Perspective and Distortion as Modes of Representation of Power and Rebellion in D.H. Lawrence’s “Introduction to these paintings”

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I first became interested in perspective when reading the written versions of Daniel Arasse’s radio talks on the history of art with frequent references to Erwin Panofsky’s essay, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. Perspective is not only an artistic means used to convey a three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional surface but also a symbolic means of ordering chaos. Perspective does not give a true vision of the world but an ideally ordered vision of this world, a normative, canonical one. It then follows from this first remark that any deviation from that order, any distortion of the laws of perspective would be a questioning of the validity of those laws as well as a creative act of rebellion against them. In this paper, I wish to give an interpretation of D.H. Lawrence’s *Introduction to these paintings* in the light of Panofsky’s essay on perspective. I will also try to show that D.H. Lawrence’s paintings themselves are his own creative acts of rebellion against the power of conventional representation.
According to Daniel Arasse, the success of perspective when it was first officially introduced by Brunelleschi in Florence in the 15th century was a political success, the political success of the Medici, aiming at presenting an admirably proportioned, ordered, harmonious vision of our chaotic world, the harmony of the Florentine microcosm reflected by that of the macrocosm, with man at the centre of that perfect universe, as his own position as beholder determined the accuracy of perspective. Hence, playing with perspective, rejecting the rules, introducing distance and distortion into the laws of perspective is rebelling against them. A mere detail in the painting is enough to reveal the oblique vision of the painter, his distance from the artistic norm or canon and his creative thinking—“c’est là que la peinture pense,” par “le détail d’un tableau qui échappe à la commensurabilité de la perspective” (Arasse 20). This obliquity of the artist’s vision, this deviation from the law, also reveals the lie inherent in perspective, the wrong assertion on which it was first based, that is, man does not see with one single immobile eye, but with two constantly moving eyes, and the image produced is not reflected onto a plane, but a curved surface. The laws of perspective are therefore arbitrary and as such, should be contested by any creative artist. And so they were, as early as their introduction in the 15th century, and even before, so that a history of perspective could be seen as a succession of recoils from and revivals of the notion of perspective. Threatening the validity of the law by introducing distortion, offering a vision of the world from different vantage-points is exactly Lawrence’s aim in Introduction to these paintings, of which he gives a concrete illustration with his own paintings.

The use of perspective and its mathematical laws turned art into a science and the true vision of the world into mathematical, geometrically ordered, limited space. Contesting perspective, distorting or simply ignoring it by resorting to more
“primitive” modes of representation is thus “making a statement on the world, but mainly on the way it is represented” (Panofsky 71). Freeing oneself from the arbitrary law of a single immobile eye and re-introducing the primary distortion of the two constantly moving eyes as well as the disorderly movements of the human gaze, the moving vantage-points it implies, is also refusing the power of a norm in vision. Perspective having “limited space, made it finite, closed it off,” artists should attempt “to break those very bonds”—as El Lissitzky, a Russian artist and architect of the avant-garde said in 1925: “[...] those very bonds which the most recent art has attempted to break. Either it has in a sense exploded the entire space by dispersing the sense of vision (“Futurism”), or “depth intervals” are represented only to “create an illusion” by “playing color surfaces off against each other” (quoted in Panofsky 154)—El Lissitzky’s own compositions “utilize shifting axes and multiple perspectives to convey the idea of rotation in space. ‘We brought the canvas into circles’”, he declared in 1921, ‘and while we turn, we raise ourselves into space” (“Monuments of the Future”. Designs by El Lissitzky, Getty Research Institute). Lawrence is doing what other painters have done before him, and will do after him for that matter, that is, he questions the validity of false appearances and arbitrary laws, he discards perspective in its avowed aim to show things “as they appear, not as they are” so that any image viewed from another vantage-point than the one calculated would show things askew, an anamorphosis of itself as it were.

In one of my previous papers, I have already considered the gaze in Women in Love, in particular the artist’s gaze and developed the idea according to which the artist’s distorting gaze could inflict mortal wounds upon his or her models, and utterly annihilate them, killing “the thing in the bud,” looking at things “from the wrong end of the opera-glasses, and see[ing]
the world that way” (WL 39), like Gudrun’s deadly medusa-like gaze upon Gerald, leaving him a petrified pebble, or Lœrke’s gaze upon his young model on a horse. But I could also say the contrary, that is, Lawrence is actually advocating in his Introduction to these Paintings and in his paintings the very same attitude he seems to condemn in Women in Love. The questioning of traditional vantage-points, the very nature of perception, the dialectics of true vision versus false appearance, could also apply to Gudrun’s definition of art. And if her art, as well as Lœrke’s, could be seen as “obscene,” so can Lawrence’s art, because of the gradual shedding of convention, proportion, a willing indifference to perspective and harmony and a return to more primitive modes of representation, that finally lead to distortion and possibly, then, obscenity, at least in the sense of showing a hidden, “off-stage” side of things.

With this in mind I have re-read Lawrence’s Introduction to these Paintings and come to the conclusion that his clever insight into Cézanne’s art and creative struggle is in fact self-explanatory and self-justifying as he was trying to clarify his own vantage-point, or point of view, through an analysis of Cézanne’s quest for true vision. Lawrence first approaches the topic by means of remarks on landscape painting in England, seeing it as “a delight in escape” (139), from the fears engendered by the body and hence, the fears of the “representation of substantial bodies” (137). To escape from these mortal fears, one has to go mental, one has to have it all in the mind, just like “sex-in-the-head,” one has to enclose oneself in a “sky-blue prison,” a “sky-blue heaven self-painted” (146), that is, one has to imprison representation in a mental concept, just as perspective is a mental concept destined to control and contain perception. To escape in turn from the boundaries of art gone mental, artists must rebel against “all the canons of accepted religion, accepted good form, accepted everything” (142). Paintings
become so many “acts of rebellion against the mental concept of landscape” (147), and one might add, the mental concept of the body—“acts of rebellion” against the tyranny of the mind that considers matter as “a form of spirit” (146). Showing things in a certain way, under a certain perspective, is symbolically imposing one view of the world over any other, and uttering a normative political discourse. This imposed canon on representation has over centuries and centuries of damage finally resulted in the death of the body, the body has finally become a corpse under the repeated assaults of the artistic canon of perspective and proportion, “a corpse with an abnormally active mind, and today [this body ] stinketh” so that “we are inside the tomb [...] even if it is painted sky-blue by optimistic paint” (147). If then pictorial representation has been under the yoke of arbitrary laws of representation, if the body has been shown as spiritual rather than material, or substantial, if it has been given ideal and false proportions, then it is high time for artists to remedy the situation and to revive the stinking body or help it escape from the tomb, it is high time to reconcile matter and spirit, mind and intuition, to admit openly that “any creative art occupies the whole consciousness of man” (153), so that a complete creative act would lead to a “complete truth, or a complete vision” (152)—and again, this adjective “complete” reminds me of Gudrun’s definition of art as giving a “complete” vision.

The truth is that perspective as artists still know it, creates false visual effects, optical illusions, so that the real distortion of representation is in perspectival representation which was oblique, biased and warped to begin with. To re-establish a straightened, true vision of the world, perspective should be discarded once and for all, as should be discarded the habit formed by years and years of seeing through a distorted lens, “the wrong end of the opera-glasses,” what Lawrence also calls
the cliché, “a worn-out memory that has no more emotional or intuitional root, and has become a habit” (154). Any effort at showing things under another angle implies a “fight with the cliché” (154). Cézanne, for one, had to fight repeatedly against the cliché that kept creeping back into his pictures, as if years of seeing wrongly had been genetically transmitted from one generation to the next. How could Cézanne fight against the cliché, against that optical illusion of a so-called “true-to-life representation,” which is only a representation of appearances and not of substance?

Lawrence contends that Cézanne resorted to distortion, to shifts in vision, in order to “distort the cliché into parody” (154), which is why many critics said Cézanne could not draw, to quote Roger Fry: “with all his rare endowments, he happened to lack the common gift of drawing” (150). For Lawrence, drawing badly was a statement against artistic norms and mental concepts, as Cézanne “could draw as well as anybody else” with his “work full of accurate drawing” (150), accurate drawing being another instance of the power of the law of perspective and proportion. Of course, Lawrence writing in such a manner about Cézanne is also Lawrence writing about his own drawing abilities and about the potential criticism of bad drawing he might receive. Representing things “more true-to-life” is distorting them, refusing accurate drawing, smashing clichés into a thousand pieces, rejecting conventional modes of representation and re-introducing “into our world of vision something which is neither optical nor mechanical nor intellectual” (156). In that sense, Cézanne and Lawrence are “pure revolutionaries” when they want man to see differently, to see beyond appearances, beyond “fronts, only fronts” and not to be “satisfied with fronts” (157). Centuries of normative vision, of imposed canons of representation and the “domination of this ready-made concept” have put “a complete screen between
us and life” (160) so that creative artists should destroy the screen, tear the veil and reveal “all-roundedness” and “inside-ness” and not be content with showing fronts: in other words, they should show things under new perspectives and from new vantage-points.

In La pornographie ou l’épuisement du désir, Michela Marzano analyses Picasso’s paintings in exactly the same terms and explains that Picasso wanted to get rid of the two-dimensional representation of the world by using distortions—“déformations,” to use his word—in order to represent woman, in that instance, all around and inside out, “sous toutes les faces, [pour] en faire le tour, [pour] la déconstruire” (Marzano 99) so as to belie the tropism of visual habit and straighten the trompe-l’œil—“démentir le tropisme des habitudes visuelles et, [...] dé tromper le trompe-l’œil”(100). Unveiling the truth implies representing the body in its “all-roundedness” and “insideness” even if this stance also implies distorting it, as Lawrence puts it: “Our true imagination is for ever curving to the other side, to the back of presented appearance” (Introduction 157). Along with Picasso and Cézanne, Lawrence presents us with the other side of things, shows us the world from “the wrong end of the opera-glasses” with his controversial nudes. And this is where desire appears. Unlike Greek sculpture which represses expression and desire in its emphasis on ideal form and proportion—“la statuaire grecque [...] réprime l’expression et le désir dans l’idéalisation de la forme” (Marzano 97)—Lawrence’s nudes express the desire to paint the body as a substantial, complete truth, and our ambivalent reaction to his paintings is in keeping with this statement by Jean Clair, in Le Nu et la Norme: “Toute l’histoire de l’art pourrait être, devrait être, l’histoire de la loi et du désir, de la norme et du nu” (quoted in Marzano 94). The naked body and the desire it awakens in us are not obscene as such, but our gaze
may be, influenced as it is by the norm and the law. This is the reason why the police raiding Lawrence’s exhibition at the Warren Gallery did not know which paintings to seize on grounds of obscenity as they were either all obscene, or none at all. By rejecting norm, canon, perspective, proportion, standards of all kinds, Lawrence, like many painters before him, was making a political and philosophical statement, threatening the established laws, acting as a revolutionary that had to be chastised. He was revealing the all-roundedness and insideness of the body, thereby challenging “our castrated spiritualities” by representing distorted, twisted bodies, by rejecting the canon through the use of new perspectives or vantage-points, simple overlapping, absence of depth or total flatness, painting like a child would, just like Etruscan artists, for that matter, as he remarked in 1927: “[Etruscan drawing] is good drawing, yet as one looks close, it is quite often out, both in line and position.” Yet “it is the complete vision of a child, full and potent” (Sketches 370, 397). These quotations encapsulate the notions we have developed so far, that is the rejection of line and position, or perspective, the primitive or child-like representation that is more “true to life” and conveys a complete vision of the world.

To quote Picasso’s words again, Lawrence in his pictures was trying to utter things as completely or as bluntly as possible, just like Picasso: “Je veux DIRE le nu. Je ne veux pas faire un nu comme un nu. Je veux seulement DIRE sein, DIRE pied, DIRE main, ventre » (quoted in Marzano 111).

In Perspective as Symbolic Form, Panofsky quotes Vitruvius, a Roman writer and architect of the 1st century BC, defining the notion of scenographia, scenography as the method of representing buildings:
As a branch of optics, scenography seeks how to properly draw images of buildings. Since it is not possible to represent them as they actually are and such as they appear, the scenographers seek to represent not the actual proportions, but how they will appear when constructed. The goal of the architect is to make his construction well-proportioned in its impression and to discover remedies for the deception of vision, by striving after not actual proportion, but rather proportion according to visual impression. (98)

I quote this passage because all the elements I have been trying to develop are present: the “proper” drawing of images, the representation of buildings, landscapes or bodies for that matter, as they visually appear, and not as they are, the opposition between deceptive impression and actual vision. Of course Lawrence’s aim is the exact opposite of Vitruvius’s scenographers, as he wishes to go beyond fronts and appearances and visual impressions to reach the truth and substance of the world, to reveal the “appleyness” of apples and the “horsiness” of horses. What he says in *Sketches* is a good answer to Vitruvius, and quite apt too, as Lawrence saw the Romans as responsible for the failure of the Etruscan people: “What is it that man sees, when he looks at a horse? what is it, that will never be put into words? For a man who sees sees not as a camera does [...] but in a curious rolling flood of vision, in which the image itself seethes and rolls; and only the mind picks out certain factors that will represent the image seen” (395).

Lawrence could draw accurate pictures and paint well-proportioned bodies. But he chose not to, he chose not to represent bodies that were well-proportioned, he chose to show flawed bodies, with misshapen limbs and unnatural, awkward positions, seen from shocking vantage-points. To quote Panofsky again, “smash[ing] the existing unity” and “disintegrate[ing] the
perspectival idea” is necessary to achieve new unity and complete vision. Painting passes then from “optical unity” to “substantial unity” (48,51). In Lawrence’s paintings, the bodies are always missing something, an arm, a leg, a head, as if to show that the “picture’s edge” may be “bounding the surface of the painting” (48) but not the bodies it represents, thus deepening and widening the space of the painting and getting rid of the constraints and control of perspective. These bodies, shown from different angles, are distorted, upper parts foreshortened and lower parts enlarged and yet, there exists a “gestural and corporeal dynamic relationship” between them, “a more intimate relationship,” a feeling of “rhythmic exchange” of colour and shape that “restores a kind of unity” (Panofsky 49). Those terms quoted from Panofsky were used to describe Graeco-Roman art, and strangely they apply perfectly to Lawrence’s paintings.

It should come as no surprise then that Lawrence found in Etruscan art a mode of representation that satisfied his own urge to show a complete vision of things. No more hiding the body under clothes, no more refined landscape painting, no more “dissolving the body in light and colour,” no more reducing it to geometrical shapes, “cubes, planes, tubes” (Introduction 141). With Lawrence, the body, even fragmented, distorted, flawed, occupies the foreground again; it is not a mental concept but a powerful substantial presence that can be felt as threatening, even obscene. Lawrence proves a true revolutionary in pictorial art, threatening the laws of representation with creative weapons, just as he was a revolutionary when cleansing the language of its dirty four-letter words by giving them a “more-true-to-life” meaning. Like Etruscan art, Lawrence’s art is full of “the rebellion of life against convention”, a “bastard
art,” in that sense then, because we do so “love convention and things reduced to a norm” (Sketches 359).

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WORKS CITED


