Chapter 16
The Dynamic Eye: Anamorphosis and Beholder between XVI and XVII Centuries

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ABSTRACT

During the Sixteenth century, the studies about perspective reach an higher level of systematize, so high to open their field of action to geographical and astronomic representations. In the painting and ornamental art, especially, it starts to use a different way of perspective technique more cunning and provocative, in agreement with the desire of contemporaneous artists and scientists to go beyond, across the limit of reality where ‘it shown only things that you can see’ for a fresh look – physical and symbolic - to the Other from her- or himself, to a new and more exciting overlook in which “…the appearance eclipses the reality”. The more odd and bizarre aspects of the perspective rules’ turn into the aim of research, where its interior laws are taken to an extreme level and are employed to verify the expressive prospect of the same technique, beyond any restitution of realistic appearance to the represented subject, organic or not. It is so the time of anamorphosis.

INTRODUCTION

During the Sixteenth century, the studies about perspective reach an higher level of systematization, so high to open their field of action to geographical and astronomic representations. In painting and ornamental art, especially, it starts to use a different way of perspective technique more cunning and provocative, according to the desire of contemporary artists and scientists to go beyond, across the limit of reality where ‘it shown only things that you can see’ for a fresh look – physical and symbolic - to the Other from her- or himself, to a new and more exciting overlook in which “…the appearance eclipses the reality”. The more odd and bizarre aspects of the perspective rules’ turn into the aim of research, where its interior laws are taken to an extreme level and are employed to verify the expressive prospect of the same technique, beyond any restitution of realistic appearance to the represented subject, organic or not. It is so the time of anamorphosis.

Anamorphosis are indissolubly related – even in their geometric genesis, that in their fruition – to the rules of linear perspective (*perspectiva artificialis*); they can be consider as mastery expression of the perspective rules in their own, representing a sort of a projective ‘depravation’. Complying with the representative rules established by Leon Battista Alberti (1435) and Piero della Francesca’s (1472 ca.) treaties, the anamorphic image discern to exceed a primary need, typical of Renaissance Art, to match representation’s space with that one of natural optical experience; indeed, even if it’s geometrically correct, it is shown to the audience as a graphic charades where specific representational choices reinforce the strength of mystic symbolism, even ritual-magical, linked to a so distort images. The goal of the essay is to examine how, between the XVI and XVII century, those image’s proto-projective deformation system, even more than producing a series of anamorphic images of extreme figurative and symbolic interest, have been the starting point of the long and passionate Baroque research about the architectural space’s deformation systems, moving the comparable projective notions from the two-dimensions of picture plane toward the Cartesian space.

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In the XIV century, when perspectival studies had already highly settled, the use of the perspectival technique became more cunning and provocative. This happened because contemporary artists and researchers wished to cross the boundaries of reality – where ‘only what is seen can be represented’ –, and explore (both physically and symbolically) new and inspiring horizons where appearance overshadows reality (Baltrusaitis, 1990). As a consequence, the most intriguing and technical aspects of perspective became the new object of study, the internal rules of perspective were taken to extremes, and the expressive possibilities of the method were tested. The era of anamorphosis had risen. The word anamorphosis derives from the Greek, and it is composed by the suffix *ajna* (up, against, back), and *morfhv* (shape). From the artistic point of view, this term indicates a particular category of flat images or three-dimensional structures, highly distorted, and not immediately recognisable when observed straightforwardly (Kuchel, 1979). Both in their geometrical genesis and in their fruition, anamorphoses are indissolubly linked to the rules of linear perspective (*perspectiva artificialis*). They can also be considered as a display of technical virtuosity, being a sort of projective ‘corruption’ of the perspectival rules. According to Baltrusaitis (1990), “this procedure is technical curiosity, but it also involves a poetics of abstraction, a powerful mechanism of optical illusion, and a philosophy of artificial reality. Anamorphosis is a rebus, a monster, freaky. It is not an aberration that subdues reality to a mental vision, but an optical subterfuge whereby appearance surpasses reality”. In an essay about the development of the perspectival theory, the historian Federico Amodeo (1993) wrote that the multiple varieties of perspective – called curious Perspective, and then anamorphosis – were well known since perspective was born, and were the source of new ideas, leading to the discovery of new paths.

Influenced by the Mannerist and Baroque need to deconstruct the Renaissance aesthetic and expressive models, several painters and essayists realised that any deviation from the principles of perspective would produce images which were geometrically correct, but far from the figurative realism at the basis of the Renaissance art. In anamorphosis, the first exception consists in imagining the beholder not in front of the painting, but laterally (Figure 1 shows the beholder’s oblique position in anamorphosis). Naitza (1977) described this position as beyond the horizon, so that all the visual rays hit the object obliquely, with more or less accentuated angles. Therefore, the visual angle is not only sideways, but
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