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## THINKING IN IMAGES. THOUGHT AND IMAGE IN PANOFSKY'S AND FLORENSKY'S THEORY OF SYMBOLIC FORMS



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**Abstract.** An important philosophical tradition makes of the imagination one of the main faculties of philosophy and of images the fundamental medium of metaphysical knowledge. If in the West-European thought, starting from the Counter-Reformation, there was an oblivion of the imaginary, in the Christian East the image, in the form of Icons, remained to symbolize divine reality, and at the same time to mark the boundary of the sensible with it. The Platonic tradition of the symbolic image re-emerges with force in Florensky's aesthetics and theological thought, whose observations and hermeneutic analyses, contained in the books *Iconostasis* and *Obratnaya perspectiva*, presuppose a conception of thought and spiritual life closely linked to spatiality and images. On the background of this conception he elaborates an aesthetic of the Icon and of pictorial representation as a symbol of the invisible metaphysical dimension of Being and of the relationship that the subject has with

this. Parallel to Florensky's hermeneutics of linear perspective, developed on the basis of philosophemes of Platonic-Christian origin, another one was developed in the 1920s, parallel and independent, based on neo-Kantian conceptual premises, which led to the publication of *Perspective as a symbolic form* by E. Panofsky. Although the two points of view appear difficult to reconcile at first glance, considering the harsh criticisms directed by Florensky towards the neo-Kantianism of the Marburg School, in this paper we will demonstrate that they come to results of astonishing similarity, though presenting irreconcilable differences in the underlying assumptions of their thinking.



**Keywords:** imagination, symbol, thought, metaphysics, reality, image, space



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*Европа и Россия: парадоксы родства*

МЫШЛЕНИЕ В ОБРАЗАХ.  
МЫСЛЬ И ОБРАЗ В ТЕОРИИ СИМВОЛИЧЕСКИХ ФОРМ  
ПАНОФСКОГО И ФЛОРЕНСКОГО

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**Аннотация.** Значительная философская традиция делает воображение одной из главных способностей философии, а образы — основным средством метафизического познания. Если в западноевропейской мысли, начиная с Контрреформации, существовало забвение воображаемого, то на христианском Востоке образ в виде икон продолжал символизировать божественную реальность и в то же время обозначать границу чувственного с ним. Платоновская традиция символического образа усиленно возрождается в эстетиче-

ской и богословской мысли Флоренского, чьи наблюдения и герменевтические анализы, содержащиеся в книгах «Иконостас» и «Обратная перспектива», предполагали концепцию мышления и духовной жизни, тесно связанную с пространственностью и образами. На фоне этой концепции он разрабатывает эстетику Иконы и живописного изображения как символа невидимого метафизического измерения Бытия и отношения, в котором субъект с ним находится. Параллельно герменевтике линейной перспективы Флоренского, развивавшейся на основе философом платоническо-христианского происхождения, в 1920-е годы была разработана другая, параллельная и самостоятельная, основанная на неокантианских концептуальных предпосылках, что привело к публикации «Перспективы как символической формы» Э. Панофского. Хотя на первый взгляд обе точки зрения кажутся трудными для примирения, учитывая резкую критику, направленную Флоренским в адрес неокантианства марбургской школы, в этой статье мы покажем, что они приходят к результатам поразительного сходства, хотя и представляют собой непримиримые различия в основополагающих предпосылках их мышления.



**Ключевые слова:** воображение, символ, мысль, метафизика, реальность, образ, пространство



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In the perhaps oldest European treatise on phenomenological psychology, the *De Anima*, Aristotle states that thought “is a kind of imagination or does not operate without imagination” [Aristotle, 2001, p. 403a, 431a]. Without images the intellect — as symbolized by the metaphor of the *tabula rasa* [Aristotle, 2001, p. 430a] — would lack the contents in which to actualize itself, and therefore it would not be able to think, since “when you think, you necessarily think of an image at the same time” [Aristotle, 2001, p. 432a], with the consequence that “It is not possible to think without images, because the same thing happens in thinking as in drawing figures” [Aristotle,

2007, p. 450a]. Aristotle sees in the etymology of the term φαντασία, which derives from the term φῶς, that in Greek means light, a further confirmation of the truth of this theory: as with sight, which is the sense par excellence, the vision of sensitive objects is made possible by light, and without light it is not possible to see, imagination took its name from light since without it no internal ‘vision’ of things is possible, therefore no thought or knowledge [Aristotle, 2001, p. 429a]<sup>1</sup>.

Just as it happens to an eye that, when knowing objects, forgets the light thanks to which it can know them, so in the history of modern Western thought imagination becomes a sort of uncomfortable guest, which cannot be removed or ignored completely, and then one tries to mention him as little as possible, trying not to meet his gaze.

According to the reconstruction of Ioan Petru Culiano, following the Protestant Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in Europe a real program of “censorship of the imagination” [Culianu, 1984, p. 255 ff] was implemented, which on a philosophical level would have had as a consequence a removal of the capacity to think symbolically elaborated and developed by the Renaissance, of which Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Giordano Bruno were the greatest exponents.

A sign of the success of this work of removal is the clear devaluation of the cognitive function of the imagination carried through by Descartes and especially by Malebranche, who defines imagination as “the madwoman of the house,” the “folle qui se plaît à faire la folle” [Malebranche, 2006, p. 24].

If just a few decades earlier Giordano Bruno could argue that imagination was the main faculty for metaphysical knowledge, since it alone is capable of thinking the infinite<sup>2</sup>, for Malebranche, imagination is rather the faculty that distracts us from truth and reason, persuades us to false opinions, brings us closer to brute beasts and to a certain point can even lead us to madness (see: [De Buzon, 2010; Wiel, 2006]).

Yet for almost two millennia, starting from the pre-Socratic philosophers, images have been entrusted with the task of mediating between the human intellect and the ultimate questions of metaphysical questioning.

The works of the first great metaphysical thinkers, such as Parmenides and Empedocles, are immortal symbolic poems, and Plato was the first to theorize the importance of myth to mediate communication and reflection on ultimate, otherwise

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<sup>1</sup> See in this regard: “Bruno, (...) through his theory of light, rediscovers the connection established in the well-known passages of Aristotle (...), which at the end of the sixteenth century the commentators of Coimbra repeated and underlined, insisting on the relationship fantasy/light (φῶς), image/vision” [Garin, 1988, p. 4].

<sup>2</sup> See: [Ordine, 2003, p. 141 ff; Leinkauf, 2010, p. 22] and the great book by Anne Eusterschulte about the importance of the imagination for mind’s capacity of grasping analogies and think metaphysically: [Eusterschulte, 1997].

elusive realities<sup>3</sup>, just as our eye, incapable of looking directly at the sun, the source of all light, can know it mediatedly in its reflection on water and through its effects of illumination on beings. Plotinus took up the legacy of his teacher Plato, founding a mythopoetic philosophical tradition which, uniting with Christian revelation, gave life to that *Wirkungsgeschichte des Neoplatonismus* (see: [Beierwaltes, 1985]) which, like a karst river, has fueled the re-emergence of symbolic thought up to the contemporary era [Beierwaltes, 1985, p. 438 f; 2017].

“He that would speak exactly,” wrote Plotinus, “must not name it [the ultimate One] by this name or by that; we can but circle, as it were, about its circumference, seeking to interpret into speech our experience of it, now shooting near the mark, and again disappointed of our aim by reason of the antinomies we find in it” (Plotinus, *Enn.* VI, IX, 3–4). According to Neoplatonic philosophizing, the One is ineffable, given that saying anything is still saying ‘something’. But the One is by definition not a thing: it is above all things and also above discursive intelligence, that, as Beierwaltes states, is, as any language, a “Phänomen der Differenz” [Beierwaltes, 1998, p. 54]. It therefore has no name, nothing can be spoken about him.

We are thus faced with the paradox indicated in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, that “of what one cannot speak one must be silent” [Wittgenstein, 1984, prop. 7], despite the fact that such things are the most important and valuable for the orientation of human life. Negative theology, as a way of approaching God without having to affirm an understanding that is impossible for human language and intelligence, has its reason in the ineffable divine transcendence: “How can we speak of the One? Something can well be said, however we do not express him himself, since we have neither knowledge nor intelligence. (...) We can speak about him, even without being able to express his essence: and in fact we say what he is not; and so we speak of him starting from what comes after him” (Plotinus, *Enn.* V, 14). Speaking of the inexpressible through the things that proceed from him, through images of the things of the world, in the awareness that the object of our speaking differs improporportionately from them, and precisely for this reason, for the impossibility of being confused with them, can be said, conjecturally indicated by them<sup>4</sup>.

Here at the origins of Christian theological speculation, where the new religion was nourished by Neoplatonic philosophemes to elaborate its doctrine, in the pages of *The Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite we find the elaboration of this theory of the symbol, in which the apophatic effort and the cataphatic necessities

<sup>3</sup> For a general introduction to this topic is useful the entry by Catalin Partenie [Partenie, 2022]. See: [Edelstein, 1949; Deretic, 2020].

<sup>4</sup> See in this regard the cornerstone work of the theorization of symbolic philosophical thought: [Nicolaus Cusanus, 1972].

of saying are combined: “The same things are similar and dissimilar to God: similar for the imitation, as far as possible, of him who is Inimitable, dissimilar in that the effects are inferior to the cause and for the lack of infinite and unconfused measures” (Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus*, IX, 7).

In this thought originates the use of speaking of God and spiritual realities through symbols, which re-emerged in the Renaissance and nourished the extraordinary and mysterious visual culture of this era, and in parallel lived continuously in the lands of Eastern Christianity, forming the foundation of the particular anti-naturalism of medieval aesthetics and the art of icons (see: [Grabar, 2001; Parry, 1996]).

The doctrine of Pseudo-Dionysius and of Christian Neoplatonism in general, in fact, influenced not only philosophy, but also medieval aesthetics, where in the East, in the art of the icon we find the principles of Christian Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysius plastically depicted.

The art of the icon not only concretized the idea of light as the bearer of rationality and divinity, but also realized the postulates of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* that concerned the symbolic representation of divine things. The mystical and symbolic theology of the Areopagite, through the systematization of his doctrines carried out by Gregory Palamas (see: [Oppo, 2018, p. 405]), influenced Platonism and the symbolic interpretation of the Icon by Pavel Florenskij.

Like the Neoplatonic Christian doctrine of the Areopagite, the reality of God, while permeating the world, is radically different from our earthly existence, subject to the flow of time, corruption and change. The icon consequently represents an unrealistic image, in which the human body is outlined by unnatural forms, placed on a golden, neutral and symbolic background. Likewise, the buildings are painted in a way that contrasts with real experience and sometimes even illogically; the observer has no way of perceiving a sensation of depth and all the characters and elements of the space on the icon are in the foreground. We are accustomed to the hyperrealism of photography and film, so the world of the icon, with its clumsily painted characters, seems strange to us. Furthermore, the characters of the icon do not bridge the gap between the viewer and God, between the creature and the Creator, through an emotional contact and the representation of feelings, as has been the case in Western painting since Giotto. Quite the opposite, the characters are completely static, still in an inert emotional statuary.

Precisely because the figurative elements are taken from the world, but painted in such a way that they cannot be confused with the concrete things represented, it immediately rises to a condition of symbol, which puts the world of the figurative in contact with the world of the unfigurable, without these planes confusing and canceling one another.

In Florensky's conception of the icon as a symbol, the presence of a Platonic heritage is evident, which, as Cantelli points out [Cantelli, 2011, p. 39 ff], is not limited to the acquisition of the doctrine entrusted by the historical person of Plato to the dialogues<sup>5</sup>, but rather concerns a philosophical attitude towards the capacity of images to represent the divine, which owes much to the Neoplatonic philosophy of Iamblichus and Proclus<sup>6</sup>, and which Florensky defined, more than a philosophy, "a force of thought," "a typical expression of the interior life" [Florenskij, 2000a, p. 68], impossible to define "even formally with Plato's thought" [Florenskij, 2000a, p. 68–69], and which has a meaning "much broader (...) and even deeper" [Florenskij, 2000a, p. 68–69] than the teaching of the Athenian philosopher, consisting in the "conception of the world closest to the feeling of religion as such" and even as "the natural philosophy of every religion" [Florenskij, 2000a, p. 68–69], which ends up identifying with the immediate and natural religious feeling of the popular soul: "Plato is the flower of the popular soul, its colors will not fade as long as this soul is alive" [Florenskij, 2000a, p. 147].

The meaning of Platonism — that is to say a Platonism prior to Plato himself — is expanded by Florensky to be "the vision of the world of immediate consciousness" [Florenskij, 2000a, p. 148] and which can be expressed as the awareness that "all nature is animated, is all alive, in the whole as in parts. Everything is reciprocally linked by mysterious bonds" [Florenskij, 2000a, p. 150]. This immediate awareness of a Life that manifests itself in nature, therefore perceived not as inert matter separated from its creator, but on the contrary ineffably connected to it by profound analogies<sup>7</sup>, is at the basis of the conception of the icon as a symbol.

In the Neoplatonic theurgy of Iamblichus the return to the divine does not occur through philosophical dialectics but through "the divine ceremonies" [Iamblichus, 1984, p. 113] (II, 96.15–97.1)<sup>8</sup>: the cult and interaction with images of the gods are understood as a concrete and real place of presence of the god, rising to real intermediaries between the human and the divine, against the backdrop of a conception of matter "born from the father and the demiurge of the whole," therefore capable of acquiring "the perfection suitable for receiving the gods" [Iamblichus, 1984, pp. 192–193] (V 232,9–233,10), and of becoming their symbol by virtue of the sympathetic principle that governs the whole (see: [Lewy, 1956, p. 460 ff]).

<sup>5</sup> About Florensky's Platonism see: [Shaposhnikov, 2013].

<sup>6</sup> About Iamblichus influence on Florensky see also: [Trubachev, 1998, p. 351; Khoruzhii, 1996, p. 554].

<sup>7</sup> For the relation between the concept of analogy and the platonic tradition, see: [Eusterschulte, 1997].

<sup>8</sup> For these references from Iamblichus see: [Cantelli, 2011, p. 40].

Florensky's conception of the icon is modeled on this Neoplatonic matrix, according to which the icon is not a simple image that metaphorically alludes to the archetype, but is this archetype itself. Icons are divine and full of the presence of divinity and, as such, they are symbols. In fact, the symbol is fully realized and compliant with its purpose "when it is truly indivisible from the purpose, that is, from the superior reality that it reveals" [Florenskij, 1993, p. 47]:

Icon painters bear witness not to their icon art, that is, not to themselves, but to the holy witnesses of the Lord and with them to the Lord himself.

(...) Here, I look at the icon and say within myself: 'It is She Herself, not her representation but She Herself, contemplated through mediation, with the help of the art of the icon. As if through a window I see the Mother of God, the Mother of God herself, and I pray to her, face to face, not the image of her (...). The icon must not get stuck in psychological, associative interpretations that reduce it to representation (...): being a manifestation, energy, light of a spiritual essence.

[Florenskij, 1993, p. 48–49]

The symbol is "a reality that is more than itself" and "it manifests something that it itself is not" [Florenskij, 2000c]. Using a metaphor employed by Florensky in *Ikono-stasis*, it is like a window that allows metaphysical reality to show itself, which is not a mere representation, allegory, but the true presence of the represented itself.

To the antithesis of this symbolic conception of art and reality in general, which he saw as typical of medieval spirituality (see: [Oppo, 2018, p. 390 ff]), Florensky opposes the Kantian distinction between phenomenon and noumenon, which splits the unity between material and spiritual, ending up denying the ontological presuppositions of symbolic thought [Florenskij, 2003, p. 202–203].

Kantian philosophy is interpreted by Florensky as a complete elaboration, on a philosophical level, of the passage from a theocentric to an anthropocentric vision of the world, which occurred during the Florentine Renaissance, which found its figurative expression in linear perspective (see: [Florenskij, 2021a]).

Perspective makes living reality a pure "impersonal and undifferentiated" material to fill "a general ordering scheme applied to it from the outside," similarly to Kantian transcendental metaphysics, "with its transcendental subject that reigns over the illusory world of subjectivity (and, what is worse, does so in a coercive manner)" [Florenskij, 2021a, p. 217]. Florensky gives a severe judgment of Western civilization, but what interests us here is the way in which he places a very abstract and rational philosophical system alongside a pictorial reproduction technique of space, presenting them as analogous expressions of a way of relating to reality.



The basis of this comparison is Florensky's conception of thought, which sees this, both as activity and as content, as independent from the word and therefore expressible both in philosophical discourse and in images.

The reason for this is that for Florensky the common object of philosophy, science and art is *life*: "The images of art are formulas for understanding life, parallel to those of science and philosophy" and therefore "those aspects and particularities of life that are fixed through logical symbols in philosophy and science find their symbolic formulas expressed in images in art," with the consequence that "one can always indicate a given formula of art alongside its twin formula in abstract thought: between one and the other there is not equality but equivalence" [Florenskij, 2021b, p. 384–385].

The centrality of the question of perspective in Florensky's critical thought is given by his conviction that the primary object of thought is not the concept or the word, but the *space*: "We can also consider space as the proper and originary object of philosophy, in relation to which all other philosophical themes must be considered derivative" [Florenskij, 2021b, p. 384].

To grasp the depth and seriousness of this thought, we need to rethink Aristotle's psychological considerations, according to which a thought is not possible without images, or without the imagination representing forms, both linguistic or figurative, 'drawing' them in the internal sense, to use Kant's words.

Space is therefore the ultimate and deepest dimension of one's relationship with reality and with oneself, as it is the dimension in which both the representation of our world and our interaction with it unfold: "Conception of the world is (...) conception of space" [Florenskij, 2021b, p. 384].

Representation is always a symbol, every representation, whatever it is, perspective or not, and all the images of the figurative arts are distinguished from one another not because some are symbolic and others, so to speak, naturalistic, but because, being all equally non-naturalistic, they are symbols of the different faces of an object, of different perceptions of the world, of different levels of synthesis. (...) The nature common to all is symbolic. And so perspective in representation is absolutely not a property of objects, as vulgar naturalism believes, but only a means of symbolic expression, one of the possible symbolic styles, whose artistic value may depend on a particular point of view, but precisely as such, it places itself beyond the unquestionable judgments on its verisimilitude, the claim of a patented realism. Consequently, in examining the problem of perspective, direct or inverse, with one or more centers, it is absolutely necessary, from the beginning, to start from the symbolic function of painting and the other figurative arts, to clarify for oneself what

place perspective occupies in the series of other symbolic procedures, what it really expresses, and to what spiritual conquests it leads.

[Florenskij, 2021a, p. 210]

Therefore for Florensky perspective is a symbol, a symbolic form.

Contemporary with *Obratnaja Perspektiva* is a text which, although part of a neo-Kantian philosophical background<sup>9</sup>, presents notable similarities with Florensky's reflection on perspective: *Perspective as a symbolic form* (1924), by Erwin Panofsky.

In this text the author questions whether the laws of perspective were rigorously based on the natural laws of vision and therefore whether the traditional perspective system was the most suitable and legitimate method for representing visual space.

For critically investigating this sort of dogmatism in historiography of art, Panofsky chooses to start from Antiquity to try to define, first of all, "if the Ancients possessed and used in their works the familiar perspective construction, with a single vanishing point for all the orthogonals of the figurative plane; and in case of a negative answer, whether the representations of space that they created plastically had a merely random character or followed their own internal logic (...). Secondly, it was a question of establishing which particular expressive value was connected with the use of a specific perspective construction" [Neri, 1976, p. 10].

Panofsky's response, parallel to that of Florensky, differs from the commonplace according to which the failure to use linear perspective by the ancients was to be attributed to a lack of knowledge of the geometric-mathematical principles on which it is based.

The similarities between the positions of the two authors, even if starting from different fundamental positions, are many.

Both argue that classical antiquity possessed a peculiar conception of space which inevitably differs from the modern one and which leads to a very particular type of perspective, which we would judge not to be exact, but which responds to an intuition of space and to a vision of world other than the modern one. In the painting of antiquity, as Panofsky observes, the totality of the world always remains something finite and discontinuous, in which the bodies maintain their substantiality intact, their individual, integral and complete form and at the same time their fullness, concreteness, which space cannot yet cancel, since it is not yet felt "as something capable of circumscribing and resolving the contrast between bodies and non-bodies" [Panofsky, 1980, p. 47].

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<sup>9</sup> Panofsky was linked to the Bibliothek Warburg, where he operated in intense intellectual exchange with Ernst Cassirer, a philosopher trained in a neo-Kantian environment in Marburg.

Perspective, or its incorrect application, cannot be regarded solely as a mathematical problem or as a question of artistic capacity. It must rather be considered as “a stylistic moment,” indeed — continues Panofsky — “if we want to adopt the term happily coined by Ernst Cassirer also in the history of art, it is one of those ‘symbolic forms’ through which a particular spiritual content is connected to a concrete sensitive sign and intimately identified with this; in this sense, it becomes essential for the various eras and provinces of art to ask themselves not only if they know perspective, but what perspective it is” [Panofsky, 1980, p. 47]. The basis of this position, which reveals a surprising similarity with that of Florensky, considering that their texts were contemporary and there is no reason to believe that they knew each other’s writings, is that “the way of representation that is typical of an era (...) the use of the line or the stain, the composition on the surface or in depth, and finally also the overall closed or open construction, although intersubjectively binding, is not an empty form, and rather has its own well certain expressive value” [Panofsky, 1976, p. 142], therefore a symbolic value.

The theoretical assumptions of Panofsky’s iconological study are that the ‘form’ is not something independent of the content, but intervenes constitutively in the sphere of the ‘content’, and thus its stylistic meaning is certainly already included among the ‘content’ values [Panofsky, 1976, p. 148]. It follows the necessarily ‘significant’ character of artistic forms and their link with all the cultural facts and spiritual contents of an era.

It is on the basis of these both methodological and theoretical assumptions that Panofsky can speak of linear perspective as the ‘objectification of subjectivity’, giving to this figurative technique a cultural and philosophical value such as to explicitly compare the function of Renaissance perspective to that of Kantian criticism, with which it associates the attempt to build a world that is both empirical and founded *a priori*, centered on the transcendental reference to the knowing subject.

It is surprising how Panofsky also refers Kantian criticism to perspective, giving a critique strongly assonant with that of the Russian philosopher:

It creates a distance between man and things (...) but then eliminates this distance, absorbing in a certain way into man’s eye the world of things that exists autonomously in front of him; It reduces artistic phenomena to well-defined rules, indeed to exact mathematical rules, but on the other hand it makes them depend on man, indeed on the individual, insofar as these rules refer to the psychophysical conditions of the visual impression, and insofar as the way in which they act is determined by the position, which can be freely chosen, of a subjective point of view. Thus the history of perspective can be conceived at the same time as a triumph of the sense of distancing and objectifying reality, or as a triumph of the will to power of man which tends to

annul every distance; both as a consolidation and a systematization of the external world, and as an expansion of the sphere of the ego.

[Panofsky, 1980, p. 65–66]

The analogical connection of perspective with Kantian epistemology takes on even more accentuated critical tones in the final lines of the essay:

Even Rembrandt's late works would not have been possible without the perspectival conception of space, which, by transforming *ousia* into *phainomenon*, seems to reduce the divine to a mere content of human consciousness, but at the same time expands human knowledge to the point of making it capable of welcoming and containing the divine. It is therefore no coincidence that this conception of space has emerged twice in the course of artistic development: the first time as a sign of an end when the ancient theocracy collapsed, the second time as a sign of a beginning, when the modern anthropocracy arose.

[Panofsky, 1980, p. 69–70]

These impressive convergences of Panofsky and Florensky must not, however, confuse us, making us forget the divergences of their basic assumptions, only by considering which an adequate appreciation of the depth of their thought is possible.

Panofsky adopts aspects of Cassirer's reflection on symbols, which he developed in a completely different geographical and cultural context than Florensky's: that of the Bibliothek-Warburg in Hamburg<sup>10</sup>.

Aby Warburg had created the extraordinary and highly original heritage of his library around his research on the *Nachleben* of the mythical imagery of antiquity, which he developed as an investigation into the modes of symbolic expression of the human being and their permanence, and into their transformations over the course of historical epochs<sup>11</sup>.

During his cooperation with the Bibliothek Cassirer developed a neo-Kantian theory of knowledge, which found expression in the three volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923–1929), in which symbols play a central role in the process of formation of human knowledge:

The symbol is not the merely accidental coating of thought, but its necessary and essential organ. It does not only serve the purpose of communicating a conceptual

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<sup>10</sup> For a critical examination of the relationship between Panofsky, Cassirer and the "Bibliothek Warburg" see: [Ferrari, 1987].

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of Warburg's project see: [Gombrich, 1999; Rampley, 1997].

content already ready-made but is the instrument by virtue of which this same content is constituted and acquires its complete determinacy. The act of conceptual determination of a content proceeds hand in hand with the act of its fixing in some characteristic symbol.

[Cassirer, 1923–1929, vol. 1, Intr., § II]

For Cassirer, the production of symbols is so innate in the human being and specific to his way of appropriating reality and experiencing his experience of the world that he paraphrases the Aristotelian definition of man as a rational animal to propose one that depicts him as a symbolic animal:

Reason is a very inadequate term to understand all the forms of man's cultural life in all their richness and variety. But all these forms are symbolic forms. Consequently, instead of defining man as 'animal rationale', we can define him as 'animal symbolicum'. In doing so, we indicate what specifically distinguishes him.

[Cassirer, 1962, chap. II]

Cassirer's concept of symbolic form includes "every energy of the spirit by which a spiritual content endowed with meaning is linked to a sensible sign and is intimately attributed to it." This concept includes "language, the mythical-religious world and art" which "each presents itself to us as a particular symbolic form; in all of them is expressed the fundamental phenomenon by which our consciousness does not limit itself to receiving the impression from the outside, but connects and permeates every impression with a free expressive activity" (see: [Ferrari, 1996, p. 227]).

Here is the point where lies the fundamental difference between Panofsky's and Cassirer's conception of the symbol and that of Florensky.

Precisely the neo-Kantian matrix of Cassirer's symbolic epistemology (see: [Bidney, 1955]), by leading the world of experience back to the self-unfolding activity of the human spirit, reaffirms that anthropocentrism of Kantianism so harshly criticized by Florensky in *Obratnaja Perspektiva*.

In Florensky too, symbols make the emergence of the human cultural world possible and, as for Cassirer and Panofsky, the symbol is not something conventional, dictated by our whim or our imagination: Symbols are spiritually constituted according to certain laws and with an internal necessity.

In both conceptions, the image is configured as a meeting place between the visible and the invisible, but this meeting and, above all, the invisible to which it refers, take on contrasting hues.

In Panofsky, images are the visible substrate through which it is possible to recognize the invisible universal of meaning. In the image, an unresolved dualism is realized between matter and form, the 'given' world and the ordering and legislator subject, between the shaping force and the material that must be shaped. The visible image is thus a symbolic form through which the creative subjectivity shapes, realizes and objectifies its world or, more precisely, one of its multiple ideal worlds.

In Florensky the central element in the symbol's capacity to signify is given not by the creative activity of the subject, but by the archetypal reality of the thing represented by the symbol, which in the symbol can make itself present precisely because it is a reality independently of the knowing subject and of the work of the artist.

For the Russian philosopher there are two worlds or planes of reality ontologically heterogeneous with each other, even if in contact, one illusory and one real, and a threshold both separates them and keeps them in contact: the image, and in a privileged way, the Icon.

The icon represents a diaphragm, the boundary between the visible world and the invisible world, it is the place of the boundary, a portal towards the encounter between the immanent and the transcendent, the phenomenal and the noumenal, the symbolizing and the symbolized.

The constitutive principle of the icon, which for Florensky represents the symbol par excellence, is its revelatory character since it, as an image, has nothing to do with the simple more or less imaginative depiction of a specific character belonging to the Christian imagination, but is instead characterized as a representation that in a mysterious way makes present the very one it outlines. The icon is the meeting place of the visible and the invisible and therefore it is not *mimesis*, copy, representative that saturates the represented in itself. It makes the invisible visible while leaving it invisible, since it is an opening to a real and noumenal dimension independent of the sensible, which although it can be present in a material conformation, is independent of it and exceeds it.

A concrete and particularly significant example of how this transformation and transfiguration of the elements of sensible reality works, is given by that particular technical procedure of representation of icons, constituted by the so-called '*razdelki*' lines, golden underlinings, which in the interpretation of the Russian philosopher come to represent "the invisible lines (<...> the primordial forces that with their reciprocal actions form the ontological skeleton of things" they represent the "ontological structure of clothes" as if to say a system of potential folds, that is, the lines along which the fabric would fold if there were the general condition for the formation of folds, or sensible materiality [Florenskij, 1983, p. 123].

In *Iconostasis* Florensky states that at the origin of the icon there is not a subjective psychological associationism, as in Renaissance art, but an authentic spiritual experience: “The true artist does not want at any cost something of his own particularity, but the beautiful, the objectively beautiful, that is, the truth of things artistically incarnated” [Florenskij, 1983, p. 62]: therefore the work of art must be the concrete manifestation of the truth deriving from the contemplation of eternal *noumena*. The icon is in this sense the incarnation of a celestial archetype, it represents “a concrete ontology” [Florenskij, 1983, p. 137]: according to this ontological-spiritual conception of the icon the holy *ikonnik*, the iconographer, is the one who, revealing the contemplated Truth, bears witness to this spiritual experience by creating the ‘proto-revealed’ icons. Consequently, as a manifestation of a celestial archetype, the icon is not a work of art, of an independent art, but a testimonial work for which, among many other things, art also serves.

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