkeit. Mathematik und ihre Anwendung in der Frührenaissance am Beispiel von Alberti und Cusanus* (Regensburg: Roderer-Verlag 2011), 15-33. The German term "Stammtisch" defies translation. One of my Lampeter students arguably translated it as follows: 'A *Stammtisch* is a table in the pub where people meet in order to discuss "the big questions".'

on this connection in the last years.<sup>7</sup> What has been traditionally played down, however, and only recently attracted the attention of Cusa scholars, is the fact that Cusa did not at all agree with the theories of his *Stammtisch*-friends – this despite the notorious ‘modern’ features of his philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

Already in his first philosophical book, *De docta ignorantia* (1440-42), we see Cusa developing a philosophically more rigorous account of the early modern mathematisation of space, one that avoids the mathematical simplifications of Alberti. In fact this account displays amazing similarities to the alternative liturgical vision of space contained in the North Burgundian paintings by artists such as Jan van Eyck.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For the following, see particularly Harald Schwaetzer; Wolfgang Schneider et al., *'Videre et videri coincidunt'. Theorien des Sehens in der ersten Hälfte des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Münster: Aschendorff 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gianluca Cuzzo, "Bild, visio und Perspective. Cusanus und L.B. Alberti". In: Inigo Bocken; Harald Schwaetzer (Ed.), *Spiegel und Portrait. Zur Bedeutung zweier zentraler Bilder im Denken des Nicolaus Cusanus* (Maastricht: 2005), 178-196; Karsten Harries, "On the Power and Poverty of Perspective. Cusanus and Alberti". In: Peter J. Casarella (Ed.), *Cusanus. The legacy of learned ignorance* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press 2006), 105-126.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Inigo Bocken, "*Imitatio* und *creatio* bei Cusanus und Van Eyck. Die neue Bedeutung des Betrachters im 15. Jahrhundert". In: Harald Schwaetzer; Wolfgang Schneider; Inigo Bocken; Marc de Mey (Ed.), *'Videre et videri coincidunt'* (Münster: Aschendorff 2010), 195-208; Luc Bergmans, "Creating as the *Possest*, Painting as *I can* and Contemplating with *Lively Attention*. An Interpretation of the Joint Venture of Jan Van Eyck and the Viewers of the Ghent Altarpiece". In: Harald Schwaetzer; Wolfgang

Even more significant is the little book that Cusa sent to the Monks at the Monastery of Tegernsee in 1453, entitled *On the vision of God (De visione Dei)*. This book includes a comprehensive deconstruction of Alberti's concepts of space, perspectivity, and subjective autonomy. It anticipated not only latter developments in modern philosophy and art such as Paul Cézanne, Alfred Hitchcock, and Jacques Lacan, as we will see below; Cusa's deconstruction of Alberti in fact takes a significant step beyond the postmodern, critical stocktaking of the modern age.<sup>10</sup> The following essay provides a short introduction to the key problems of this text in the light of these late-modern developments, focusing particularly on the issues of visibility and invisibility, which at their heart are questions that arose in relation to Pseudo-Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*.

### **1. Cusa's Experimental Staging of the Modern Perspective**

In 1452 the Monks of Tegernsee put to Cusa the question of how the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius the Areopagite might be conceived. Cusa's *De visione Dei* was his response, which took the form of an experimental introduction to the mystical theology of his philosophical paragon. For together with his book, he sent to his friends an icon that depicts a so-called *figura cuncta videns*: an 'all-seeing figure', whose gaze

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Schneider; Inigo Bocken; Marc de Mey (Ed.), 'Videre et videri coincidunt' (Münster: Aschendorff 2010), 257-271; Wolfgang Christian Schneider, "Betrachtung, Aufstieg und Ordnung im Genter Altar". In: Harald Schwaetzer; Wolfgang Schneider; Inigo Bocken; Marc de Mey (Ed.), 'Videre et videri coincidunt' (Münster: Aschendorff 2010), 209-236.

<sup>10</sup> I have provided support for this hypothesis in part III of my forthcoming book (see Fn. 1).

simultaneously follows the movements of all its viewers at the same time. The icon Cusa used was presumably a so-called ‘Veronica’ – a ‘Veronica’ being a replica of the famous *vera icona* (true icon) which was venerated in Rome. According to the legend, this latter icon was identical with the veil onto which the lord had pressed his face on the way to Mount Calvary; its name deriving from the woman, ‘Veronica’, who had offered her veil to Christ (*vera icona* – Veronica).

The *vera icona* Cusa sent to the monks was not an early modern *art image* but a variation of this archetypal *cult image*, presumably similar to Van Eyck’s portrait style versions of this icon.<sup>11</sup> (Given the long tradition of scholarly attempts to harmonize Cusa and Alberti this fact has significance beyond the field of art-history). Cusa instructs the monks to fix this mystic icon to the Northern wall, and to walk past it from East to West and also from West to East, while fixing their eyes on its gaze. If the monks follow this instruction, they will discover that the gaze follows them at all times (*Praefatio*, n. 4, 6f.). If the monks start talking with each other they will discover

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<sup>11</sup> Hans Belting compares it with Van Eyck’s 1438 icon, which is now displayed in the Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin. Cf. Belting, *Florenz und Bagdad*, 240-246. As for the distinction between ‘cult image’ (Kultbild) and ‘art image’ (Kunstbild) see Belting’s ground breaking 1990 monograph ‘Bild und Kult’; transl. as Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. Transl. by E.F.N. Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994). For a thorough investigation of the Western *vera icona* tradition, see Gerhard Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel. Traditionen des Christusbildes und die Bildkonzepte der Renaissance* (München: Fink 2002).

something more exceptional still: namely that the gaze follows the movements of all viewers simultaneously, even when they are moving in opposite directions.

## **2. The Coincidence of Vision and Audition**

This leads us to Cusa's well-known concept of the 'coincidence of opposites' (*coincidentia oppositorum*). That the gaze of the all-seeing figure follows individual movements might appear 'impossible'; but this appearance is itself still consistent with the law of contradiction. By contrast, the fact that the gaze moves *simultaneously* in opposite directions offends the law of contradiction. Hence it touches on a more rigorous 'impossibility'.

This last point is cardinal for Cusa's concept of God. The principles of human reason 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 tantamount 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 dialectical distinctions or analytic *de-finitions*. We cannot conceive what a word means when it refers to an infinite reality (*pace* Georg

Cantor's set theory).<sup>12</sup> But we can know *reflexively* that the infinity 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 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 is dependent upon his ability to *hear*. I can never see from my perspective what another might see from hers. But I can *perceive* it, 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).

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<sup>12</sup> Modern mathematicians might object that the concept of infinity has become definable subsequent to Georg Cantor's concept of "uncountable sets". However, the standard interpretation of Cantor's infamous "diagonal argument" is not consistent with Cusa's uncompromising realist use of the law of the excluded middle; and it is still possible to interpret Cantor's argument in accordance with these more rigorous principles. Cf. Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer, "Zu einer prototheoretischen Begründung der klassischen Mengenlehre". In: Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert; et al. (Ed.), *Proceedings des Becker-Kolloquiums "Übungen zur Begründung der Mathematik"* (Hagen: 2005); and with regard to Cusa, Hoff, *Kontingenz, Berührung, Überschreitung*, 84-143, and 443f.

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. Only the free-play of individual perspectives can make us realize that not only is there always more to be seen than we actually see, but the temporarily invisible is simultaneously visible in the social space of face-to-face encounters:

He makes many figures, because the likeness of His infinite power can be unfolded in the most perfect way only in many figures. And *all* intellectual spirits are useful to *each* [intellectual] spirit. [...] For each intellectual spirit sees in You-my-God something [without] which the others – unless it were revealed to them – could not in the best possible manner touch unto You-their-God. ( c. 25 n. 117,1-8; Hp n. 111)

### 3. Alberti's Account of the Modern Perspective

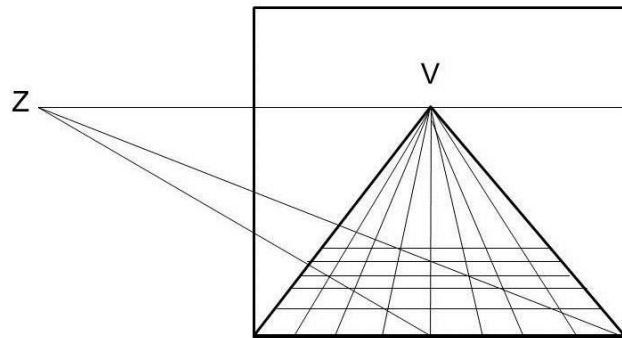
Perspectivity, Individuality, Plurality: in appreciating these phenomena as matters of ultimate concern, we have already exceeded the threshold of modernity.<sup>13</sup> However, as the art historian Hans Belting has pointed out, the all-seeing gaze of Cusa's icon is incompatible with the strategy of early modern portrait art which seeks to tie the gaze of a portrait to a fixed angle of vision from which it can be appropriated and annexed.<sup>14</sup> It

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. also Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel*, 201-272.

<sup>14</sup> 'Er (Cusa) kontrastiert den unendlichen Blick Gottes mit dem endlichen Blick seiner Geschöpfe [...]. Das Monopol von Gottes Blick durfte nicht von seinem Betrachter annektiert werden, der seinen

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), for example, we find the most striking examples of this new cultural technology of visualisation. Piero used a grid floor as a measuring unit, and 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 (Z) of the viewer (in the above diagram Z is turned by 90 degrees to the left side). The latter was defined as an abstract geometrical point, and corresponded to the vanishing point (V) within the image to which the backwards oriented parallel lines of the floor converged like receding railroad tracks.

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eigenen Blick ikonisch machen wollte. Das war zugleich ein Seitenhieb auf das neue Portrait, das sich den frontalen Blick der Ikone angeeignet hat.' Belting, *Florenz und Bagdad*, 240.

This compositional strategy was consistent with Alberti's theoretical innovations, which introduced the two key concepts of modern science and culture:<sup>15</sup> the vanishing lines reflect the invisible eye point of the viewer before the painting; and this puts the latter in the position of an autonomous observer, who can control the space of his perception as if it were nothing but a mirror image of his subjective position.

Our gaze is no longer exterior to these paintings, as the eye point in the above illustration demonstrates. On the one hand, the eye point (Z) 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 (V) at the horizon.

The last point 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. As soon as I have got this right, the embodied space of my real world fades into

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<sup>15</sup> For a concise introduction to Alberti's construction of the perspective, cf. Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge: 2001), 72-75; the following interpretation of the central perspective is indebted to the above monograph of Belting (see Fn. 3).

the background, like the LG label at the bottom of my television screen. As soon as the viewer ‘immerses’ himself 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.

#### **4. Narcissus and the Emergence of the Modern “Virtual Space”**

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.’<sup>16</sup> As such, Alberti offers a new understanding for Narcissus’s act of falling in love with himself, and in doing so presents a challenge to traditional understandings of his action.

According to the mythological tradition, Narcissus fell in love with his mirror image, and became engulfed by its elusiveness. As Philostratus the Elder expressed in his description of various artworks of antiquity, he ‘does not hear anything we say, but he is

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<sup>16</sup> *Quid est enim aliud pingere quam arte superficiem illam fontis amplecti?* Alberti, *On Painting*, n 26; cf. also, Claus-Artur Scheier, "Albertis Narziß und der 'Cartesianismus' von 'De pictura'". In: Harald Schwaetzer; Wolfgang Schneider; Inigo Bocken; Marc de Mey (Ed.), *'Videre et videri coincidunt'* (Münster: Aschendorff 2010), 67-80, 79.

immersed eyes and ears alike, in the water.’<sup>17</sup> In the face of this mythological imagery, mirrors were perceived as deceptive and dangerous: as distinct from the real encounter with living bodies, the mirroring of images was associated with the incorporeal and fugitive shadow world of death.<sup>18</sup>

A new 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

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<sup>17</sup> Philostratus; Philostratus et al., *Imagines*. With an English transl. by Arthur Fairbanks (London: William Heinemann 1931), I 23 (accessed via <http://www.theoi.com/Text/PhilostratusElder1A.html>); cf. also Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel*, 216.

<sup>18</sup> This is the background to an almost forgotten episode of Dante’s *Inferno* where the poets Dante and Virgil encounter, in the circle of fraud, two thirsty sinners that vainly ‘lick the Mirror of Narcissus’. Cf. Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*. Ed. by G. Petrocchi (Milan: Mondadori 1966), *Inferno* XXX, and *Paradiso* III; transl. accessed in: <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/>. For the following, cf. Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel*, 212-243; and Belting, *Florenz und Bagdad*, 246-53.

realistic appearance is linked to a physical medium.<sup>19</sup> But to indulge in this narcissistic habit is for Alberti and his artistic successors no longer dangerous, since the viewer's attitude to his imaginary mirror has become frozen. Hence, by redefining the image as a window that cuts through the visual pyramid, the new generation of artists also created a 'cut through the temporal pyramid' (*Schnitt durch die Zeitpyramide*):<sup>20</sup> The uncontrollable temporality of bodily encounters was arrested and replaced by the encounter with an atemporal "virtual reality".

As Karsten Harris has argued, this counterintuitive concept of artistic realism came about for pragmatic reasons. The sacrifice of our everyday realism was the price to be paid for a simulacrum that permitted representational security.<sup>21</sup> Similar to Ulysses, who let himself be tied to the mast of his ship so that he could listen to the deceptive sounds of the Sirens without getting lured by their mortal attraction, the viewer is required to suppress his natural inclination to act if he wants to enjoy the narcissistic achievements of the time to come – though it arguably took more than three further centuries of

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Sylvie Tritz, "Ad imaginem et similitudinem. Bildtheologie, Malereitheorie und Kunstpraxis zur Zeit des Nikolaus von Kues". In: Inigo Bocken; Harald Schwaetzer (Ed.), *Spiegel und Portrait. Zur Bedeutung zweier zentraler Bilder im Denken des Nicolaus Cusanus* (Maastricht: Uitgeverij 2005), 197-216, 206.

<sup>20</sup> Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel*, 252.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, 76-83.

habituation with the ties of perspective art before we became able to enjoy virtualized violence without giving way to our responsive inclination to act.<sup>22</sup>

### 5. Liturgical vs. Virtual Spaces

As pointed out above, the new art of painting that arose in the Early Renaissance in North Italy was not designed to afford actions which responded to a real time environment. It was designed to suppress the temporality of human perception based on a technology that obliterated any sign of actuality at the screen of the painting; our perception of space became focused on *virtual* realities.

This is the reason why Alberti rejected, other than Van Eyck and Cusa, the gold background paintings of the Gothic tradition. Alberti had no objections against the use of ‘massive gold’ as long as he was talking about, what Immanuel Kant later called the *par-ergon* (“accessory work”) of a painting. But when it came to the *ergon* (the “proper work of art”)<sup>23</sup> he criticized even the use of gold with regard to golden objects.<sup>24</sup> If a

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. John Milbank, *Being reconciled. Ontology and pardon* (London: Routledge 2003), 26-43.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Werke Bd. 5. Hg. von Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: 1957), §14; cf. also Immanuel Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*. Werke Bd 4. Hg.von Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: 1956) B62f. For a deconstruction of this dualism, cf. Jacques Derrida, *Die Wahrheit in der Malerei*. Übers. von M. Wetzel (Wien: Passagen-Verlag 1990), 31-176.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Alberti, *On Painting*, II n. 49; see also Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel*, 209.

painter depicted, for example, the golden belt of Dido 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 an ontological realist tradition that appreciated the tactile presence of paintings in the real space we inhabit. 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 plenitude of God.<sup>25</sup> However, the staging of suspense effects between immanence and transcendence became unacceptable as soon as the modern, representationalist tradition of perspective paintings started to distinguish between the *ergon* and the *par-ergon* of the painting in order to celebrate the viewer's unconditioned immersion in the illusory world of a virtual space.

As distinct from this new tradition, Cusa's *vera icona* did not have the character of art image in which the viewer is expected to immerse him or herself. Rather it was designed to serve as 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

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<sup>25</sup> The open triptych in the chapel of the St Nikolaus Hospital in Kues, which was build in accordance with Cusa's instructions, provides an excellent example of this mystagogical use of gold. Cf. Foerster, Thomas, "Das Passionstriptychon im St. Nikolaus-Hospital von Bernkastel-Kues." In: *Cusanus Jahrbuch* (2011), 55-89, p. 60 Fn. 14.

the difference between the human and the divine. In short, Cusa's icon was designed to recover the pre-modern, *liturgical* concept of space.<sup>26</sup> 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: God looks at me as if he were subjected to my spontaneous movements. Cusa is no longer afraid of mirroring effects like these; 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.<sup>27</sup>

This innovative feature of *De visione Dei* has to be interpreted in the light of Cusa's earlier claim that his writings include 'previously unheard' (*prius inaudita*)<sup>28</sup> teachings. In the relevant eleventh chapter of *De docta ignorantia II* Cusa had argued (notably 100

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<sup>26</sup> Already Michel de Certeau has described Cusa's Tegernsee experiment as a 'mathematical liturgy' that introduces a social concept of space (cf. Certeau, Michel de, "The Gaze. Nicholas of Cusa." In: *Diacritics* 17.3 (1987), 2-38, 14, and 18ff). I have reconstructed the related 'liturgical concept of space' in part III of my forthcoming book (see Fn. 1). Cf. also Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing. On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell 1998), 3-46.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel*, 262.

<sup>28</sup> *De docta ignorantia II*, c. 11 n. 156.

years before Copernicus) that, in terms of the comparative methods of scientific reason, the centre of the universe can be located everywhere: In an infinite sphere every point is equidistant to the periphery; hence every point can be its centre.<sup>29</sup> *De visione dei* goes a step further in the logic of this ‘unheard teaching’, when in the preface Cusa praises a mural of Rogier van der Weyden’s in which the North Burgundy painter had depicted himself in the divine position of an ‘all-seeing figure’. As he argues in the following chapters, it is a gift of grace that ‘we cannot hate ourselves’; for ‘I ought to love myself (*diligere debeo*)’, and everyone should do so.<sup>30</sup> Hence, everyone is justified in following the examples of artists like Van der Weyden and Van Eyck by posing in the position of God. I am justified in perceiving myself as the centre of the universe! What Sigmund Freud called latter ‘primary narcissism’<sup>31</sup> is in Cusa’s view, like in Alberti’s, salutary, healthy and good. It does not necessarily mark the first step into an illusionary world of self-deception: it can also mark the starting point of a mystagogical ascent that leads to salvation.

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. D. Mahnke, *Unendliche Sphäre und Allmittelpunkt. Beiträge zur Genealogie der mathematischen Mystik* (Halle/Saale: 1937), 77-108; 145-159; and Jean-Michel Counet, *Mathématique et dialectique chez Nicola de Cues* (Paris: 2000), 211-253.

<sup>30</sup> *De visione Dei*, c. 15 n. 65, 14 and n. 66,5-9 (Hp n. 70); see also c. 6, n. 20.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Sigmund Freud, *On Narcissism: An Introduction*. Ed. by J. Sandler, E. Spector Person, P. Fonagy (New Haven: Yale University Press 1991).

The last point brings us back to the difference between Cusa and Alberti. In contrast to Alberti, the immersion in narcissistic images marks in Cusa only the first rung of a ladder that leads to the vision of God;<sup>32</sup> 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. Certainly, Alberti’s ‘narcissistic’ account of images included a humanist 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. Instead, it focused on my ability to put myself *in the position* of others,<sup>33</sup> as if the difference between two perspectives could be reduced to the difference between two narcissistic positions that I myself as viewer could adopt in a time sequence.

This sequential dimension of Alberti’s concept of intersubjectivity might be illustrated by the example of Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa. Art images like these 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 time, 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

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. *De filiatione dei*, c. 3 n. 65-68.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Alberti, *On Painting*, II n. 25, and III n. 61-63; and Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel*, 248f.

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. In contrast to Cusa’s common sense realism, modern art images tend to replace our pre-reflexive experience of the social space by an artificially created ‘egological’<sup>34</sup> experience of ‘intersubjective’ convertibility.

### **6. Eros vs. Mimesis**

Against this background, it might be argued that Alberti’s account of intersubjectivity not only anticipated the modern concept of subjective autonomy, but also the unmasking of this concept in the philosophy of Descartes’ post-modern successors. This becomes particularly evident in Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic account of the modern

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<sup>34</sup> This critical observation relates to recent phenomenological debates on Husserl’s ‘egological’ concept of intersubjectivity which can be traced back to Jacques Derrida’s controversy with Emmanuel Lévinas’ on this topic in the 60’s of the last century (cf. Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics". In: *Writing and difference* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1978), 79-153). However, as I have argued in part III of my forthcoming book with regard to Lévinas and Jean-Luc Marion (see Fn. 1), phenomenological methods are insufficient to overcome the representationalist rationality of the post-Cartesian tradition. Hence, Cusa’s common sense realism has become more relevant than ever before.

concept of intersubjectivity in his essay '*The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I*'.<sup>35</sup>

According to Lacan's, justifiably<sup>36</sup> non-empirical, psychoanalytical account of the emergence of 'intersubjectivity', our social skills derive from the pleasure of toddlers who enjoy imitating their own mirror image. Our ability to talk with other persons is accordingly the upshot of a creative act of self-deception: the infant learns to talk with other persons and to accommodate 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 imitating, like a toddler that imitates its mother while the latter is telephoning with its father.

Cusa, by contrast, builds on an Augustinian anthropology, one articulated through a far more clearly Medieval heritage. According to this anthropology, the transition from the stage of the 'infant' (*in-fans*), that it not yet able to talk (*non fari*), to the stage of the

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<sup>35</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience". In: *Ecrits: A Selection* (London: Tavistock Publications 1977), 1-7.

<sup>36</sup> Lacan's speculative theory aimed to explain how we *retroactively* imagine the emergence of subjective autonomy and intersubjectivity *as 'revealed' in the therapeutic experience of psychoanalysis*. This is consistent with the Kantian assumption that subjectivity is not an empirical fact but a condition of the possibility of empirical experiences. For this reason, it would be pointless to "disprove" Lacan's theory, for example based on empirical observations about joint attention in child-parent dyads.

‘boy’ (*puer*), 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.’<sup>37</sup> 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’ as soon as the infant falls in love with a reality that transcends the virtual space of mirroring effects (in the above key passage Augustine does not differentiate between boys and girls).<sup>38</sup>

In *De visione dei* this nexus is associated with the irresistible erotic attraction of the iconic gaze that arouses our desire for the vision of God. 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.

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<sup>37</sup> *Non enim eram infans, qui non farer, sed iam puer loquens eram. Et memini hoc, et unde loqui didiceram, post adverti. Non enim docebant me maiores homines praebens mihi verba (...) sed ego ipse mente, quam dedisti mihi, deus meus, cum gemitibus et vocibus variis et variis membrorum motibus edere vellem sensa cordis meis.* Aurelius Augustinus, *Confessiones / Bekenntnisse*. Lat.-dt. übers. und erl. von J. Bernhard (München: Kösel 1955), I 8,13.

<sup>38</sup> See also Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel*, 258: „Nur geschieht der amplexus hier nicht durch ars, sondern durch den nexus amoris, und darin ist auch die Selbstliebe des Menschen aufgehoben, weil sie im cusanischen Sinne Gottesliebe bedeutet.“

This explains why Cusa emphasises in *De visione dei* so firmly the erotic attraction of the all seeing gaze:

You draw (*trahis*) us unto Yourself by every possible means of drawing (*trahendi modo*) by which a free rational creature can be drawn (*trahi potest*) (c. 15 n. 66,1-4; Hp n. 70).

God ‘looks’ at me as if he was nothing but my mirror image, and this is attractive. But he is looking in the same unique manner at everyone else; and it 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 scenario 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’. However, modern ‘intersubjective’ accounts of the human language acquisition are not barred from appreciating this erotic dimension of human perception. This again becomes most evident in Jacques Lacan’s account of intersubjectivity.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Jacques Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse (1964). Le séminaire, livre XI*. Ed. by Jacques Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1973), 113-273.

### 7. The Unmasking of Alberti's "Narcissus" in Post-modernity

Lacan argues that as soon as the infant learns to talk with and listen to others, it becomes trapped in the insatiable dynamics of human desire. Where he differs from Cusa is that the dynamics of this desire is, according to Lacan's reflexive approach, not mediated by a natural desire for the vision of God. Similar to René Girard's more empirically-oriented concept of mimetic desire, it is rather borrowed from other people; or more precisely, it is mediated by the *desire of the other* – in the double sense of this genitive. 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-are not rooted in a teleological dynamics of nature; it is the upshot of the reflexive dynamics of social interactions: I desire what the others desire (e.g. to see what the other sees) because I believe that the others believe me to desire what they desire.

This explains, from a Lacanian point of view, why we prefer to attend full cinemas and not empty ones: 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!<sup>40</sup> Post-modern talent shows like *The X Factor*, that are designed to reveal the inscrutable 'something' that makes a singer a 'star', are arguably

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. also Michel de Certeau, "What We Do When We Believe". In: Marshall Blonsky (Ed.), *On Signs* (Baltimore: Blackwell 1985), 193-202.

built on this reflexive principle. Lacan's logic of desire provides, as it were, the first theoretical account of the fact that the invisible community of Simon Cowell's viewers tends to believe that others believe them to believe what Simon Cowell believes them to believe when they watch *The X Factor*!

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 'intersubjective' 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 *amplexus amoris* (embrace of love) any more than the epiphenomenon of a socially extended mirror?

### **8. Cusa's Alternative Account of the Social Space**

Cusa's answer to the above question builds on a sophisticated account of the interplay between heterogeneous sensory faculties, and considerations of the impact of habits of faith and belief on our sensory perception.<sup>41</sup> In contrast, Lacan builds on a kind of 'hermeneutics of suspicion' that emphasises, in accordance with the late writings of

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<sup>41</sup> I have reconstructed Cusa's holistic gnoseology in part III of my forthcoming book (see Fn. 1), and contrasted it there from the late medieval modularisation of sensual, cognitive and volunative faculties.

Sigmund Freud, the destructive sides of our narcissistic self-regard.<sup>42</sup> Consequently Lacan treats our poetic ability to link and combine information across sensory modalities as part of an elaborate, albeit creative, strategy of self-deception that is derived from more elementary dynamics of mimetic rivalry. Given this alternative, our answer to the question of whether Augustine's loving desire is only an epiphenomenon arguably depends on what we consider to be more elementary: the ambiguity of an undetermined scenario of drives that can only be determined via a socially mediated processes of mirroring in which good and evil tend to neutralize each other; or the poetic guidance of narratives and liturgical practices that enable us to disentangle the dynamic of our desires without getting disorientated in the ambiguity of an ultimately pointless zero-sum game.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960* (London: Tavistock/Routledge 1992), ch 7-12; Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (Frankfurt/M.: 1975); and Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Frankfurt/M.: 1974).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Johannes Hoff, "Mystagogy Beyond Onto-theology. Looking back to Post-modernity with Nicholas of Cusa". In: Arne Moritz (Ed.), *A Companion to Nicholas of Cusa* (Leiden: Brill 2013); Hoff, *The Analogical Turn* (passim); and Johannes Hoff, "Das Paradox des Glaubens und der Holzweg moderner Entscheidungslogik. Kierkegaards Lektüre von Genesis 22 und ihre Wirkungsgeschichte von Heidegger bis Derrida und darüber hinaus". In: Helmut Hoping; Julia Knop; Thomas Böhm (Ed.), *Die Bindung Isaaks. Stimme, Schrift, Bild* (Paderborn: Schöningh 2009), 238-258.

Another way of approaching this issue is to investigate, along with Lacan's disciple Michel de Certeau, how Cusa deals with the disturbing dimensions of the dark attraction of his all-seeing gaze. At certain points we can indeed detect an unsettling similarity between Cusa's attempt to deconstruct Alberti's narcissism and Lacan's deconstruction of Descartes' concept of subjective autonomy.<sup>44</sup> Cusa pays attention to such a sensitive point when he notes in his chapter on Jesus in *De visione Dei* that the faithful, who feel themselves 'attracted'<sup>45</sup> by the paradoxical presence of the creator in a visible creature, will appear as mad in the eyes of the wise: *stultitiam asserunt id credere possibile* (c. 21, n. 91, 7; Hp n. 92).

Christological accounts of the madness of faith have been part of the Christian tradition since as early as Saint Paul. But what do such accounts contribute to phenomenological or ontological debates on human perception? Certeau provides us with an answer to this question when he relates the *stultitia* (madness) in Christ to the transient bewilderment that arises when the monks discover that the all-seeing gaze, which is looking at everyone as if it were looking at *no one else*, is looking simultaneously at *everyone else*. The monks in this situation are not only required to listen to their confrères and to believe what the other monks say. They are also called to assent to what no one can, as long as he considers himself an autonomous 'subject': they are required to participate in

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<sup>44</sup> Certeau, "The Gaze", 34f.

<sup>45</sup> *Sis creator pariter et creatura, attrahens pariter et attractum*, c. 21 n. 97,7-8.

an act of *joint* attention; and to take something for granted that cannot be assured through the evidences of visual perceptions alone.

Our ability to appreciate this phenomenon is mediated by Jesus Christ, Cusa maintains, and by the theological promise that his remaining presence will enable every believer to perceive the invisible Son of God in the visible face of his neighbour. However, Cusa's solution to this problem provokes the modern suspicion that he takes this step too quickly. To be sure, every Christian since Saint Paul knows that the decision to believe is madness, and the above quotation demonstrates that Cusa was familiar with this tradition. But the fine line that separates the madness of faith from its destination has grown into a nihilistic abyss in the five centuries that followed Cusa's late medieval experiment.

### **9. The Return of the Invisible in Late Modernity**

This abyss becomes most evident if we compare Cusa's account of the invisible with the modern re-emergence of the invisible in the wake of Paul Cézanne's deconstruction of the linear perspective. Certeau refers to Lacan's contributions to the related phenomenological debates, which build in turn on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's groundbreaking publications about Cézanne, as well as his *Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>46</sup> Merleau-Ponty had demonstrated that Alberti's linear perspective is not as

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<sup>46</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge 1989).

realistic as it purports to be; and that, in fact, Cézanne's paintings actually 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'.<sup>47</sup> Similar to Picasso's cubistic paintings, the paintings of Cézanne and his successors appear 'warped' *because* they do justice to the temporal dynamics of human perception. 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.<sup>48</sup>

This latter concept of realism is more consistent with Cusa's ontologically realist account of human perception than the representationalist accounts that emerged in the wake of Roger Bacon, Alberti, Descartes, and Locke. Similar to Cezanne, Cusa treats the emergence of visual perception as the upshot of an attunement between the *intention* of colours that, so to speak, 'address' the viewer, and the *attention* of the viewer who

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<sup>47</sup> 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.

<sup>48</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", 65.

responds to this ‘address’.<sup>49</sup> But how does this non-representationalist account of vision relate to Cusa’s account of the visibility of the invisible in *De visione Dei*?

Up to a certain point, the all-seeing gaze of Cusa’s icon only makes explicit what characterises every object of human perception: that things have the power to attract my attention; they arouse my desire because ‘they are looking at me’. Numerous contemporary publications confirm this account of visual perception, from Merleau-Ponty (‘the things attract my look’),<sup>50</sup> James Elkins (‘The object stares back’),<sup>51</sup> to George Didi-Huberman (‘What we see is looking at us’).<sup>52</sup> But Cusa’s experiment in fact, goes deeper than the level of such contemporary debates on human perception. This becomes evident if we clearly distinguish Cusa’s deconstruction of Alberti’s representationalist concept of the linear perspective from Lacan’s deconstruction of the related, modern concepts of subjectivity and space, since Lacan’s deconstruction is in essential aspects still attached to Alberti’s concept of space.

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<sup>49</sup> *Visio ex intentione coloris et attentione videntis oritur. Compendium* c. 13 n. 41,6-9; see also *De apice theoriae*, n. 7.

<sup>50</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Ed. by Claude Lefort. Transl. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston Ill.: Northwestern University Press 1968), p. 76.

<sup>51</sup> James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back. On the Nature of Seeing* (Orland, Fla: Harcourt 1997).

<sup>52</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Was wir sehen blickt uns an. Zur Metapsychologie des Bildes*. Übers. von M. Sedlaczek (München: 1999) (own translation).

### 10. Paranoiac Features of the Late-Modern Invisible

Alberti reduced the position of the viewer to an inextended eye point that is reflected by the vanishing point in the painting (see the above diagram). Descartes' distinction between extended (*res extensa*) and non-extended substances (*res cogitans*) built on this representationalist tradition, but moved the non-extended eye point behind the image; as in the infamous drawing in his *Optics*, where the viewer hides behind the retina of a big oxen eye. Lacan harked back to Alberti and deviated from the later only insofar as he unmasked the truth of the Cartesian subject to be nothing more than the upshot of a narcissistic illusion; and this means, by implication, that the alter ego of face-to-face encounters is an illusion as well. According to this approach, the secret of his or her face is nothing but the upshot of a self-deceptive 'transference relation'.<sup>53</sup>

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 (in the case of Descartes) the inextended soul *beneath* the (sur-)face. But according to Lacan the secret of this eye is nothing but an illusion: it is the by-product of our

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre VIII: Le transfert* (Paris: Seuil 1991).

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’ – a heap of shit.<sup>54</sup>

Lacan’s deconstruction of the Cartesian concept of subjectivity confronted his disciples with an abyss of desire that recalled the nightmares of his ‘paranoiac critical’<sup>55</sup> surrealist contemporaries. In the quotation, prefixed to his essay on Cusa, Certeau quotes a sentence of Octavio Paz’ *Pasado en claro* 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.

Lacan’s contemporary Alfred Hitchcock provided the cinematographic counterpart to this poetic nightmare when he staged one of the best-known scenes of Western film history, the iconic, in terms of our late-modern imagination, ‘Shower Scene’ of his thriller *Psycho*.<sup>56</sup> In the first sequence of this scene we see the face of the unsuspecting victim Marion (played by Janet Leigh) taking a shower in her motel room. A few shots later we see through Marion’s shower curtain the shadow of the disturbed owner of the motel, Norman Bates (played by Antony Perkins), entering the bathroom. In the next

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (1964), 92-97.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Briony Fer, "Surrealism, Myth and Psychoanalysis". In: Briony Fer; David Batchelor; Paul Wood (Ed.), *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism. Art Between the Wars* (New Haven etc.: Yale University Press etc. 1993), 170-249, 218-221.

<sup>56</sup> The psychology of “The Gaze“ is an on-going topic in Hitchcock’s films. Cf. Slavoj Žižek (Ed.), *Ein Triumph des Blicks über das Auge. Psychoanalyse bei Hitchcock* (Wien : <sup>2</sup>1998), pp.193-263

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 visual faculties. After the enigmatic killer has left the room, the shower scene ends by revealing the truth about the victim – announced by her tearing down the curtain – as we see the blood of Marion sucked into the whirlpool of the drainage pipe, which becomes eventually superimposed by a single eye spinning round in the opposite direction. Lacan used to recall that, according to Freud, dream images of a drainage pipe are nothing but a symbol for the shit that hides behind the screen of our narcissistic illusions. The downside of Marion's *face* is exactly that, *faeces*.

### **11. Cusa's Alternative Account of the Invisible**

This disturbing revelation leads us back to our starting point: in Lacan and Hitchcock the 'bond of love', that makes human faces appear as 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 reality to be is nothing but an illusion, would it then not be more reasonable to question the non-realist prejudices that make this appear 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 Certeau started to reconstruct Cusa's liturgical concept of space when he tried to deconstruct the philosophical nightmares of his psychoanalytic teacher.

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 with the cinematic world of Hitchcock. On the one hand, this artistic tradition deconstructed Alberti's proto-Cartesian central perspective, based as it was on the distortion and multiplication of perspectives; but on the other hand, it remained, like Lacan, attached to this tradition. This becomes evident if we recall Alberti's most important innovation: the interpretation of the painting as a representative window that cuts through the visual pyramid. As outlined above, Alberti's window-model requires us to adopt a fixed position in relation to the physical picture-frame in the real space of our social life to ensure that our real position coincides with the illusionary position of the eye point in the imaginary 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 into the visible space of the image 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, in the paintings and the films, we are confronted with a rhetorical strategy of visualisation that is at least in 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, and unlike Cusa, in Picasso and Hitchcock these pluralised 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.

In contrast to Alberti, the invisible becomes again visible in late-modernity; 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 virtuality, viz. as a paranoid construct that at the same time negates and 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 "Fountain" of 1917 that evoked tactile and olfactory associations. As George Didi-Huberman has demonstrated, starting from this prototypical example, artistic objects like these have more in common with

medieval contact relics than with an image in which we can immerse ourselves.<sup>57</sup> They recover the situated, real time aspects of our perception.

Cusa does something similar when he focuses on an image relic that can be touched and kissed: the gaze of his *vera icona* is not associated with a virtual space but with an actual physical object, while its unfathomable 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 poetic 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. And it would be inappropriate if we tried to demonstrate that this is possible based on phenomenological analyses of phenomena of ‘givenness’, as the post-Cartesian tradition of modern philosophy might mislead us to do. It suffices to deconstruct the counter-intuitive, representationalist presuppositions of philosophical or ‘scientific’ theories that undermine our ability to trust in the primordial realism of our everyday perception – “unless he believed, he would not understand”, says Nicholas of Cusa (n. 3,22f.; Hp n. 4).<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ähnlichkeit und Berührung. Archäologie, Anachronismus und Modernität des Abdrucks* (Köln: Dumont 1999).

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Hoff, "Mystagogy Beyond Onto-theology" (forthcoming); and above Fn. 34.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> 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 than ever before. But the late modern revival of the invisible was still focused on Alberti's representationalist imaginary space, and this prevented it from regaining its social and liturgical significance. It is precisely this, however, which Cusa's experimental introduction to Pseudo-Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* offers us – a realist awareness of the social and liturgical dynamic that underpins the invisible in a medieval context and which thus presents a challenge to the basic assumptions of our post-Cartesian way of thinking.