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FROM REVERSE PERSPECTIVE TO PERFORMATIVE SPACE: GADAMERIAN REFLECTIONS ON FLORENSKY'S AESTHETICS

1. Introduction

The hermeneutical approach I adopt in this paper is neither historical-philosophical, nor purely systematic. On the one hand, I do not dare to broach a historic-philosophical account of Florensky's aesthetics, something which would exceed both the bounds of this essay and the range of my competences; nor, on the other hand, do I even intend to offer any theoretical considerations concerning Florensky's aesthetic writings, his theory of space, of perspective or of cult, from a systematic point of view. The paper does not aim to try to classify Florensky's approach under any label – whether aesthetic *formalism*, aesthetic *realism* or aesthetic *symbolism*.

Rather, here I dare to attempt a *parallel reading* of certain texts by Pavel Florensky and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Again, this approach should not be considered historical-philosophical – which is to say: I do not seek to establish, as Leon Chernyak did in an essay published more than thirty years ago¹, a problematic historical-philosophical connection between Florensky

¹ “The Heidegger-Gadamer hermeneutic starts (both in a positive and in a negative sense) from Husserl's teaching. We cannot say the same about the philosophy of Pavel Florensky. How would Florensky's views have evolved had he experienced the influence of Husserl's ideas? Fortunately, history has done this extrapolation for us. Let us consider A.F. Losev. One of the most prominent Russian Platonists,

and Gadamer. I do not even intend (at least, not as a main objective) merely to establish some parallels or affinities on some particular points in the aesthetics of the two authors. In fact, as will soon become clear, I deal with texts which tackle very different topics (in one case reverse perspective, in the other the notion of aesthetic consciousness). I will rather analyze some notions and considerations by both thinkers in order to *allow the emergence of some common views*, or at least of *common orientations*, in relation to some overarching aesthetic topics. I don't claim that Florensky anticipated Gadamer, or conversely that Gadamer was repeating statements already formulated by Florensky. But I do believe that by reading both authors together, and two of their texts in particular, one can reach a better understanding of what is implied in *both* texts, particularly in relation to two main general topics: on the one side, what can preliminarily be labelled a *critique of modern aesthetics* (this topic will occupy sections three and four); on the other, an idea of the aesthetic experience as taking place in what I will call a *performative space* (this topic will be treated in a preliminary fashion in section two and more in detail in the fifth and final section).

2. Florensky's Essay *The Church Ritual as a Synthesis of the Arts: Between Synesthesia and Performative Space*

I start my investigation with a short text by Pavel Florensky, *The Church Ritual as a Synthesis of the Arts*, which, Nicoletta Misler notes, was written "in October 1918 for a lecture he was invited to give to the Commission for the

Losev, by his own admission, formulated his ideas directly from those of Florensky. At the same time, Losev is one of the most significant Russian Husserlians. So, we have good grounds to compare the Russian and German lines of the philosophical comprehension of language" (Chernyak, 1988, 203–204). In fact, I don't share Chernyak's hermeneutical justification (as I don't concur with other arguments employed in his essay, as will become clear). On the one side, the fact that Losev is both Husserlian and influenced by Florensky's aesthetics does not constitute per se a ground to think that a comparison between the two authors would be pertinent. On the other, two authors can arrive totally independently at common conclusions about a particular topic. Given the absence of an established historical connection, in terms of the reception of texts I prefer to directly take *hermeneutical responsibility* concerning the common views I claim to identify in the two authors: this seems to me to be a more transparent approach.

Preservation of Monuments and Antiquities of the Lavra. This Commission was organized immediately after the October Revolution by the new government in an effort to counteract the vandalism and pillaging that threatened the property and treasures of the Lavra, the vital center of Russian Orthodoxy.”²

In this essay, after a first introductory paragraph, Florensky takes a quite radical position against museums, as, so to speak, *institutionalized collections of artworks*:

In the ensuing discussion it will perhaps become apparent that a museum – to bring my idea to its conclusion – a museum that functions autonomously is false and essentially pernicious to art, because although the work of art is classified as an object, in no sense is it merely an *object*. It is not an ἔργον, an immobile, stagnant, dead mummy of artistic production. It should be understood as an unquenchable, eternally beating flow of creativity itself, as the creator’s living, pulsating activity. Even though it is removed from the artist in time and space, it remains inseparable from him. It still radiates and plays with the colours of life, it still flows with the ἐνέργεια of the spirit.³

The following lines of the essay seem to suggest that Florensky here pledges allegiance to a sort of historicist view of art: works of art, as living beings, have to be placed in their own environment. The crime of museum is so to say to *deracinate* them from their own habitat and put them artificially together in a collection. A true, genuine museum should, on this basis, reconstruct such an environment in order to allow a more appropriate aesthetic experience.

This reasonable criticism of museums as *deracinated collections of artworks* is, however, to be set alongside the considerations offered at the end of this short essay, where explicit reference is made to Scriabin’s *Prefatory Act*:

I could understand a fanatical demand to destroy the Lavra and leave not a stone standing, made in the name of the religion of socialism. But I absolutely refuse to understand a *Kulturträger* who, on the basis of nothing more than a fortuitous overabundance of specialists in the visual arts in our day, fervently protects the icons, the frescoes and the walls themselves, and remains indifferent to other, no less valuable achievements of ancient art. But most importantly he doesn’t take into account the highest goal of the arts, their

² Mislser in Florensky 2002, 97. See also Mislser’s considerations included in the general introduction to Florensky’s aesthetic writings (Mislser 2002, 42–46).

³ Florensky 2002, 101–102.

ultimate synthesis, so successfully and distinctively resolved in the church ritual of the Troitse-Sergieva Lavra, and sought with such insatiable thirst by the late Scriabin. It is not to the arts but to Art that our age aspires, to the very core of Art as a primordial unifying activity. And for Art it is no secret, where not only the text, but the entire artistic embodiment of the *Prefatory Action* is concealed.⁴

It is well known that in other texts Florensky explicitly formulated negative judgments about Scriabin's music, and that the reference to him in this context was possibly dictated by non-musical and non-theoretical reasons.⁵ But this is not relevant; the point, rather, is to ask what makes this reference to the last unfinished work of Scriabin *plausible* in this context. The answer can be found in Scriabin's words about how he imagined a performance of *Mysterium* (for which the *Prefatory Act* would have constituted a preliminary act):

In this artistic event there will not be a single spectator. All will be participants. The work requires special people, special artists and a completely new culture. [...] The cast of performers includes, of course, an orchestra, a large mixed choir, an instrument with visual effects, dancers, a procession, incense, rhythmicized textual articulation.⁶

Here there are two points to be noted: one, the evident importance of the notion of synesthesia, which is implicitly endorsed by Florensky in his idea of church ritual as synthesis of arts, as valorizing not only the visual and acoustical elements, but all the sensual inputs related to it.⁷

As aesthetically relevant this aspect might be, however, it is not what I am interested in as regards the argument I intend to develop. In Scriabin's excerpt there is a second, less evident aspect, which not only makes his (more or less politically induced) reference *plausible*, but also *relevant* for Florensky's general aesthetic approach. It is the idea of what we can call a *performative space*, i.e. a space which is characterized (to put it briefly) by the fact of *participating* in something. The spectators in a performative space are *witnessing* something by *taking part in it*.⁸ In this respect, a historicist attitude towards art, according

⁴ Florensky 2002, 111.

⁵ See in this respect Mislner 2002, 41–42.

⁶ Morrison 2019, 151.

⁷ Florensky 2002, 108.

⁸ See on this notion Fischer-Lichte 2008, 107–114. More on this in the last section of the essay. See also Gadamer's considerations about the notion of *Theoros* in Note 55.

to which we should enjoy a work of art by placing it within its environment, i.e. its historical context (a classical example of such an attitude consists in the historically informed musical performance), would not be the right alternative to the modern museum, in Florensky's eyes. The recipient envisaged by Scriabin, which *takes part* in the cult, shares nothing in common with the modern *art connoisseur*, who reads all the historical information in the program note or elsewhere before going to listen to a concert. The *recipient* envisaged by Scriabin (and Florensky) does not aim at the *appropriate consumption* of an artistic cultural good: he intends rather to *participate in an event*. The real *sin* of the museum, accordingly, is not only that it would *deracinate the works of art* from their environments and put them together in a collection, but also (and possibly more importantly) that it *deracinates the recipient*, by fostering a detached position in front of a work of art as a *disinterested, unengaged spectator*. What Florensky implicitly envisages by the reference to Scriabin is in fact a *criticism of a Kantian-inspired aesthetic approach* which is, in Florensky's view (and in Hegel's terms), *alienated*.⁹

This interpretation of Florensky's approach is supported by the fact that a criticism of the notion of an unengaged subject, observing from an external point of view a piece-of-the-world placed in front of it – a sort of *pictorial representative of Kant's transcendental subject* – is at the very center of one of Florensky's most influential aesthetic writings, namely the essay "Reverse Perspective." There he explicitly takes a stance not only against Kant, but against an entire *Weltanschauung* that, in his view, was so to speak *implicitly aesthetically exemplified* in the Renaissance by the invention of perspective, before being *explicitly theoretically formulated* in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. I tackle this text in the fourth section of this essay. First, however, I introduce the *second voice in this dialogical composition*, namely Hans-Georg Gadamer. In his main work *Truth and Method* a criticism of the notion of the museum is also to be found, namely in the chapter consecrated to the notion of *aesthetic consciousness*. This, in my view, furnishes hermeneutical tools that are valuable for understanding Florensky's criticism of modernity formulated in his above-mentioned major essay.

⁹ More on this point in the fourth section of the essay.

3. Gadamer's Criticism of Aesthetic Consciousness as Criticism of Modernity

It is obviously no coincidence that aesthetic consciousness, which develops the concept of art and the artistic as a way of understanding traditional structures and so performs aesthetic differentiation, is simultaneous with the creation of museum collections that gather together everything we look at in this way. Thus we make every work of art, as it were, into a picture. By detaching all art from its connections with life and the particular conditions of our approach to it, we frame it like a picture and hang it.¹⁰

This passage from *Truth and Method*, whether we like it or not, almost literally repeats Florensky's criticism of the institution of modern museums as deracinating both artworks and recipients. Here, however, we have not only a *crime* – embodied in the museum as a collection of artworks severed from “their connections” – but also a *murder*. The perpetrator of this crime are not the political powers which have instituted museums in different countries, but rather a particular attitude to works of art, rooted in Kant's and Schiller's aesthetics, which *encouraged* and, in Gadamer's eyes, *demande*d such institution, which he calls *aesthetic consciousness*:

The idea of aesthetic cultivation – as we derived it from Schiller – consists precisely in precluding any criterion of content and in dissociating the work of art from its world. One expression of this dissociation is that the domain to which the aesthetically cultivated consciousness lays claim is expanded to become universal. [...] Through reflection, aesthetic consciousness has passed beyond any determining and determinate taste, and itself represents a total lack of determinacy. It no longer admits that the work of art and its world belong to each other, but on the contrary, aesthetic consciousness is the experiencing (*erlebende*) center from which everything considered art is measured. [...] By disregarding everything in which a work is rooted (its original context of life, and the religious or secular function that gave it significance), it becomes visible as the “pure work of art.”¹¹

As in the case of Florensky, it seems that the obvious consequence of such premises would be praise of historicism: if the sin of the aesthetic con-

¹⁰ Gadamer 2004, 130–131.

¹¹ Gadamer 2004, 73–74.

consciousness it is to consider a work of art as a pure aesthetic object, then the correct attitude should be on the contrary to see it as a historical object, whose characteristics are to be understood in relation to its social, cultural, economic, and mainly historical context. Only through this additional information we can *read* and *interpret* the work of art appropriately.

Hermeneutical aesthetics, including Gadamer's, is indeed sometimes reduced to such an attitude – according to which (to put it provocatively) we have to read the *Bach-Lexikon* before listening to the *St Matthew Passion*: and once we have done that, having accomplished our hermeneutical duties, we can buy the ticket for the concert and be accepted into the paradise of the art connoisseurs. Such a view, at least in Gadamer's case, is totally misleading. In fact, according to Gadamer, the historicist attitude is only a *sophisticated version of the aesthetic attitude*. In order to understand such an apparently paradoxical statement we have again to read Gadamer:

Since aesthetic consciousness claims to embrace everything of artistic value, it has the character of simultaneity. As aesthetic, its form of reflection in which it moves is therefore not only present. For inasmuch as aesthetic consciousness makes everything it values simultaneous, it constitutes itself as historical at the same time. It is not just that it includes historical knowledge and uses it as a distinguishing mark: rather dissolution of all taste determined by content, as proper to aesthetic taste, is also seen explicitly in the creative work of artists who turn to the historical. [...] De facto contemporaneity (Gleichzeitigkeit) becomes simultaneity (Simultaneität) in principle only when one is fundamentally prepared to resist denigrating any taste that differs from one's own "good" taste. In place of the unity of a taste we now have a mobile sense of quality. The "aesthetic differentiation" performed by aesthetic consciousness also creates an external existence for itself. It proves its productivity by reserving special sites for simultaneity: the "universal library" in the sphere of literature, the museum, the theater, the concert hall, etc.¹²

In Gadamer's view, and according to the approach of aesthetic (and historical) consciousness, we might not only look, on Monday, through the program notes before going to listen to the *St Matthew Passion*, but, on Tuesday, we might also inform ourselves about the use of psychedelic drugs in the seventies in order to appreciate, that evening, a concert of *progressive pop*; and after that we can listen to some Paganini and Kreutzer in order to appreciate the

¹² Gadamer 2004, 74–75.

quotations in the solos of a Heavy Metal concert given on Wednesday; while on Thursday, we can cast a glance at the political movements of the sixties in Europe and North America in order to appreciate the significance of the predicate “free” in a concert of free-jazz given that same day. On Friday we rest, in order to assimilate all these heterogeneous aesthetic experiences. This is a hyperbolic exemplification of what Gadamer calls the *dissolution of taste*. *We can appreciate anything whatsoever*, as we are able, each time, to place the artwork in the appropriate historical and cultural context.

But for Gadamer this is *not at all* how artworks should be experienced, and this is also *not at all* how texts, including philosophical, jurisprudential and theological texts, should be read. This idea of hermeneutics as form of contextual historicism is rooted in the idea (shared also by Chernyak at the end of his essay)¹³ that artworks, according to hermeneutics, are, in the last instance, *texts to be deciphered*, and that the historical information will provide us with the *passwords to enter into the beautiful world of the artistic pantheon*. But in fact, as already claimed on other occasions,¹⁴ this is not at all what Gadamer’s hermeneutics intends to achieve. Gadamer does not want to ground aesthetics on hermeneutics, but the other way round. He endorses an approach to textual goods which is in some sense grounded in our (real, not ideologically biased) experience of artworks, and more specifically of artworks of performing arts:

The following investigation starts with a critique of aesthetic consciousness in order to defend the experience of truth that comes to us through the work of art against the aesthetic theory that lets itself be restricted to a scientific conception of truth. But the book does not rest content with justifying the truth of art; instead, it tries to develop from this starting point a conception of knowledge and of truth that corresponds to the whole of our hermeneutic experience. Just as in the experience of art we are concerned with truths that go essentially beyond the range of methodical knowledge, so the same thing is true of the whole of the human science.¹⁵

I don’t want to deny the importance of language in Gadamer’s hermeneutics. I do believe, however, that in order to adequately evaluate its importance

¹³ “The most adequate form for representing culture is, from Gadamer’s point of view, a text” (Chernyak 1988, 217).

¹⁴ See for example Ruta 2019.

¹⁵ Gadamer 2004, XXII.

we have to take into account the whole hermeneutical project of *Truth and Method*. To put it briefly: for Gadamer, if culture is text, we have to add that *texts, in order to be accessed, also by simply reading them, are to be performed*.¹⁶

Once we have said this, we have consequently to answer two questions:

- 1) What is wrong with the experience of art (and of truth) adopting the approach of aesthetic consciousness?
- 2) What is right about the real experience of artworks of performing arts, which can be also applied to any hermeneutical praxis?

The first question will be answered in the last part of this third section, while the second question will constitute part of the topics discussed in the fifth and final section of the essay.

In order to understand what is wrong in the aesthetic and historical consciousness, according to Gadamer, we can again refer to the text by Florensky. According to Gadamer, the kind of attitude reinforced by the aesthetic-historical consciousness, consisting in *framing* the artwork or the historical fact to be understood in its *aesthetic or historical framework*, implicitly endorses an idea of the object to be approached as *dead object*, as simply a *thing*: in Florensky's words, as an "immobile, stagnant, dead mummy of artistic production." The following excerpt about historicism sets out such a characterization almost literally:

In historical studies this experience has led to the idea that objective knowledge can be achieved only if there has been a certain historical distance. It is true that what a thing has to say, its intrinsic content, first appears only after it is divorced from the fleeting circumstances that gave rise to it. The positive conditions of historical understanding include the relative closure of a historical event, which allows us to view it as a whole, and its distance from contemporary opinions concerning its import. The implicit presupposition of historical method, then, is that the permanent significance of something can first be known objectively only when it belongs to a closed context – in other words, when it is dead enough to have only historical interest. Only then does it seem possible to exclude the subjective involvement of the observer.¹⁷

¹⁶ "Like a public reading or performance, being read belongs to literature by its nature. They are stages of what is generally called 'reproduction' but which in fact is the original mode of being of all performing arts, and that mode of being has proved exemplary for defining the mode of being of all art" (Gadamer 2004, 154).

¹⁷ Gadamer 2004, 294.

The last excerpt is important, as it allows us to understand both the *meta-physical sin*, which the aesthetic and historical attitudes have in common, as well as the label *unresolved Cartesianism* which Gadamer attaches to Dilthey,¹⁸ and according to which he was not able, in fact, to free himself from the model of *Naturwissenschaften*, even while officially being the philosopher who claimed the methodological independence of *Geisteswissenschaften*. The Cartesianism of this operation consists, in brief, in the movement of *bringing the object of investigation before the consciousness*, which gains, through this very movement, a *non-engaged and alienated* position. The historical consciousness, according to Gadamer's interpretation, *contextualizes the historical objects in order to take a (scientific) distance from them*: it puts them in the right *historical frame*: this is, metaphorically put, what these two apparently different phenomena have in common.

There is more: this *alienating movement* of putting the object in front of oneself in order to know it, this movement of *eradicating himself from the reality in order to better know and control it*, is also, and in fact eminently, characteristic of the scientific enterprise as research-program, which happens to be the distinguishing phenomenon of *modernity*.¹⁹ The following excerpt from Gadamer shows how the critique of aesthetic consciousness leads finally to a critique of modernity, as the age where *the only legitimate knowledge is the one driven by method*:

Just as the age of mechanics felt alienated from nature conceived as the natural world and expressed this feeling epistemologically in the concept of self-consciousness and in the rule, developed into a method, that only "clear and

¹⁸ Gadamer 2004, 231. It remains of course open whether this characterization of Cartesianism and its ascription to Dilthey are correct. In fact *Truth and Method*, by providing an encompassing framework of both aesthetics and hermeneutics, has to pay the price of such an ambitious project in terms of simplification (or at least stylization) of many philosophical questions and answers. But this is a problem common to all theoretical enterprises with such scope and ambitions. The same considerations are valid for Florensky's views about modernity, set out in the next section. For a criticism of Gadamer's reading of Dilthey's hermeneutical project see particularly Makkreel 1975, 413–421.

¹⁹ This point has been eminently treated by Heidegger in his seminal essay "The Age of the World Picture". See particularly Heidegger 1977, 126–127. In his Lectures on Nietzsche, Heidegger pledges also for a notion of modern aesthetics as re-proposing the Cartesian subject-object structure. In this respect, his diagnosis of modern aesthetics is compatible with Gadamer's one. This does not at all mean that is a good diagnosis. For a criticism of it, see Menke 2002, 31–32.

distinct perceptions” are certain, so also the human sciences of the nineteenth century felt a similar alienation from the world of history. The spiritual creations of the past, art and history, no longer belong self-evidently to the present; rather, they are given up to research, they are data or givens (*Gegebenheiten*) from which a past can be made present. Thus the concept of the given is also important in Dilthey’s formulation of the concept of *Erlebnis*.²⁰

As we can see, both aesthetic consciousness and historical consciousness, according to Gadamer, repeat the Cartesian configuration enforced by the *Naturwissenschaften*. They configure themselves in the form of both an *alienated subject* on the one side, and a *reified object* on the other. The very notion of *method* is the price paid by modern subjectivity in order to regain access to a reality from which it has alienated itself, and in which it *no longer takes part*, in order to better control it. Now the point I intend to make is that such a metaphysical configuration is very much in line with the way Pavel Florensky characterizes the *Weltanschauung* implied by the notion of linear perspective. This is the subject of the next section.

4. Florensky’s Reverse Perspective as Criticism of Modernity

In this fourth section, I intend to show how the diagnosis of modernity as an *age of alienation and reification*, articulated in Gadamer’s notion of aesthetic (and historical) consciousness, is implicitly adopted by Pavel Florensky in the analysis of perspective developed in his seminal work “Reverse Perspective.”

The approach and content of Florensky’s essay is very well synthesized by Stephen C. Hutchings:

“Inverse Perspective” begins with an account of peculiarities in the representational structure of ancient icons. [...] Much of the essay is taken up with condemning those who would explain such peculiarities by reference to the painters’ inability to see “naturally.” [...] The fact that these artists did not submit entirely to its laws was a matter of choice, not ignorance. The choice was conditioned by the fact that medieval culture was of the “contemplative-creative” rather than the “appropriative-mechanical” type. Whereas post-Renaissance civilization posits the individual subject and the

²⁰ Gadamer 2004, 56.

desires peculiar to it as the fulcrum of existence and therefore involves a retreat into subjectivism and self-gratification, pre-Renaissance man – the true realist – understood that “in order to desire, it is necessary first to be a reality among other realities.” The corollary of this is the recognition of *other centers of being* outside the human subject, each with its own laws and its own form.²¹

It is immediately curious that, in spite of its ostensibly focusing on a specific technical problem, Florensky's essay relates to far more general questions, such as the supposed subjectivism of modern civilization as opposed to the realism of the Middle Ages. Such puzzlement is only reinforced by looking at the structure of the essay, where an entire section out of two is dedicated to an historical analysis not of reverse perspective, but rather of linear perspective and its metaphysical presuppositions. Why so much space dedicated to something which does not directly concern the object of the essay? And why start the essay with a long and challenging historical preamble, instead of entering directly into the technical questions?

In order to answer these questions, we have to glance over the circumstances of the composition of Florensky's essay and its relation with his essay on church ritual. Despite treating different topics, the two texts share the same *addressee* (both intended as a “lecture for the Commission for the Preservation of Monuments and Antiquities of the Lavra of the Trinity and St Sergius”²²) and the same *intent*, that of defending the artistic and religious patrimony of Lavra against the acts of vandalism which were taking place in the era.²³ Given this situation, the strategic approach adopted in “Reverse Perspective” and as synthesized by Hutchings, becomes understandable: Florensky's priority is not to enter into the aesthetical or iconographical details of the technique used in the art of icons, but rather to provide a “theoretical system of art-historical appreciation,”²⁴ which could be endorsed by the commission in order to support the safeguarding of the artistic and religious patrimony.

²¹ Hutchings 1999, 103. Hutchings proposes in his article an alternative translation of the title of Florensky's essay.

²² Mislér in Florensky 2002, 300.

²³ The new Commission instituted in the years immediately following the Revolution initially shared the same objective of the representatives of the Orthodox Church, like Pavel Florensky. See on this point Mislér, in Florensky 2002, 97.

²⁴ Mislér 2002, 42.

All this becomes quite visible in the organization of the argument. Florensky has to establish the aesthetic value of an artistic artifact, the Russian Orthodox icon, which exemplifies a technique of representation that transgresses the dominant one, namely linear perspective, whose authority is grounded on its claim to possess two interrelated properties: *naturalism* and *realism*.

Both historians of painting and theoreticians of the visual arts aspire, or at least did so until recently, to convince their audience that a perspectival depiction of the world is the only correct one, since it is the only one that corresponds to actual perception, because natural perception is presumed to be perspectival. According to such a premise, deviation from perspectival unity is thereupon regarded as a betrayal of the law of perception, a perversion of reality itself, whether because the artist lacks training in drawing, or because drawing has been consciously subordinated to decorative, ornamental aims or, in the best case scenario, compositional aims. Either way, according to this estimation, deviation from the norms of perspectival unity appears as unreality.²⁵

In order to legitimate the aesthetic legitimacy of such transgressions, Florensky chooses a clever two-stage approach:

1. In the first stage, his aim is to provide a legitimation of the transgression of linear perspective as being not a mistake or a fallacy, and so something less appropriate than linear perspective, but rather as an *alternative way* to depict reality. In fact, perspective is not a *natural* way of depicting reality, but a *conventional* one, which has its rights and its limits, relative to its historical and cultural context, just like any other convention:

Is perspective, the perspectival image of the world, the perspectival interpretation of the world, a natural image that flows from its essence, a true word of the world, or is it just a particular orthography, one of many constructions that is characteristic of those who created it, relative to the century and the life-concept of those who invented it, and expressive of their own style – but by no means excluding other orthographies, other systems of transcriptions, corresponding to the life-concept and style of other centuries?²⁶

In this first operation we can say that Florensky *dismantles a vertical arrangement*, according to which linear perspective, as a *natural* and *objective* way of representing, is a *better* (the *best*) way of depicting three-dimensional

²⁵ Florensky 2002, 251.

²⁶ Florensky 2002, 207. Underlines are included in the original formatting.

reality on a two-dimensional surface. By delegitimizing the supposed superiority of linear perspective against other techniques, Florensky thereby puts the linear and reverse perspective in a *horizontal position, one beside the other*, as alternative possible ways of depiction. The first argumentative move of Florensky is thus a *pledge for pluralism*.

2. However, almost immediately afterwards Florensky makes a second move, consisting in *restoring a vertical line, a sort of hierarchy, but inverted*. Now the question is no longer one of claiming a peer-to-peer relation between linear and reverse perspective, but rather the superiority of the second against the first in terms of realism. The argument used by Florensky is the following: linear perspective in fact is not only *unnatural* (it is a convention), but also *unrealistic*, as a *subjectivist* and *illusionistic* presentation of reality. It presents the world as it would appear to a hypothetical observer: thus in fact, and surprisingly, it isn't a triumph of objectivity but rather of subjectivity.

The absence of linear perspective among the Egyptians, as also in a different sense among the Chinese, demonstrates the maturity of their art, and even its senile overripeness, rather than its infantile lack of experience. It demonstrates the liberation from perspective, or a refusal from the very beginning to acknowledge its power – a power which, as we will see, is characteristic of subjectivism and illusionism – *for the sake of religious objectivity and suprapersonal metaphysics*. Conversely, when the religious stability of a Weltanschauung disintegrates and the sacred metaphysics of the general popular consciousness is eroded by the individual judgement of a single person with his single point of view, and moreover with a single point of view precisely at this specific moment – then there also appears a perspective, which is characteristic of a fragmented consciousness.²⁷

As can be easily detected here, and as will become clearer in what follows, Florensky here *de facto* adopts (as in essence so does Gadamer) an implicitly *Hegelian reading of modernity*, characterized by the *rise of subjectivity* which is, in one and the same move, the *rise of alienated subjectivity*. In Hegel's approach, as was well summarized by Jürgen Habermas, in order to claim its own right and freedom this subjectivity has to pay the price of alienating itself – alienating itself from traditions and their unjustified prejudices (theoretical subjectivity), from the collectivity and its coercive and unjusti-

²⁷ Florensky 2002, 208–209

fied customs (moral subjectivity), and finally from reality itself (aesthetic subjectivity):

The principle of subjectivity determines the forms of modern culture. This holds true first of all for objectifying science, which disenchant nature at the same time that it liberates the knowing subject: [...] The *moral concepts* of modern times follow from the recognition of the subjective freedom of individuals. [...] *Modern art* reveals its essence in Romanticism; and absolute inwardness determines the form and content of Romantic art. The divine irony conceptualized by Friedrich Schlegel mirrors the self-experience of a decentered self “for which all bonds are broken, and which only will endure to live in the bliss of self-enjoyment.”²⁸

That Florensky not only superficially adopts, or at least shares, such a reading of modernity, can be verified by the fact that the two opposing figures in which the alienated modern subjectivity manifests itself – namely the theoretical subjectivity which aims at *controlling* reality by *dominating* it through science and technology, and the aesthetic subjectivity which on the contrary *escapes* reality by programmatically *refusing to compromise* with it – are presented in his essay, in reverse order.

The *first claim* is that the *Weltanschauung* entailed in the adoption of linear perspective is that of an *unengaged viewer*, a spectator which has *no sense of responsibility*: this bold claim almost exactly mirrors the critique of romantic irony formulated by Hegel:²⁹

Perspective is rooted in the theatre not simply because historically and technically perspective was first used in the theatre, but also by virtue of a deeper

²⁸ Habermas 1987, 17–18.

²⁹ Robert Brandom’s analysis of the end of the first section of *The World of Self-Alienated Spirit* of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* stresses how the so-to-speak *destiny of alienated subjectivity* is nihilism, as announced in the discussion of the ironic consciousness which, literally repeating Florensky’s words, *does not undertake responsibility* for its own speech: “The practical understanding this disrupted consciousness has of its own attitudes is *ironic*. It still makes distinctions and employs concepts, but it does not take its commitments seriously, does not take itself to be undertaking responsibilities by its talk. [...] Its ironic stance consists in not identifying even with its own attitudes, which it knows to be in the end vain and contentless. [...] Still the adoption of this nihilistic recognitive attitude remains a characteristically modern assertion of the authority of the individual – a manifestation of the rise of subjectivity, even in a perverse overreaction. It is a ‘self-centered self’ [Hegel 2010, 526], which seeks recognition of itself in its exercise of the power to *make* the norms vain by *taking* them to be so” (Brandom 2019, 513–514).

motivation: the theatricality of a perspectival depiction of the world. For in this consists that facile experience of the world, devoid of a feeling for reality and a sense of responsibility, that sees life as just a spectacle, and in no sense a challenge.³⁰

In the lines immediately following, Florensky analyzes the *second aspect* of modern subjectivity, the detachment from reality in the sense of the Kantian disinterested aesthetic recipient, which approaches reality according to its own categories, structuring its own perspectival and subjective space. This second aspect consists in assuming that reality, in itself, is so to speak *formless*, a sort of *amorphous material* to be formed by the (theoretical and practical) work of the subject:

If one sums up every charge that is leveled against mediaeval art on formal grounds, it amounts to the criticism: “There’s no understanding of space,” and this criticism, if openly expressed, signifies that there is no spatial unity, no Euclidean-Kantian schema of space [...] On this basis it is suggested (and what’s most dangerous is suggested unconsciously) as quite self-evident or absolutely proven somewhere or by someone, that no forms exist in nature, in the sense of each form living in its own little world, for in general no reality exists that has a centre within itself and is therefore subject to its own laws. Therefore, it is suggested, everything visible and perceptible is only simple material for filling in some general regulatory schema imposed on it from without, a function fulfilled by Euclidean-Kantian space. Consequently, all forms in nature are essentially only apparent forms, imposed on an impersonal and indifferent material by a schema of scientific thought.³¹

In his analysis, Florensky shows how this second, theoretical, side of the modern Kantian subjectivity has a destiny symmetrical to the first, the aesthetic-ironic one (see n. 29), namely a commitment to what nowadays is named *nihilism*, the *negation of all reality*. Theoretical (and in fact practical) nihilism consists in the negation of reality by its “predatory attitude” towards it: the modern subjectivity *does not accept reality, but rather submits it to its own laws*. This attitude, finally, is emphatically opposed to the medieval one, where reality is recognized and accepted:

The pathos of modern man is to shake off all realities, so that ‘I want’ establishes the law of a newly constructed reality, phantasmagoric even though it

³⁰ Florensky 2002, 211.

³¹ Florensky 2002, 216

is enclosed within ruled-out squares. Conversely, the pathos of ancient man, and of mediaeval man too, is the acceptance, the grateful acknowledgment, and the affirmation of all kinds of reality as a blessing, for being is blessing, and blessing is being. The pathos of medieval man is an affirmation of reality both in himself and outside himself, and is therefore objectivity. [...] in the final analysis there are only two experiences of the world – a human experience in a large sense and a scientific, i.e., ‘Kantian’ experience, just as there are only two attitudes towards life – the internal and the external, and as there are two types of culture – one contemplative and creative, the other predatory and mechanical.³²

Before concluding this section and passing to the next, let me make two (in my view) important points:

1. This explicit opposition between the pre-modern and modern *Weltanschauung* has, *de facto*, both a strategic and tactical function. It is by this very characterization of modernity as predatory, as *reifying* activity, that the traditional point of view upheld by Florensky can find a counterpart in the (supposedly) progressive attitude of the newly instituted Commission. It is sufficient to read some passages of György Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*, written in 1920, to realize how Florensky’s reading of modernity is compatible with a (orthodox) Marxist-inspired one.³³ Of course, I don’t presume that Florensky developed his theory simply in order to please the Commission. But it is a fact that such a view, which Florensky evidently developed out of an independent interest, plays an important tactical role in the economy of the essay.

2. The second point to be made is that the centrality given to Kant in this reading of modernity determines both a point of contact and of distance with Gadamer’s approach: Florensky, like Gadamer, sees Kant as one of the main culprits of the situation that characterizes modern consciousness. But while Florensky sees in Kant the *theoretical point of arrival* of a characterization of consciousness as one alienated from the world, which has to dominate it in order to access it,³⁴ Gadamer sees in Kant rather an *aesthetic point of departure*, according to which art has nothing to do with truth, and therefore should be enjoyed in a reflexive, disinterested way, in order to guarantee

³² Florensky 2002, 217–218.

³³ See particularly Lukács 1971, 111–112.

³⁴ This characterization of Kant’s philosophy as opposed to reality is present in Florensky as early as his dissertation, as well shown by Frank Haney (see particularly Haney 2001, 94).

the universality of aesthetic judgement, which cannot refer to anything objective, but only to a subjective (but not individually determined) free play of faculties, purely contemplative.

Beyond simply critiquing modernity, however, it is their aim to provide an *aesthetic alternative* where Florensky and Gadamer again formulate positions about art and truth which, without being simply coincident, seem to look in the same direction. As we will see, both authors in this case adopt a position which is incompatible with the Hegelian one (or at least with one of the several Hegelian positions that could be formulated). Here I refer specifically to excerpts from the *Lectures on Aesthetics* where the passage of art, which “sets truth before our minds in the mode of sensuous configuration,”³⁵ into more abstract and therefore more accomplished forms of truth-setting, and most eminently in philosophy, is theorized together with the consequent *Vergangenheitscharakter der Kunst*.³⁶

There is a deeper comprehension of truth which is no longer so akin and friendly to sense as to be capable of appropriate adoption and expression in this medium. [...] Thought and reflection have spread their wings above fine art. [...] The development of reflection in our life today has made it a need of ours, in relation both to our will and judgement, to cling to general considerations and to regulate the particular by them [...] Consequently the conditions of our present time are not favourable to art. [...] In all these respects art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past.³⁷

Unlike Hegel, Gadamer and Florensky both think that art *still has something important to say about “setting the truth.”* Theirs is, however, not simply the reactionary position of re-sensualizing the truth; nor is it even a progressive position about such a re-sensualization, which might to draw valuable support from observations concerning the rise of the new forms of media which have re-shaped our domain of perception, and in which the truth can find a *new sensuous configuration*.³⁸ According to the Hegelian scheme, such a position

³⁵ Hegel 1975, I, 101.

³⁶ See on this formula particularly Gethmann-Siefert 2005, 347–360.

³⁷ Hegel 1975, I, 10–11.

³⁸ Without referring to the countless studies on the subject, the classical analysis by Walter Benjamin about cinema and its medial revolutionary impact on art can in this respect be taken as a falsification of Hegel’s diagnosis of romantic art, according to which “every form and every material is now at the service and command of the artist whose talent and genius is explicitly freed from the earlier limitation

would be only a repetition of the previous process: once the new forms of media are fully aesthetically exploited, then the need for abstractness would again require the passage from art into philosophy.

Both Florensky and Gadamer think rather that art has primarily to do with truth in a way which *cannot be substituted* by philosophy (unless this itself adopts some key characteristics of art experience), and even less by scientific knowledge as it has shaped itself in the modern age. If art has something to say about truth, is something revolutionary, not reactionary, since it has to do with the *performative aspect of art experience*. In this respect, both thinkers implicitly assume that art is not only a thing of the past, but contains also a significant potential for our future ways of *dealing with truth*. In order to rightly evaluate the contribution of art in “setting the truth,” we have, however, to reshape our notion of truth as modeled on the subject-object configuration, which according to both authors characterizes modernity. Truth cannot consist in the Kant’s inverted (Copernican) version of the notion of *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, explicitly adopted in the first Critique, according to which the material of reality is submitted to the forms of subject. The truth is not the result of *adequacy*, but rather of an *active interaction* between subject and object, in which the exposure of the subject to the reality is not conceived primarily in terms of *perception* (as already Kant grants), but rather in terms of *participation*. If art can still say something, and something important, about truth, it is because knowledge has to be reconfigured according to the performative space envisaged by Scriabin in the passage quoted at the end of the second section: a space in which, in Russell’s terms,³⁹ *we can get acquainted with something only by taking part in it*.

5. Art, Truth and Performative Space: Intersections of Past and Future in Gadamer’s and Florensky’s Aesthetic Theories

Having analyzed the critique of modernity implicit in Florensky’s and Gadamer’s texts, as it were the *pars destruens* of their aesthetic theories, I do not intend in this section to provide an account of the *pars construens* of the art

to one specific art-form” (Hegel 1975, I, 606). See in this respect Benjamin 1969, particularly Sections VII–XIII.

³⁹ See Russell 1999, Chapter 5.

theories of both thinkers (assuming that they have *one*), in order thereafter to see whether they share some common points. The objective is much more modest: I intend to identify some elements that both authors propose as alternative to the notion of art and aesthetics developed in the modern times, which they claim to be inadequate. Again, the aim is not to detect a similarity or identity of theses, but rather to identify common lines of questioning along which both authors travel, according to exigencies which, in my view, point in the same direction.

I have identified three items. Two were anticipated at the end of section four, referring respectively to the question of the *truth-value of art* and to its *performative dimension*. They will take respectively the first and third positions in this short list. In the second place, I will mention a further element that refers to the question of *plurality*. These three elements do not have the same weight. The first two items, despite occupying spaces of their own, play an almost introductory role for the third, which has to be considered the most important, and indeed almost the central topic of this last section.

In tackling the first item I start with Gadamer, and specifically with the claim I made in the last section according to which in Kant he identified a sort of point of departure of the subjectivization of aesthetics, which he heavily criticized throughout the whole first section of *Truth and Method*, and which is exemplified most clearly in the notion of aesthetic consciousness. In this respect, Kant is guilty of having declared the *epistemological irrelevance* of art, since aesthetic judgment does not concern the *Erscheinungen*, and even less the *Ding an sich*, but rather our cognitive reactions to them. Through the aesthetic judgement we gain no knowledge about the world, but only about ourselves. This is the main target of Gadamer's criticism:

The binding quality of the experience (Erfahrung) of art must not be disintegrated by aesthetic consciousness. This negative insight, positively expressed, is that art is knowledge and experiencing an artwork means sharing in that knowledge. This raises the question of how one can do justice to the truth of aesthetic experience (Erfahrung) and overcome the radical subjectivization of the aesthetic that began with Kant's Critique of Aesthetic Judgment. [...] Is there to be no knowledge in art? Does not the experience of art contain a claim to truth which is certainly different from that of science, but just as certainly is not inferior to it?⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Gadamer 2004, 84.

The example which Gadamer chooses in order to show, against Kant, that Art can (and should always have) a truth value, is the Greek tragedy. For the sake of synthesis, I extrapolate three main points from this section of *Truth and Method* which are particularly significant for my argument:

1. The aesthetic experience of Greek tragedy is characterized by Gadamer with the strong term *communion* (*Kommunion*). This is not, however, to be understood as a sort of compassion for the tragic destiny of the characters on the stage. Things are much more interesting than that. The notion of communion is to be understood in the sense that what is experienced is something *common to everyone* – not only the spectator, but ideally also the actors and the author. It is a *common truth*. And, according to Gadamer, this is valid also in modern art, including fiction literature: “The writer’s free invention is the presentation of a common truth that is binding on the writer also.”⁴¹

2. The common truth presented in the work of art, and eminently in the Greek tragedy, is not the truth of an event. The realism does not lie in the presentation of *true facts*. The truth presented in the work of art is rather a metaphysical one: “Tragic pensiveness does not affirm the tragic course of events as such, or the justice of the fate that overtakes the hero but rather a metaphysical order of being that is true for all.”⁴² Art is not simple reproduction of reality, but rather presentation of the metaphysical structures which inform reality. In this respect, again, fiction can be more “realist” than a newspaper article, as it gives us a glimpse into the structure of reality, beyond its variables and the contingent elements which characterize the single events. *Art describes reality by stylizing and typifying it.*

3. The second element claims a specific theory of mimesis, which is not simply restored by Gadamer, but rather reformulated in order to exhibit its epistemological value. This operation consists in two main steps: (a) mimesis is not to be considered as simple repetition, or as imitation of reality: as Gadamer says, “mimesis has a cognitive import”, always, and including (indeed, possibly eminently) when exercised by children; when we (and not only the artist) imitate something, we come to know it better; and on the other side, we can imitate something if we, somehow, understood it in a certain way; (b) this cognitive import of mimesis is identified in the notion

⁴¹ Gadamer 2004, 129.

⁴² Gadamer 2004, 128.

of *recognition*, which makes the connection with the previously mentioned notion of “metaphysical order” clear:

The joy of recognition is [...] the joy of knowing more than is already familiar. In recognition what we know emerges, as if illuminated, from all the contingent and variable circumstances that condition it; it is grasped in its essence. [...] The ‘known’ enters into its true being and manifests itself as what it is only when it is recognized. As recognized, it is grasped in its essence, detached from its accidental aspects.⁴³

Both the idea that art has an epistemological import, and that its significance should not be reduced to a subjective or intersubjective reaction to (material or formal) stimuli, are to be considered central issues in Florensky’s article on reverse perspective. The last lines of the passage quoted in Note 27 are significant in two respects:

1. Florensky opposes an *art of illusion* (exemplified by the adoption of linear perspective) to the demand for objectivity which he asserts should animate genuine art. That this bears upon the notion of *truth* is explicitly stated in the lines immediately following the quoted passage, where it is stressed how, and not by chance, linear perspective originated (according to Vitruvius’ *De Architectura*) in decorative art: “when Aeschylus staged his tragedies in Athens around 470 BC, and the famous Agatharcos provided him with sets and wrote a treatise about them, the Commentarius, it was this that prompted Anaxagoras and Democritus to explain the same subject – the painting of stage sets – scientifically.”⁴⁴ So the technique of linear perspective was devised originally “not in pure art, which is essentially always more or less metaphysical, but in *applied* art, as an element of decoration, which has as its task not the *true essence of being, but verisimilitude to appearance.*”⁴⁵

2. In the excerpt quoted it is not only stated that genuine art has to do with *truth* and not with *appearance*, but also that, in order to accomplish

⁴³ Gadamer 2004, 113–114. Adorno’s statement, according to which the musical interpretative act, even in the case of pure instrumental music (so an interpretation of an artwork which paradigmatically neither denotes nor exemplifies images or meanings, to be eventually imitated) entails a mimetic dimension, can be considered as the symmetrical position to Gadamer’s, according to which any mimetic act entails a hermeneutical dimension. See for example Adorno 2006, 169–170.

⁴⁴ Florensky 2002, 209. Also in this case, the question is not whether such reconstruction is correct, or fully correct. This has no role in my argument.

⁴⁵ Florensky 2002, 209.

such a task, it has to tackle with *essence* of reality. It is therefore implicitly assumed that the (traditionally understood) notion of *mimesis* as simple imitation, as duplication of reality, is *not* what genuine art should do. This point is confirmed, among others, in another passage: “The task of painting is not to duplicate reality, but to give the most profound penetration of its architectonics, of its material, of its meaning.”⁴⁶ It is clear that Florensky, unlike Gadamer, does not here provide a theory of *mimesis* which would satisfy the demands of genuine art: and this is possibly also due to the fact that Florensky’s main Greek reference is not Aristotle, as in Gadamer’s case, but rather Plato, whom he considered virtually as an *objective counterpoint to Kant’s subjectivism* in the Western tradition,⁴⁷ and who notably formulated, in the 10th Book of the *Republic*, one of the most radical criticisms of art as mimetic activity. As paradoxical it may sound, however, it remains that art, in order to be *realist*, has to deal (in Gadamer’s words) with the *metaphysical order* of reality.

In assigning such a task to genuine art, and in criticizing the subjectivism of linear perspective, Florensky develops a further argument that constitutes my *second item* of comparison between Florensky and Gadamer. This argument is in fact formulated in three (points two to four) of the six points in which Florensky articulates the main features of linear perspective. The *Kantian-subjectivist sin* of linear perspective, in Florensky’s eyes, is actually a *triune error*: linear perspective is *subjective* because it is *individual* (that is, it depicts reality from a single point of view), *monocular* (that is, this point of view is constructed as if constituted by a single eye), and *immobile* (as no ocular movement is, so to speak, *registered* in the painting). Rather than being realistic, linear perspective, in a sort of repetition of Plato’s criticism of poets, provides a copy of a copy, specifically an *imitation of photography*:

The above-mentioned lawgiver is thought of as forever inseparably chained to his throne. If he quits this absolutized place or even stirs slightly on it, then the whole unity of the perspectival construction is immediately shattered and the

⁴⁶ Florensky 2002, 209.

⁴⁷ “In his philosophy of cult, Florensky compares Kant and Plato in one direct opposition as intellectual antipodes. In a tabular overview he tries to prove that Kant’s philosophy, in its inner structure, corresponds point to point with Plato’s, while contentwise he always asserts the opposite of the respective Plato’s statement” (Haney 2001, 92).

whole perspectival system falls apart. In other words, in this conception the viewing eye is not the organ of a living creature, who lives and labours in the world, but the glass lens of the camera obscura.⁴⁸

What Florensky proposes in order to overcome such a deplorable situation, and as is already exemplified by the Russian icons, is not to *eliminate* the point of view, but rather to *pluralize* it. *Realism* is here *de facto* put into close connection with *pluralism*:

The closest dissemination of the methods of reverse perspective to be noted is the use of *polycentredness* in representations: the composition is constructed as if the eye were looking at different parts of it, while changing its position. So, for example, some parts of buildings are drawn more or less in line with the demands of ordinary linear perspective, but each one from its own particular point of view, with its own particular perspectival centre; and sometimes also with its own particular horizon, while the other parts are, in addition, shown using reverse perspective.⁴⁹

This passage provides further clarification of the critique of linear perspective. The question of *having a point of view* is not, *per se*, problematic. Florensky, as far as I understand him, does think of the artist as a human being and so as a *finite creature*, not as a god which has direct access to the metaphysical truth. It is rather the contrary which should be maintained. The point of view of the artist painting with linear perspective is in fact *tacitly assumed to be the point of view of God*, as it is not *declared* and put in relation with other, finite, points of view (as in the polycentric reverse perspective); it is therefore *absolutized*. So, Florensky concludes, the position of the artist

is declared to be the centre of the world; it claims to reflect spatially the Kantian absolute, gnoseological significance of the artist. Truly, he looks at life 'from a point of view', but without any further definition, for this point, elevated into an absolute, is definitely no different from all the other points of space, and its elevation over the rest is not only unjustified, it is unjustifiable, given the entire world view under discussion.⁵⁰

The question of pluralism in our understanding is central to Gadamer's hermeneutical project. The classic excerpt which addresses it is the following:

⁴⁸ Florensky 2002, 263–264

⁴⁹ Florensky 2002, 204.

⁵⁰ Florensky 2002, 262.

Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history. [...]. Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well. Perhaps it is not correct to refer to this productive element in understanding as “better understanding.” [...] It is enough to say that we understand in a different way, if we understand at all.⁵¹

An obvious objection which could be made in this context is that, in fact, the pluralism advocated by Gadamer is a *hermeneutical, interpretive* one, while the one advocated by Florensky is an *artistic, productive* one. Yet in fact such objection would miss the real point at stake here (and this is why the task of this essay does not consist in simply individuating some affinities, since in some cases these can be deceiving). Gadamer’s considerations related to understanding in fact indirectly concern the artistic production as well. This can be easily verified if we again refer to the very notion of *mimesis*, as described above, which is the base of the artistic act. In Gadamer’s eyes, as we have shown, *mimesis* is never simple reproduction, and therefore cannot be perfectly accomplished. In a certain sense, *there is no perfect mimesis*, but only more or less *felicitous* *mimesis*. There is not a sort of model which can be perfectly reproduced. As Gadamer points out,

In imitating, one has to leave out and to heighten. Because he is pointing to something, he has to exaggerate, whether he likes it or not [...]. Hence there exists an insuperable ontological difference between the one thing that is a likeness and the other that it seeks to resemble.⁵²

If *mimesis*, as such, not only has an *epistemological import* (concerning truth and knowledge) but also a *hermeneutical import* (concerning understanding), it is reasonable to assume that the question of pluralism is also relevant to

⁵¹ Gadamer 2004, 296.

⁵² Gadamer 2004, 114. It is very instructive to notice that, in a specific musical context, Hermann Danuser says substantially the same thing in relation to musical interpretation, which cannot, per definition, actualize all the structures exemplified by the musical score. See Danuser 1994, 1055–1056.

it. The *pointing* to some aspects of the imitated object constitutes, so to speak, the *hermeneutical act* which is at the base of mimesis, and which enables it. This aspect is evident, for example, in the performances of caricaturists, who imitate on the stage particular individuals by exaggerating some aspects of them, thereby casting a sort of *theoretical light* on their whole personality, which is thereby *typified* and assumes a sort of universal character. Finally, there is a hermeneutical act which is performed both in the creation of the artwork and in the interpretations of them, a hermeneutical act which, as such, can never be considered perfectly accomplished. Pluralism thus concerns art in all its aspects.

My intention here is not to deny the difference between the composition of a theater piece, its performance, and the critique made of it by an art critic. I want on the contrary to stress that, in Gadamer's approach, besides the many aspects which differentiate these three acts, there is also something which they have in common, and that this common element is the mimetic (and therefore hermeneutical) act, which, as specified in the previous passage, brings with it a sort of unilaterality, and therefore calls for a pluralism. Given these specifications, the following passage from Gadamer, and the provocative formula of *double mimesis*, becomes easier to understand:

What the actor plays and the spectator recognizes are the forms and the action itself, as they are formed by the poet. Thus we have here a *double mimesis*: the writer represents and the actor represents. But even this double mimesis is one: it is the same thing that comes to existence in each case. More exactly, one can say that the mimetic representation (*Darstellung*), the performance, brings into existence (*zum Dasein*) what the play itself requires. [...] It is to move out of the real experience of the play if the spectator reflects about the conception behind a performance or about the proficiency of the actors.⁵³

The last aspect I intend to take into consideration, as anticipated at the outset, is the notion of *performative space*, which, despite not having been explicitly formulated in these terms by either thinker, I consider to be the central element in a proper understanding of the aesthetic proposals of both Gadamer and Florensky, as the space in which a genuine relation between subject and object can be thought and realized, and which is alternative to the one formulated and put in place in the modernity.

⁵³ Gadamer 2004, 116.

I take this notion by Erika Fischer-Lichte, who uses it to characterize the space in which a performance takes place, as a specific space to be distinguished from our normal, geometrical notion of space:

First, the space in which a performance takes place represents an architectural-geometric space that pre-dates the performance and endures after it has ended. [...] In contrast, the space in which a performance occurs can be regarded as a performative space. It opens special possibilities for the relationship between actors and spectators and for movement and perception. Whatever the ways in which these possibilities are used, applied, realized, treated, or, alternatively, subverted, they affect the performative space. Every movement of people, objects, lights, and every noise can transform this unstable and fluctuating space. The performance's spatiality is brought forth by the performative space and must be examined within the parameters set by it.⁵⁴

In the chapter dedicated to it, Fischer-Lichte clarifies how the performative space can assume different configurations in which spectators and actors interact in quite different ways. On the other side, Fischer-Lichte's analysis raises the following questions: *What specificity* does the performative space acquire by being a space where performances are performed? And *what are the theoretical implications of such a factual difference?*

The thesis that I endorse here is the following: the specific nature of a performative space, independently from the different configurations it can acquire, consists in the fact that, in that space, *one can get acquainted with something only by taking part in it*. It is in this specific sense that in the performative space there are no pure theoretical, epistemologically disinterested behaviors. This is because, in such spaces, knowledge cannot be attained without active participation. Even the spectator, sitting in the parquet of the most traditional theater, can get acquainted with the performance, can know it, only by participating in that event. Thus we say, when someone claims that something magical transpired in a concert at which he was present: "I know what you mean. I was there too". This constitutes the break with the Cartesian constitution of subject-object, where the object sits in front of the subject as an empty box in which things are there to be perceived and known. The acquaintance with a performance in a performative space does not consist in a simple cognitive or perceptual operation, where some "information" is

⁵⁴ Fischer-Lichte 2008, 107.

received by a subject which somehow internalizes and elaborates it, in order to extract some knowledge from it. Participation is not mere elaboration of information.

The theoretical import of this specificity can be underscored by referring to Gadamer's considerations about drama as an *event to be celebrated*:

A festival exists only in being celebrated. [...] The same is true of drama: it must be presented for the spectator, and yet its being is by no means just the point of intersection of the spectators' experiences. Rather, the contrary is true: the being of the spectator is determined by his "being there present" (Dabeisein). [...] To be present means to participate. If someone was present at something, he knows all about how it really was. [...] Thus watching something is a genuine mode of participating. Here we can recall the concept of sacral communion that lies behind the original Greek concept of *theoria*. *Theoros* means someone who takes part in a delegation to a festival. Such a person has no other distinction or function than to be there. Thus the *theoros* is a spectator in the proper sense of the word, since he participates in the solemn act through his presence at it and thus sacred law accords him a distinction: for example, inviolability. In the same way, Greek metaphysics still conceives the essence of *theoria* and of *nous* as being purely present to what is truly real, and for us too the ability to act theoretically is defined by the fact that in attending to something one is able to forget one's own purposes. But *theoria* is not to be conceived primarily as subjective conduct, as a self-determination of the subject, but in terms of what it is contemplating. *Theoria* is a true participation, not something active but something passive (*pathos*), namely being totally involved in and carried away by what one sees.⁵⁵

We have to be careful here, as words can be misleading: while in the Kantian configuration, even as (more or less legitimately – but this is not the point) understood by Florensky as an eminent expression of the Cartesian metaphysical configuration of modernity, passivity plays a strategic role in order to avoid metaphysical dogmatism, such a passivity is not at all to be understood as in the previous passage from Gadamer. The passivity at work in the First Critique, as characteristic of one of the two sources of knowledge, is much more compatible with a kind of knowledge based on cognitive psychology, and modeled on information systems, according to which knowledge is the product of a working-out of the material provided by the reality. Passivity, in

⁵⁵ Gadamer 2004, 121–122.

this respect, would be considered as almost synonymous with a “registering” of raw data in order to transform it into knowledge. But this is not what is meant by Gadamer. The passivity at work in the previous passage, in Kantian terms, means that even the categories are so to speak *exposed*, and indeed the whole subject is exposed in the notion of “sacral communion that lies behind the original Greek concept of *theoria*.” This is very well expressed in the following excerpt, where the notion of “being present” is understood as “being outside oneself.” This is a radical exposition, not one limited to the registration of “data” provided by reality (while the categories remain protected in the locked realm of subjectivity):

We started by saying that the true being of the spectator, who belongs to the play of art, cannot be adequately understood in terms of subjectivity, as a way that aesthetic consciousness conducts itself. But this does not mean that the nature of the spectator cannot be described in terms of being present at something, in the way that we pointed out. Considered as a subjective accomplishment in human conduct, being present has the character of being outside oneself. [...]. In fact, being outside oneself is the positive possibility of being wholly with something else. This kind of being present is a self-forgetfulness, and to be a spectator consists in giving oneself in self-forgetfulness to what one is watching. Here self-forgetfulness is anything but a privative condition, for it arises from devoting one’s full attention to the matter at hand, and this is the spectator’s own positive accomplishment.⁵⁶

In what does the performative character of all this consist? We saw that taking part in something is akin to being outside oneself. But what makes the link between such a configuration and the typical aspects of artistic experience which are labeled under the notion of performativity? My answer consists in the following: only through this notion of *taking part*, of being outside oneself, can one understand what Erika Fisher Lichte calls the *transformative character of performance*. And this constitutes the point of contact of the whole constellation of performativity with the notion of Hegelian experience, which is a central notion of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Experience, in the Hegelian sense, is not a simple *transformation of raw data*, but a *transformation of oneself*; after a real experience, we are no longer the same individuals. And the experience of art is in this respect paradigmatic, only if it has the characteristics

⁵⁶ Gadamer 2004, 122.

described before by Gadamer, and only if the subjectivity, in some Hegelian sense, *alienates itself in the situation* instead of *alienating itself from it*, as the modern Cartesian configuration seems to suggest.

The notion of taking part in something as being outside oneself appears in several considerations offered by Florensky, and not only in relation to the phenomenon of cult. Of course in his study on cult he states that “The real way to approach the sacraments is to participate in them,”⁵⁷ but this is not the real point. In my view, such a vision of getting acquainted with something by participating in it, although eminently exemplified by the cult, actually informs the whole of Florensky’s aesthetics, and is the counterpart of his criticism of modernity. This can be seen in two different excerpts, from two different works, where the same expression *living contact* is used:

1. In his paper “On realism” he clearly states that aesthetic realism can only be achieved on the basis of a realistic *Weltanschauung*, consisting precisely in an idea of a subject which is not *looking at* reality from an exterior point of view (just as, in our pre-theoretical idea of realism, we often presuppose that in order to avoid subjectivism we must avoid ‘getting involved’), but is rather a subject which *comes into living contact with reality*:

Realism in art has as its necessary prerequisite the realism of an entire world-understanding. But to go further, can we express a worldwide reality, if we ourselves stand outside it and do not come into contact with it? Obviously our living remoteness from reality must again destroy realism in art as well. There are realities in the world; one comes to know them by coming into living contact with them through work in the worldwide sphere. This cognition may be expressed by means of art; works of art can unite us with realities that are inaccessible to our senses – such are the formal prerequisites of any artistic realism, and a tendency that rejects even one of them thereby forfeits its right to be called realism.⁵⁸

2. Such an approach is re-stated in his essay on reverse perspective, where it is explicitly opposed to that informing linear perspective, which is declared to be deceptive:

The task of painting is not to duplicate reality, but to give the most profound penetration of its architectonics, of its material, of its meaning. And the pene-

⁵⁷ Florensky 2016, 204.

⁵⁸ Florensky 2002, 180–181.

tration of this meaning, of this stuff of reality, its architectonics, is offered to the artist's contemplative eye in *living contact* with reality, by growing accustomed to and empathising with reality, whereas theatre decoration wants as much as possible to replace reality with its outward appearance. The aesthetics of this outward appearance lie in the inner connectedness of its elements, but in no way is it the symbolic signifying of the prototype via the image, realised by means of artistic technique. Stage design is a *deception*, albeit a seductive one; while pure painting is, or at least wants to be, above all *true* to life, not a substitute for life but merely the symbolic signifier of its deepest reality.

We are now in a position to reconsider the theoretical import – beyond its purely practical/rhetorical function in that particular context – of the reference to Scriabin's *Prefatory Act* quoted at the end of the first Section: the performative space envisaged by Scriabin is, in Florensky's eyes, *de facto* epistemologically paradigmatic, beyond the specific theological question of the cult. It is only in such a space that the word "realism" can acquire an adequate exemplification. For Florensky, as for Gadamer, acquaintance is not simple *registration* of data, but *participation* and, consequently, *involvement*. The active interaction with the environment is not seen as an obstacle to realism, as interfering with the objective view of reality, but rather as its necessary condition.

It is worth noticing how the ideas of both Florensky and Gadamer, despite referring to the history of art (that is, Greek Tragedy and medieval art), come to conclusions which are shared nowadays by the many aesthetic approaches which are premised on what is called the performative turn. For its part, the performative turn has developed its own aesthetics, in many respects opposed to modern (and more specifically Kantian) aesthetics, by reflecting both on contemporary theatrical performances and on the pre-modern notion of cult. This is not to claim, though, that in order to find a way out of modernity, we have either to look *before* or *after* it. What is at issue here is rather to show how human history, including the history of art and history of aesthetics, must retain an essential element of *reflection* if it is properly to be called *human*. Human history is a process powered (amongst others) by the act of reflecting, including reflecting on its past. In this respect, and beyond the criticism which might be levelled at their diagnoses, both Gadamer and Florensky can be said to have generously contributed to this process, by providing us with valuable tools with which to orient ourselves.

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SUMMARY

From Reverse Perspective to Performative Space: Gadamerian Reflections on Florensky's Aesthetics

In this paper I attempt a parallel reading of certain texts by Pavel Florensky and Hans-Georg Gadamer, particularly, although not exclusively, Florensky's seminal essay "Reverse Perspective", and Gadamer's main work *Truth and Method*. I do not thereby seek to establish a problematic historical-philosophical connection between the two thinkers. I rather analyze some notions and considerations developed by both of them in order to allow the emergence of some *common views*, or at least of *common orientations*, in relation to two overarching aesthetic topics: on the one side, what can preliminarily be labelled a *critique of modern aesthetics*, and on the other an idea of the aesthetic experience as taking place in what I will call a *performative space*. While, in relation to the first point, both authors seem to adopt a Hegelian reading of modernity, characterized on the one side by an alienated subjectivity, on the other side by the reduction of the world to a collection of dead objects, the second point indicates a possible alternative to this lamentable situation, consisting in the conception of a (performative, space, where *acquaintance with objects can only be achieved via participation in events*. In this respect, while both authors developed their views in the course of reflection on cultural and artistic phenomena of the past (medieval visual arts and Greek tragedy respectively), they come to results which have been reached autonomously by those aesthetic approaches that are premised on the so-called *performative turn*.

Key-words: philosophy, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Pavel Florensky, connection, subjectivity.

Słowa kluczowe: filozofia, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paweł Florenski, podmiotowość, relacja.