

Perspective and Metamorphosis from the Renaissance to Amazonia

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I aim to create a dialogue between “perspectivist” anthropology and the concept of “perspective” in aesthetics and art history. By juxtaposing the two, I will explore the emergence of an anthropological theory of representation that points toward a “reversal” of the Western perspectivist paradigm. The first part will delve into the notion of perspective as a distinctly modern and Western “scopic regime,” while the second part will examine anthropological perspectivism as a form of “reversal” of the first. This reversal will be characterized as pointing toward a “metamorphic” conception of perspective within the ethno-anthropological framework. I will argue that, in anthropological perspectivism, “having a perspective on the other” involves an openness to adopting their form, whether as a risk or an opportunity. Thus, “putting the other into perspective (as an object)” transforms into “assuming the perspective of the other (as a subject).”

KEYWORDS

Perspective, perspectivism, metamorphosis, representation, anthropology

In this article, I will attempt to bring “perspectivist” anthropology into dialogue with some reflections on the notion of “(linear) perspective” in aesthetics and art history. I will seek to show how, in the polarities highlighted by this comparison, it is possible to see the emergence of a *theory of representation* that constitutes a “reversal” of what will be examined as the representational paradigm of Western perspectivism.

First, what do I mean by “perspectivist anthropology”? Eduardo Viveiros de Castro defines perspectivism as “a set of ideas and practices” particularly prevalent in indigenous Amazonia, more generally throughout Native America, and to varying degrees in multiple indigenous societies worldwide (though this ethnological generalization of the model has not remained without criticism).¹

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¹ Two very harsh critiques of this and other aspects of perspectivism are elaborated by Ramos 2012 and Turner 2009. When situated within the contemporary anthropological rediscovery of the conceptual tool of “animism” (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017, pp.

Viewed in light of a traditional soul-body dialectic, this cosmology “imagines a universe peopled by different types of subjective agencies, human as well as nonhuman, each endowed with the same generic type of soul, that is, the same set of cognitive and volitional capacities” (Viveiros de Castro 2004, pp. 5-6). This interspecific psychological identity implies a conception of the body as the site of differentiation, as long as it is a *site of perspective*. For example, even though a human and a jaguar are similar in terms of their “personhood,” what differentiates them is the body-environment nexus: each body has properties that configure its environment in a specific way. The bodily difference between a human and a jaguar results in a difference in the “worlds” these different species inhabit: similar concepts, values and desires populate the souls of humans and jaguars, but they pass through two different bodily filters, each capable of reacting to different affordances and engaging in certain behaviours over others. Thus, for example, the same ideas of “drink” or “home” will yield different objective correlates: “what jaguars see as ‘manioc beer’ (the proper drink of people [...]), humans see as ‘blood’ [and vice versa]. Where we see a muddy salt-lick on a river bank, tapirs see their big ceremonial house” (Viveiros de Castro 2004, p. 6).

Thus, by perspectivism, anthropologists mean a conception of the world that foregrounds the corporeal-environmental situatedness of the subjectivities (both human and other-than-human) that inhabit it, identifying the factor of differentiation among these subjectivities in the acquisition of different perspectives that are not simply “different viewpoints on the same world,” but more properly “formally similar yet bodily-environmentally distinct viewpoints that *generate* different worlds.”²

Beyond the ambition of constructing an original ethno-anthropological schematism, perspectivism aims to identify certain non-Western cosmologies as “partners” in philosophical thought, particularly useful in the effort to develop a philosophical rejection of “the

160-163; Mancuso 2014; Harvey 2006; Descola 2013; Bird-David 1999), perspectivism can be understood as a spontaneously transcultural comparative model. However, this understanding also scales back its predicative claims on individual ethnographic contexts. I will not further develop the issue of the relationship between perspectivism and animism as transcultural ontologies or comparative models. I mention it here to acknowledge a tradition of ethno-anthropological “generalization” in logical-structural terms and its critical points; however, the ambition of this article remains (for whatever this means) strictly philosophical, focusing more on the conceptual life of the notion of perspective within this field of study, rather than on its actual robustness or validity as an ethnographic tool.

² Good introductions to perspectivism and its partaking in a broader “ontological turn” in anthropological and social sciences are Holbraad & Pedersen 2017, Mancuso 2016 and Viveiros de Castro 2012.

vicious dichotomies of modernity” (Viveiros de Castro 2014, p. 49). These dichotomies (subject-object, human-nonhuman, culture-nature, and so on), as I will attempt to show, are countered by this anthropological school with the (distinctly modern) philosophical technique of ‘ironization.’ The notion of perspective itself is imbued with this irony: the perspectival subject of Western modernity is stripped of its rationalistic fixity and exposed to decentering, deformation and relativization. Specifically, unlike the abstract and monocular subject of the Alberti’s “*costruzione legittima*,” the perspectival subject of anthropological perspectivism is conceived as *intrinsically metamorphic*. The perspectival subject cannot but “unceasingly transform into its opposite,” into the other-than-self, thus framing the relationship with the other as an encounter with a “Necker cube,” *a space of oscillating identity and gestaltic instability* (Viveiros de Castro 2014, p. 72). Returning to the earlier example of perspectival differentiation between human and jaguar, Viveiros de Castro writes: “every beer has a background-taste of blood and vice-versa” (Viveiros de Castro 2014, p. 73).

In this article, I recognize anthropological perspectivism as a valuable “partner” in philosophical thought, suggesting a potential new structural role for the concept of perspective within a theory of representation that is beyond-the-human (Kohn 2013), ecological (Descola 2013) and multispecies (Van Dooren *et al.*, 2016). However, the very use of the term “representation” – which I will employ here in its scopic-visual and aesthetic-cognitive sense as it appears in contemporary debates on linear perspective (e.g. Marin 2001) – reveals the article’s departure from some fundamental philosophical premises of anthropological perspectivism. The latter adopts a rigorously anti-representationalist stance, preferring an “ontological” discourse about “worlds” over an “epistemological” discourse about “worldviews” (Henare *et al.*, 2007, pp. 10-12). Since my aim is a from-above comparison between studies on “linear” perspectivism in the West and studies on perspectivist cosmologies in various ethnographic contexts, this article does not intend to adhere to the perspectivism of Viveiros de Castro and colleagues in a scholastic manner.

In §1, I will focus on the notion of perspective as a distinctly modern and Western “scopic regime,” while in §2, I will examine anthropological perspectivism as a kind of “reversal” of the first. I will characterize this reversal as indicative of a “metamorphic” conception of perspective by the anthropologies under consideration. Even one of the fathers of Renaissance ‘perspectivism,’ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, spoke of the human being as a “wonderful

chameleon,” whose metaphysical freedom allows them to transform into any living being: to vegetate like a plant, to cry out like a beast, to dance like a star (Severi 2018, p. 262). However, it is important to add that metamorphoses, understood in the strong sense – not merely as chameleonism or mimicry, but as the true adoption of the form and perspective of the other, representing a true decentring of one’s self – fall within the domain of magical exceptions or *mirabilia*, in a tradition that spans from Ovid to Kafka (Malabou 2012, p. 7). In contrast, in some non-Western ontologies, these *metamorphoses represent the only authentic ‘rational’ possibility for the understanding of the other.*

1. *Perspective: the scopic regime of Western modernity*

In the following text, Philippe Descola identifies Renaissance perspective as the scopic-imaginative logic of the cognitive and practical relationship of the “modern subject” with the world:

Thanks to linear perspective, which orders a geometric space from the viewer’s axis of vision that is centered, homogeneous and measurable at every point, the subject who creates the image and the viewer who contemplates it work together to create a new totality that emancipates itself from the things it depicts. Perspective enables a new experience of the phenomenal world, which has suddenly become modern nature as a reality instituted by a human agent and henceforth traversed by the distinction between a subject and an object. (Descola 2021, pp. 439-440).

Descola, therefore, considers “perspective” as the hypostatization of a human subject that objectifies the non-human other in a *homogeneous and impersonal* image. This entails the deepest ecological consequences: “Nature, now dumb, odor-free, and intangible, had been left devoid of life. [...] [A]ll that remained was a ventriloquist’s dummy, of which man could make himself, as it were, the lord and master” (Descola 2013, p. 61). In a similar way, Bruno Latour claims that perspective establishes a regime of representational binarization: the (human) subject *for* this (natural) object, and the object *for* this subject (Latour 2017, p. 17). This dualistic scheme anchors a monolithically defined “nature” to an ideal and omnipotent human sight, which, as we will see, “rationalizes” all the other-than-human into a flattened and linearized whole. Latour expresses these thoughts through the following image: “To prepare a still life (*nature morte*), the artist first has to kill it” (Latour 2017, p. 18).³

³ I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for recommending that I reference the work of Denis Cosgrove in connection with these themes, though numerous other sources could undoubtedly be cited, particularly within the field now recognized

Reflections such as the latter fit into a broader discourse that (often critically) *metaphorizes* Renaissance linear perspective as a (or *the*) “scopic regime” of Western modernity: a schema that defines epochal conditions of visibility and invisibility (Jay 1988).⁴ As noted by James Elkins, since at least the eighteenth-century perspective has evolved from being a cold geometric method of pictorial representation to becoming a metaphor that has rewritten both lexically and conceptually the history of Western thought: “Any opinion is a ‘standpoint’, a ‘point of view’ [...] Every thought, to the degree that it is our own possession, contributes to our ‘perspective’” (Elkins 1994, p. 29). Eventually, in the work of authors such as De-scola and Latour, “perspective” has become the name given to the monarchic gaze upon the world that dominates the non-human and attributes to it a value *relative* to human “usefulness” or “truth.”

In these (often indistinguishably critical and descriptive) conceptions of perspective as the “scopic regime of modernity,” a *dialectic of distance* between subject and object is at stake. Erwin Panofsky referred to it as an oscillation between the “‘claim’ of the object” and the “ambition of the subject”:

Thus the history of perspective may be understood with equal justice as a triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real, and as a triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control; it is as much a consolidation and systematization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self (Panofsky 1991, pp. 67-68).

as “landscape aesthetics” (Siani 2022). Regarding Renaissance perspective painting – especially concerning the early Italian origins of landscape painting – Cosgrove writes: “in an important, if not always literal, sense the spectator owns the view because all of its components are structured and directed towards his eyes only. The claim of realism is in fact ideological. It offers a view of the world directed at the experience of one individual at a given moment in time when the arrangement of the constituent forms is pleasing, uplifting or in some other way linked to the observer’s psychological state; it then represents this view as universally valid by claiming for it the status of reality. The experience of the insider, the landscape as subject, and the collective life within it are all implicitly denied. Subjectivity is rendered the property of the artist and the viewer – those who control the landscape – not those who belong to it” (Cosgrove 1984, p. 26).

⁴In this text, Martin Jay discusses a “plurality” (inherently undetermined) of scopic regimes that shape modernity. He exemplifies this by placing Cartesian-Renaissance perspectivism alongside what Svetlana Alpers famously called the Dutch “art of describing” and Christine Buci-Glucksmann’s Baroque “madness of vision.” To be sure, Jay recognizes the “hegemonic” role of the perspectivist scopic regime within both artistic and scientific visual culture, but he emphasizes the importance of avoiding its “demonization”: “The radical dethroning of Cartesian perspectivalism may have gone a bit too far. In our haste to denaturalize it and debunk its claims to represent vision *per se*, we may be tempted to forget that the other scopic regimes I have quickly sketched are themselves no more natural or closer to a ‘true’ vision. Glancing is not somehow innately superior to gazing; vision hostage to desire is not necessarily always better than casting a cold eye; a sight from the situated context of a body in the world may not always see things that are visible to a ‘high-altitude’ or ‘God’s-eye-view’” (p. 19).

The *Zwischenraum*, the intermediate space between self and external world that Aby Warburg (2017) saw constitutively displayed and incessantly renewed in the history of Western artistic creativity, is, according to authors like William Ivins (1938), a space of rationalization of the visible, while others, like John Berger (1972, p. 109), emphasize how the perspectival gaze aims to “lock infinity in a safe,” and thus to the appropriation by the perspectival self of a homogeneous space. This visual tension between distancing and appropriation rests on a premise of anthropocentric rationalization of the visible/imaginable: visual space is “denarrativized,” “robbed of its substantive meaningfulness to become an ordered, uniform system of abstract linear coordinates” (Jay 1993, pp. 51-52). The human subject is thus placed in an ambivalent role: while it is true that the spectator is nothing but a particular point of view within an infinite *res extensa*, it is also true that the faculty to trace the limits and terms of the visible characterizes this human subject as an “angelic ‘I’” (Harries 1973). The human being is a “zero point” that generates an infinity of possible perspectives on an infinite world, but does not grant these perspectives genuine autonomy (Rotman 1987). Rather, the subject states “this is how I would see” from this viewpoint or that, where these viewpoints would remain blind spots if not filled by human consciousness. In this sense, modern perspective is essentially “linear”: it draws an infinite line that transverses reality orthogonally, without consideration for the encounter of non-human perspectives, pigeonholing the plurality of alternative modes of vision into a monofocal master grid. This “cold, synchronic, omniscient gaze” (Bryson 1983, p. 94) is not only “angelic,” but even “godlike”: linear perspective grants “to mortal man the heretofore sacred privilege of *imaging nature* just as God himself projected it from his own divine eye” (Edgerton 2009, p. 76, my italics).⁵

However, it would be difficult to deny the evidence that, in the history of modern sciences and arts, the ideal of a systematizing gaze and an infinite rationalized space – with the dialectic of distance that this polarity entails – *has remained exclusively an ideal*. The demiurgic-rationalistic *Urform* of the world has always been exposed to a *reversal* into its negative, namely the proliferation of scattered and perverse glances. We could say that, throughout the perspectivist modernity art and thought, Leibnizian perspectivism, heir to that of Alberti and Brunelleschi in its confidence in the

⁵ Belting (2011) claims that with perspective “the question of the image” was born: the question of the centrality of gaze and the transformation of the world into an image (in an obvious reference to Heidegger’s “world picture”). Perspective turns *nature* into a totality of which it is possible and necessary to have an *image*. On these issues, see also Fraisopi (2016) and Longo (2012).

fulfillment of the single point of view in an infinite and rational harmony,⁶ has always been afflicted by Nietzschean perspectivism, that is, by illusionism and relativism.⁷ In other words, *an anamorphic potential* has always stylistically and conceptually infested the perspectival paradigm (Lacan 1998, pp. 79-90). Anamorphosis, like the one shown in the famous Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, is a "depraved perspective," but despite this, it is nothing but a "logical demonstration" of the perspectival gaze (Baltrušaitis 1977), since, we could say, it is a real attempt to explore the multiple dimensions or alternative geometries promised by the opening of an infinite space by linear perspective. Anamorphosis is an ambiguous introspection by perspective, an attempt to carry itself to its extreme consequences, which, however, culminates in a reversal of the original rationalistic intent.

A ground of anamorphic proliferations such as Baroque art – in which "the soul aspires to dissolution in the sublimity of the huge, the infinite" (Wölfflin 1950, p. 10) – may be seen as a demonstration of the impossibility of considering perspectivist rationalism as anything more than an ideal never fully realized. The infinite *res extensa* projected by Baroque perspective becomes wild and impassable by a single gaze directed towards a rational vanishing point. Glances flee towards "a luminous chaos of material excess, where form undoes itself to become another" (Buci-Glucksmann 2013, p. XIX). The subject – now no longer a rational and abstract point, but a bodily and passionate individual – is brought by vision outside of itself, to ecstasy (Buci-Glucksmann 2013, p. 4), and the world betrays every gaze that attempts to linearly traverse it by distorting every form. The ambition for the truth of perspective is *logically* reversed into a joyful aporia (Marin 2001, p. 15). The gaze surrenders to the folds of representation and casts glances without ambitions for the infinite, but *dissolved* in the infinite (Deleuze 1993, p. 24).

Anamorphosis and the Baroque demonstrate that the rationalistic distance opened by the scopic regime of linear perspective is always exposed to self-contradiction. By slightly shifting the point of view, a space that appears perfectly geometrized becomes an illusionistic and dysmorphic space. A gaze that imagines it can

⁶ "From the perfection of the supreme author it also follows that not only is the order of the whole universe the most perfect possible, but also that each living mirror which represents the universe according to its own point of view, that is, each *monad*, each substantial centre, must have its perceptions and its appetites regulated in the best way which is compatible with all the rest" (Leibniz 2014, p. 275)

⁷ "If our 'I' is our only *being*, on the basis of which we make everything *be* or understand it to *be*, fine! Then it becomes very fair to doubt whether there isn't a perspectival *illusion* here – the illusory unity in which, as in a horizon, everything converges" (Nietzsche 2003, p. 77).

“see through” the pictorial surface and fantasize about “dominating” the representational space, can instead become lost in a “madness of vision.”

2. Amerindian perspectivism as metamorphism

Now, I suggest that the attempt by Viveiros de Castro and colleagues to understand under the label of “perspectivism” the cosmologies of some native non-Western cultures, is related to the recognition of what I just described as the “anamorphic potential” of the systematized space. The dialectical irony in these anthropologists’ choice of word lies in adopting only the “irrational” byproducts of the representational regime of perspective. Here, “having a perspective” does not mean striving for the rationalization and domination of the visible. Instead, it means *exposing oneself to anamorphic relationships with the world, opening up to an inevitable madness of representation*. In this sense, I suggest that anthropological perspectivism rediscovers in some non-Western cosmologies a representational paradigm determining a *reversal*⁸ of Western perspective. Anthropological perspectivism has as its hallmark the conversion of an anamorphic risk into a lucid metamorphic consciousness: *the transformation into the other as a representational model*.⁹

The fundamental premise of this perspectivism is a conception of the world as an uncertain “metamorphic zone” (Latour 2017). As Peter Rivière notes, the “native peoples of Amazonia live in a highly transformational world, where what you see is not necessarily what you get” (1994, p. 256),¹⁰ and this due to a particular conception of the body. Viveiros de Castro defines the Amazonian body as “an assemblage of affects or ways of being that constitute a habitus” (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 113). For instance, the body of a jaguar is not merely its physical frame, but an extended and

⁸ I take *the metaphor* of a “reverse perspective” from Pavel Florenskij (2002). I am not suggesting a shared methodology or intent between anthropological perspectivism and Florenskij’s aesthetic-theological theory, but I use this image of a perspective “reversal” to highlight a resonance in the goals of the two theories to “challenge” the representational system of linear perspectivism on its own ground. Both theories ambitiously present a model of representation that is not simply other but, in a somewhat ironic dialectic, elaborates a “negative” of the criticized theory. For a similarly non-literal and dialectical interpretation of “reversal” in Florenskij, see Antonova (2010).

⁹ We can find a similar model of representation as the adoption of the perspective of the other in Walter Benjamin’s dissertation on German Romanticism. We can in fact think of metamorphic perspectivism as the endless incorporation of “other beings, other centers of reflection, more and more into [one’s] own self-knowledge” (Benjamin 1996, p. 146).

¹⁰ This is true not only for the Amazon world. See, for example: Hallowell 1960, p. 65.

dynamic affective structure determined by everything it means to “be a jaguar,” such as moving like a jaguar, smelling like a jaguar and hunting like a jaguar. Thus, a transformation into a jaguar is already noticeable in the adoption of behaviours similar to those of the animal (primarily, in ethnographic examples, the “thirst for blood”). The physical difference between a human being and a jaguar is one negotiable boundary among others (at most, as we read in many myths or stories, characterized as a phenomenological threshold of confirmation)¹¹ and certainly not an ultimate barrier.

Every form of life is internally driven by a metamorphic *Bildungs-trieb*: daily existence is guided by a constant “allomorphic impetus” (Viveiros de Castro 1992, p. 22). The Brazilian forest of the Araweté is a cosmos where there is no stable mirroring between the self and the other. The forest is “a non-Euclidean social space” (Viveiros de Castro 1992, p. 4), where the form of the self and the form of the other are subject to “a process of continuous topological deformation.” Descola (2013, p. 138) aptly refers to this phenomenon as “anamorphosis”: the forest space is uninhabitable by systematizing gazes and stable life forms, as every encounter with the other can potentially deform the basic relational premises of the space in which it occurs.

Kaj Århem (1996) discusses, in the case of the Makuna, “the universe of living being [...] as a cosmic food web” (p. 188). What determines the nature of a jaguar is its bodily perspective, that is, its performative, affective and relational positioning in the cosmic order of the forest. We can follow Deleuze’s idea that “perspectivism [...] does not mean a dependence in respect to a pre-given or defined subject; to the contrary, a subject will be what comes to the point of view, or rather what remains in the point of view” (Deleuze 1992, p. 19). Perspective is an effect of the individuation of a body within a diachronic, dialogical and differential cosmic process. “The form (or perception) is defined by the relation, and not vice versa” (Vilaça 2005, p. 458).

The body, and thus its perspective, are continuously fabricated through nourishment, abstention, decoration and a series of other daily practices where it is impossible to clearly distinguish processes of conservation from those of transformation, the maintenance of identity from the exploration of alterity (Tassan 2017; Vilaça 2002; Viveiros de Castro 1987). Even metabolic processes are seen as potentially metamorphic practices. In these processes it becomes particularly clear how metamorphosis always involves a dialectic between a *vis centrifuga* and a *vis centripeta* (Goethe 1988, p. 43), between

¹¹ For some non-Amazonian examples, see: Howell (2013, pp. 101-102; 2016, p. 56), Willerslev (2007, pp. 89-90).

en the (re)generative maintenance of identity and the “allomorphic impetus.” Among the Makuna, the meat of an animal can only be consumed after proper shamanic blessings, since food consummation “involves a process of partial consubstantiation and contextual identification between eater and food – and therefore also the potentiality of the eater being ‘consumed’ by the very food consumed” (Århem 1996, p. 194). Among the Suya, failure to observe certain food restrictions exposes to a risk of “incorrect incorporation” of the prey, this implying a metamorphosis of the human into a witch, and as a consequence the ability to transform into a bat, a jaguar or an owl (Seeger 1981, p. 199). Among the Wari’, prey that is not correctly killed, inspected and ingested may provoke certain types of sickness, in which “the sick person gradually transforms into the animal” (Vilaça 2002, p. 357). This risk of transformation into the prey due to a failure to comply with hunting and consumption norms assumes, for the Achuar, the form of a risk of “role reversal”: the undisciplined or disrespectful hunter, for example, becomes himself a potential prey of cannibal spirits (Descola 1986, p. 318).

Maintaining one’s bodily perspective is, therefore, a continual exercise in mitigating metamorphic risks, and therefore of taking care of one’s role or position in the cosmic web. To metamorphose means to assume the other’s position, and therefore the other’s perspective within the cosmic network of the forest. A human fears *instantaneously and unknowingly* entering the gaze, that is, the relational space, of the non-human entity.

Metamorphosis occurs at the meeting point of two perspectives [...]. In this case, then, it would be probably more accurate to say that transformation is not a process but a relation. Nothing ‘happened’, but everything has changed. No motion, no ‘process’, no ‘production’; just position and condition, that is, relation. (Viveiros de Castro 2012, p. 147; see also Viveiros de Castro 2014, p. 66).

The ability of the individual’s gaze to distance and distinguish what it meets is linked to a subtle anamorphic line, which, like in the case of Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, requires a particular correspondence between viewpoint and topological conditions. Ethnographies from various parts of the world tell us of instances where this coincidence is lacking, leading to a perspectival distortion in the relationship with the other that calls into question the possibility to have a stable representation of them and, in certain occasion, even to distinguish oneself from them. For the Yukaghir, for instance, hunting is essentially a perspectival game. Hunting is not a moment of orthogonal and stable distancing between a hunter-subject and a hunted-object, but an encounter with the gaze of

the other in a dynamic and topologically ambiguous space, thus a space of potential reversal of perspectives. Hunting an elk requires the hunter to imitate the appearance, movements, smell and sound of the prey (Willerslev 2007, p. 1). However, this “mimetic performance” should not be understood in utilitarian terms of disguise or illusion. The hunter imagines entering a seduction scenario with the prey, where not only the lives but also the identities of both parties are at stake. The hunter may temporarily transform into an elk, seduce the animal and kill it. But it can also happen that, by entering this metamorphic zone, the hunter falls in love with the elk and irreversibly distorts their human gaze.

In conclusion of this characterization of the notion of *perspective as perpetual exposure to anamorphic (and thus metamorphic) risks or opportunities*, I would like to suggest that there are some significant resonances between this way of understanding perspective and some post-Panofskian readings of Renaissance perspective. Hubert Damisch emphasizes that the perspectival subject is the opposite of a “humanist” or anthropomorphic subject (Damisch 1994, pp. 44-5; Iversen 2005). Instead, it is a geometric element inserted into a topological network that does not gift the subject with universal freedom, but *captures* it in a spatial grammar (Damisch 1994, p. 46; Lacan 1998, p. 89). Perspective is a representational system that determines perceptual reasoning and fixes the image of the other as a “lure” for the gaze (Marin 2001, pp. 14-17). Accordingly, the proliferation of anamorphoses is the collateral effect of the rationalization of gaze. In Norman Bryson’s terms, the *gaze*, the orthogonal look that systematizes the flow of phenomena, tries to repress but is always threatened by the *glance*, the “fleeting look” that, captured by the Other, decenters the subject’s position and relativizes any claim of linearity (Bryson 1983, pp. 87-131). The perspectival world of the Yukaghir is, in this sense, a “hall of [*curved*] mirrors” (Willerslev 2007, p. 11), where an accidental or imprudent look can deform the individual’s body – i.e., the synthetic unity of their affects – and displace their viewpoint into that of another individual or species.

3. Concluding remarks

The perspectivist socio-ecological complexity cannot be homogenized into an absolute vision where the viewpoint and vanishing point establish the systematizability of infinite space by a rationalizing gaze. The forest world can only be viewed from an infinity of perspectives, each understandable as an anamorphic variation of

the other. There is no stable rational form, no *costruzione legittima* of space. It is only possible, recalling Florenskij, to see each perspective corresponding to a single *Gestalt*, and each of the infinite *Gestalten* claims its own inalienable principle of vitality.¹² Having a perspective on the other thus means being open, either in the sense of a risk or in the sense of an opportunity, to adopt their form: “putting the other into perspective (as an object)” becomes “assuming the perspective of the other (as a subject).”

However, this radical reconfiguration of the concept of perspective raises a doubt: in Viveiros de Castro and colleagues’ ambition to find philosophical “partners” in perspectivist ethnographies for rejecting a theory of representation based on the universal rationalization of the world (and thus the establishment of a dialectic between alienating “distancing” and dominating “appropriation”), might they not end up fostering a new universalistic ambition? This ambition could be even more presumptuous than the previous one, because the objective homogenization of the other can give way to an idealistic proteism, that is, a claim to universal “personification.” The perpetual risk/opportunity of metamorphosis into the other might thus signify an unwarranted certainty regarding “What It Is Like to Be” the other. The risk of justifying such a theory of representation on an ethno-anthropological basis must be mitigated, and David Graeber’s (constructive) critiques of perspectivism can help clarify this issue.

On one hand, Graeber (2015, p. 6) writes that perspectivism should teach us not to resign ourselves to the “radical alterity,” and thus the fundamental unrepresentability, of what it is like to be the other, but rather to recognize that what distances us from the apprehension and way of life of the other is not so “radical” after all. So that what differentiates us is not a metaphysical boundary, but a metamorphic frontier. On the other hand, however, Graeber provides a shrewd “critical” definition of this metamorphic freedom. The “flat” metaphysical ground underlying a universal metamorphic disposition is *not* positively characterized as a space of cosmic resonance, harmonization of identities or reconciliation of differences in a monadology of universal mirroring. Instead, the metaphysical ground underlying the metamorphic zone is *negatively* characterized by Graeber as a space of “recognition of our common limitations,” where “nobody ever will be able to understand the world completely, and [...] this gives us something to talk about”...

¹² “[N]othing that exists can be seen as indifferent and passive material for fulfilling whatsoever kind of schemas, still less taking into account the schema of Euclidean-Kantian space. And so forms should be apprehended according to *their own* life, they should be represented through *themselves*, according to the way they have been apprehended, and not in the foreshortenings of a perspective laid out beforehand” (Florenskij 2002, p. 218).

or someone to transform into, as I would add (Graeber 2015, pp. 27-28). Thus, perspectivist metamorphosis means overcoming the necessary “equivocation” (Viveiros de Castro 2004) in the encounter with the other – of whom we initially never understand what it is like to be them – not through the search for a spontaneous and reassuring super-identity (or “Form”) that defines us both, but through the constant recognition of the *limitedness* that we share when attempting to represent ourselves and the world. In this sense, metamorphosis does not establish universal personification, but rather a disposition to recognize the fragile limits of one’s own and the other’s identities, to which one responds with a constant attempt at self-redefinition in the encounter with the other.

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