Thinking Space, Advancing Art

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Cassirer and Crowther

By

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ABBREVIATED TITLES OF WORKS BY CASSIRER AND CROWTHER CITED IN THE NOTES

Ernst Cassirer

PSF – Philosophy of Symbolic Forms
Vol.1, *Language*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1953
Vol.2, *Mythical Thought*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1955
Vol.3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1957
Vol.4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, trans. J.M. Krois and D.P.Verene, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1996

LCS – The Logic of the Cultural Sciences, trans. S.G. Lofts, Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 2000

EM – Essay on Man, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1944

Paul Crowther

KS –The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art: Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989

CAP – Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993

AE – Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993

LTA – The Language of Twentieth-Century Art: A Conceptual History, Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 1997

TTI – The Transhistorical Image: Philosophizing Art and its History, Cambridge University
Press, Cambridge, 2002

PAP – Philosophy after Postmodernism: Civilized Values and the Scope of Knowledge, Routledge, London and New York, 2003

DACTC – Defining Art, Creating the Canon: Artistic Value in an Era of Doubt, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007

POTVA – Phenomenology of the Visual Arts (even the frame), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2009

TKA – The Kantian Aesthetic: From Knowledge to the Avant-Garde, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010

TPMA – The Phenomenology of Modern Art: Exploding Deleuze, Illuminating Style, Continuum, London and New York, 2012

POAV – Phenomenologies of Art and Vision: A Post-Analytic Turn, Bloomsbury Studies in Philosophy, London and New York, 2013

INTRODUCTION

CASSIRER AND CROWTHER

I. The Primacy of Space

Look at your surroundings. You can see them from different angles; you can move towards and away from things; you can rearrange what's there, you can tell people about what you see. The changing light alters how things appear. There are some things that you know are visible in principle, but which are hidden from sight right now. In some cases, this is because they are too small to be seen directly; in other cases, it is because physical action would be needed in order to make them visible. If you sit still, nothing much happens unless there's some intrusion. But actually, it is very hard to sit *absolutely* still and fix attention on what's there.

Pictures arise from and transform all these spatial situations in complicated ways. Electronic and photographic images do as well, to some degree. But while they can be generated or 'taken,' and have all sorts of creative possibilities, they are not, by definition, made. Pictures *are* made. They originate in and address the complexities of our inherence in space in ways that the other images cannot. Electronic imagery may be "the thing" right now but as long as we have bodies and exist in space, there will be a need to create and look at pictures. This book considers the philosophical features of this need.

In the most general terms, pictures are space-occupying forms made to project virtual space. We argue that the relation between their space-occupying physical structure and their projected space is the basis of a unique area of aesthetic meaning. Our basic argument is that making pictures transforms how space appears, and does so through both historical development and semantic syntactic structures. Pictorial art is a unique formative activity in the much bigger picture (so to speak) of how we occupy space.

This view is not much favoured in contemporary theories of visual art. In the Anglo-American tradition of aesthetics, for example, there have been many books on pictorial representation that tend to focus on the questions of how far it is based on natural phenomena and how far on

cultural convention.[1] Other studies consider the varieties of representation, and one excellent study looks at the relationship between pictorial representation and imagination.[2] None of these works, however, considers the ontological importance of how making pictures changes our perception of space; and for none of them is the idea of pictorial space of central importance.

This same tradition has produced much fewer works on pictorial *art*. There is one excellent work by Richard Wollheim called *Painting as an Art*;[3] unfortunately, it too quickly focuses on questions of spectatorship, and understands the artistic significance of pictures on the model of a rather general theory of expression. This, as Paul Crowther has shown in great detail, is not adequate for the pictorial aspect of pictorial art.[4]

A more interesting approach from someone broadly in the Anglo-American tradition has been provided (even if many years ago) by Susanne Langer. She claims that

> from the first line of decorative drawing to the works of Raphael, Leonardo, or Rubens, the same principle of pictorial art is wholly exemplified: the creation of virtual space and its organization by forms (be they lines, or volumes, or intersecting planes, or shadows and lights) that reflect the patterns of sentience and emotion. The picture space, whether conceived in two dimensions or in three, disassociates itself from the actual space in which the canvas or other physical bearer of it exists; its function as a symbol makes the objects in a picture as unlike normal physical objects as unlike normal physical objects as a spoken word is unlike the sound of footsteps, rustlings, clatter, and other noises that usually accompany and sometimes drown it.[5]

Langer considers a general ground for pictorial art but not in any great detail. Nor does she tell us what is positive about the disassociation described above. Obviously it must be connected to "patterns of sentience and emotion" but that means we require an explanation of how they relate to one another through "the principle of pictorial art." Langer does not provide this. In fact, she is right off the mark. Pictures are admittedly different from what they represent, but she is wrong in thinking that they are as unlike as a word is from the ambient noises that surround it. Indeed, the whole point of the picture (whatever else it does) is to communicate on the basis of some spatial similarity to the thing(s) it represents.

To explain what makes pictorial art special, therefore, it is necessary to explain *how* it engages with and changes the subject's relation to space. This means an account of both the continuity and discontinuity between our physical experience of space and the space of the picture, and the way in which the latter representation loops back on the former, in a positive

way. Pictures are ways of space-forming. They open up a pictorial space that revises how we relate to real space. This is what has to be explained.

We move now to the continental tradition of philosophy. It has not addressed the philosophy of pictorial representation as such but has, instead, looked in greater detail at specific media, notably painting, and art's more general relationship to ideas such as truth and embodiment. Indeed, figures such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze have very much interpreted visual art in the light of their own broader philosophical standpoints.[6]

This has strengths and weaknesses. The strengths involve painting being given special importance as it discloses important philosophical truths in a way other sources cannot. A weakness is that the philosophers in question tend to extrapolate what authentic painting amounts to on the model of their own favoured artists (Cezanne in the case of Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze, and Van Gogh in the case of Deleuze and Heidegger). Their approaches also tend to suppress the fact that painting *qua* pictorial transforms space in a way that cannot be explained except through its own unique structures, and that this has outcomes rather at odds with the aforementioned approaches themselves.[7]

There is another issue. Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze are very critical of the idea of space considered independent of our more total mode of being-in-the-world, or embodiment. They are also very critical of how this independent concept of space has influenced pictorial art – especially (in the case of Merleau-Ponty, at least) in relation to the primacy that has been given to linear perspective. However, Crowther's criticism of these thinkers suggests that pictorial space itself has an autonomy that feeds back on our total immersion in the world, offering a kind of release from its restrictions.[8]

We will return to this question further on. Before that, it is necessary to briefly consider some other contemporary theories of pictorial art. Jacques Ranciere (in contrast to the philosophers just mentioned) has used the ideas of the aesthetic and the image in numerous works. However, his use of these is greatly globalised – almost journalistic.[9] This leads to a few provocative and interesting ideas concerning the cultural status of the visual arts but it does not really address the ontological structures that, historically and conceptually, gave pictorial art its cultural status. In particular, the pictorial basis of the pictorial arts (and its core of spatial transformation) is not an issue that is central to his approach.

Theorists other than philosophers have given consideration to pictorial images. W.J.T. Mitchell, for example, in a work provocatively titled *What Do Pictures Want?* asks the question

> How is it,…,that people are able to maintain a "double consciousness" towards images, pictures, and representations in a variety of media, vacillating between magical beliefs and sceptical doubts, naïve animism and hard headed materialism, mystical and critical attitudes ?[10]

His answer to this is a more detailed exploration of an approach developed in his previous works. The approach claims that

> the interaction of pictures and texts is constitutive of representation as such: all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no "purely" visual and verbal arts, though the impulse to purify media is one of the central utopian gestures of modernism.[11]

Mitchell's books look at this heterogeneity of meaning in many different contexts and this emphasis in his writing has found widespread acceptance. Writers such as Rosalind Krauss, Griselda Pollock, Norman Bryson and Kevin Moxey have undertaken a radical questioning of traditional approaches that emphasise the artwork as an aesthetic object and affirm the importance of a "canon" of great artists. Their basic strategy is to assess the artwork as a set of signs situated within a broader field of signs, a field of heterogeneous "discursive practices" whose configuration is driven by factors such as race, gender, sexuality and class interests. Such viewpoints have little time for "essentialist" ideas of "universality" and would probably regard a position that stresses art as a progressive formative activity as a "fetishization" of white, male, middle-class Eurocentric values. For them, values are relative to the signifying/social contexts in which they arise, and require a "genealogy" that unmasks the social conditions under which they are constructed.[12]

The attraction of this approach for the understanding of pictorial works is very strong. In particular, it invites us to view visual meaning as fundamentally determined by the complex network of signifying practices, historical circumstances and intentions that meet in the individual work. The visual work is a multi-layered text. To see the work as distinctively artistic is, in the terms of poststructuralist approaches, to execute a "closure"; that is, to privilege one limited aspect of the work at the expense of the work's more complex reality as a position within a field of signifying practices and historically specific power-relations.

However, pictures are not just texts that happen to be visual. Indeed, their visuality itself articulates something more fundamental. If something exists and is visible, then it must occupy space.[13] The demands of existing in space give rise to vision and the other senses, not vice-versa. We are *of* space and immersed in it. This means that even if space is only one aspect

of a more total human condition, it is an extremely privileged aspect. The fact that pictures are spatial, and change how space appears, must accordingly be implicated in the complex different ways they provide information for spectators. No matter how much heterogeneity may be involved in pictures, there are good reasons to argue that it is emergent from pictorial representation's basic idioms of spatiality and the distinctive aesthetic meanings connected to these idioms.

We are claiming, then, that the dimension of space-forming in pictorial art has been distorted, or at best neglected. All the main approaches are oriented towards different aspects of spectatorship. No matter how intricate and provocative such analyses may be, they are no longer cutting-edge; indeed, they have become something of an orthodoxy. A real cutting-edge approach will be developed only when pictorial art's space-forming aesthetic basis has been adequately theorised.

That being the case, it has to be acknowledged that our spatial senses utilise symbols in order to be understood. Animals find their way through space on the basis of instinct and simple cognition. Humans deal with space through understanding the possibility of occupying different positions within it at different times. Our cognition of space is made intelligible through language-use and symbols. It follows, therefore, that if we are going to explain the aesthetic meaning of pictorial art, we must find a way of theorising its spatial and signifying aspects as an integrated structure.

This strategy might lead to the accusation of "essentialism." However, John Lechte argued that "even if the forms of the image change, there is still something essential about the image…" [14] As Lechte presents it, this essential feature is not at all rigid and timeless. It allows the image different ways of being realised and made meaningful under different historical circumstances. Hence if we can offer an integrated account of pictorial art as spatio-symbolic structure historically developed, then we will not be giving in to naïve essentialism.

A sceptic might still be unconvinced by the possibility of this "integrated structure." Indeed, one of the reasons such emphasis has been placed on heterogeneity and the conditions of spectatorship is the more widespread doubt about the stability of meaning as such. Rosalind Krauss, for example, makes use of Roland Barthes and refers enthusiastically to Ferdinand Saussure's ideas, which lie at the basis of Barthes' theory of the text. For Krauss, Saussure effectively blocks the notion that meaning in language is constituted by a correspondence between linguistic signs and the objects for which those signs are labels. Instead,

> meaning came to be seen as the result of an entire system by which the use of [such a word as] rock can be deployed instead of a large set of possible alternatives or substitutions, say, stone, boulder, pebble, crag, agate, lump of ore… the choice one makes within this system of substitutions betrays a whole array of assumptions keyed to vastly different vocabularies: of scale, of technical (geological) mastery, of picturesque emotion, of verbal precision or generality. There is a system of interrelated difference, and in order to enter this system, the word rock cannot be tied uniquely to this lump of matter at one's feet. Meaning is not the label of a particular thing; nor is it a picture of it. Meaning,…, is the result of a system of substitutions.[15]

In this approach, meaning is an unstable affair determined by a sign's position in a field of other signs. The large-scale implications of such an approach call into question the strict boundaries we draw between more general categories and forms of discourse. It follows, then, that trying to find an 'integrated structure' for the spatial and symbolic features of pictorial art is in conflict with the very conditions of signification.

However, the poststructuralist approach faces the problem of explaining how – in the face of this theoretical instability of meaning – it is even possible for human beings to communicate with one another (both directly and over periods of time). The problem here is that of how systems of signification – fields of meaning – are themselves possible. Crowther has correctly identified what is at issue here through his focusing on (ironically enough) a term from Derrida, namely 'iterability.'

For Crowther, iterability is that stability of meaning – centred on the material identity of signs and their definite rules of use – that provides constants across different contexts of employment.[16] It is a logical presupposition of any systematic signifying activity whatsoever. Without iterability, signs would have no 'third person force'; they would not be shareable.[17] The iterable dimension is a factor that stabilises the field of meaning, and we shall return to it a little further on.

We now arrive at a very important stage in the argument. We wish to explain pictorial art's space-forming aesthetic meaning, and have acknowledged that this involves integrating spatial and symbolic structure with the idea of historical realisation. We have also seen that our cognition of space is so important that it should not be simply absorbed into a more total conception of the human condition. Indeed, its privileged status may be significant for the aesthetic meaning of pictorial art. The question arises, therefore, as to whether there is a theory that will connect all these features.

There is such a theory. Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms has assigned great importance to space not just as the basis of existence

but as a focus of historically developing understanding, based on signification's most fundamental structure. Cassirer also had a strong idea of art as a formative activity. He hoped to write a book on art as a symbolic form, but in his lifetime produced no more than a few papers and book chapters on the topic. Unfortunately, as we shall see further on, they are actually of limited use in the understanding of pictorial art.

However, already in this Introduction we have used ideas from Paul Crowther's work. Crowther is one of the few contemporary philosophers outside the immediate circle of exegetical scholars on Cassirer to make extended use of Cassirer's ideas.[18] His work also stands outside the existing orthodoxies because it continuously emphasises all art media as processes of formation that change how the world is perceived or experienced. It also draws upon the histories of the arts (especially visual modes) with an unusual breadth and depth of engagement, and actively brings together the Anglo-American and phenomenological traditions of philosophy as well as the Kantian and Hegelian ones. Crowther's three recent phenomenological studies of the visual arts in combination offer the most important extended philosophy of visual art written to this day.

There are many angles that allow Crowther's general philosophical strategy to be seen as a continuation of the philosophy of symbolic forms that extends it into new areas, and which allows its incomplete features (such as the lack of a full theory of imagination) to be compensated for. Crowther's aesthetics, especially, offer in effect a completion of Cassirer's unfinished philosophy of art by radically extending our understanding of what the making of artistic symbolic forms involve.

However, showing the interesting ways Crowther extends the philosophy of symbolic forms is not the main purpose of our book. Our purpose involves combining Cassirer's and Crowther's ideas in arguments that demonstrate how pictorial art extends our basic involvement in, and cognition of, space, and give it a special kind of aesthetic meaning. In effect, we will explain what is unique about pictorial art by reference to the creation of pictorial space and its historical development rather than spectatorship. Crowther's work in aesthetics generally involves a Copernican turn that reverses the main object of analysis from the audience's perception of artworks to what they embody as created and made transformations of how the world appears. This Copernican turn will be the guiding methodological principle of the present work.

It is hoped also that that the linkage of Cassirer to Crowther's continuing work will show how philosophically important a resource the former's central idea remains. Indeed, the link with Cassirer also gives Crowther's interpretation of art the kind of broader support that

Heidegger's, Merleau-Ponty's and Deleuze's general philosophies give to their ideas about art. Brought together, Cassirer's and Crowther's ideas make the philosophy of symbolic forms into an on-going project.

Interestingly, there are two immediate points of important conceptual connection between Cassirer's and Crowther's work that allow the former's approach to space and the latter's approach to pictorial art to be formulated in a single theory that integrates all the features referred to above. For example, we just encountered Crowther's notion of iterability as a rejoinder to poststructuralist scepticism about meaning. The way Crowther explains this further offers the important link to the basis of Cassirer's philosophy – without the existence of stable material signs, there would be no field of rules and relations allowing for their connection to other signs for referential purposes, and without this field there would be no stable structure allowing signs to be invested with a specific identity. In Crowther's words,

> Iterability presupposes a relation between sign and field of signification, which is one of reciprocal dependence. And that dependence is one manifestation of a broader functional unity, which stabilizes the whole sphere of human existence. Consciousness can only identify some item by subsuming it under a more general form—such as a group, a class, a kind, a whole, or a series, or whatever; but reciprocally, it can only operate with such general forms in so far as it can comprehend them as functions of their individual instances.[19]

Although Crowther does not say so, this passage actually offers an excellent paraphrase of what is a major tenet (perhaps the major tenet) of Cassirer's central philosophical position (which we will explore in more detail as this book progresses). Indeed, Cassirer's own theory can take us to a level that embodies the phenomenon of iterability and explains an even more fundamental point.

He argues, for example, that we can only understand how sensuous particulars (such as spoken sounds) can be the bearers of symbolic meaning

> if we assume that the basic function of signification is present and active before the individual sign is produced, so that this producing does not create signification, but merely stabilizes it, applies it to the particular case. Since every particular content of consciousness is situated in a network of diverse relations, by virtue of which its simple existence and self-representation contain reference to other and still other contents, there can and must be certain formations of consciousness in which the pure form of reference is, as it were, sensuously embodied.[20]

Here Cassirer is emphasising that the existence of a field of signifying relations is stabilised through its exemplification of the fundamental *act of producing* meaning. All symbolic forms – including art – are manifestations of this *basic symbolic function*.

The exploration and development of Cassirer's position here (in relation to further ideas from Crowther) will accommodate the contemporary importance of signification as the basis of knowledge and overcome the aforementioned poststructuralist scepticism about an integrated theory of pictorial art.

The second important shared feature that allows us to connect Cassirer and Crowther is the emphasis placed by both on the historical development of cognitive structures. In very broad terms, for example, Cassirer's symbolic forms are logically distinctive modes of signification that give structure to our understanding of the world and can be historically developed so as to become more comprehensive in their articulation. The experience of space is a major example of this. In Crowther's case, his theory of culture holds that all cultural practices (including pictorial art) have a normative significance that is logically connected to how they are historically developed.

We can bring out what is common to Cassirer's and Crowther's positions here by reference to the idea of *progressive articulation*, a term invented by Crowther. He defines it as "a process of cumulative and sometimes erratic advancement where each form of knowledge is able to build on its previous stages to become more internally complex and detailed and more comprehensive in its explanatory and/or methodological scope."[21]

Though Crowther does not use the term in relation to Cassirer specifically, this describes the major historical emphasis in Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms perfectly. Such forms can be refined in such a way that any one stage of their development is able to build upon previous stages and relationships to other symbolic forms. In this way, they comprehend their objects of investigation in ever more unified and comprehensive ways. Progressive articulation is the way, through history, a symbolic form is *logically developed* in terms of the realisation of its referential scope.

The importance of this is that it allows a rehabilitation of the idea of advances in art by reference to the progressive articulation of *pictorial space*. In recent times, the idea of artistic advance and progress has not found favour. It seems to be regarded as a positivist notion where one historical phase is understood as being better than those that preceded it. However, an emphasis on the progressive articulation of visual art is one

that emphasises difference rather than improvement. The fact that one phase of historical development advances over its predecessors means that it deals with new sets of syntactic, semantic and narrative issues. But this does not make it superior to its predecessors. Indeed, the problems faced by earlier phases are likely to be recurrent ones that they remain uniquely qualified to negotiate. Progressive articulation does not involve evolutionary supersession, in other words, but rather an expansion of the field of possibilities available to artistic media. It is uniquely placed to allow the restoration of a non-hierarchical notion of artistic progression.

In order to situate pictorial art in relation to basic symbolic function and progressive articulation, a proper ontology of pictorial art needs to be included. As we said earlier, Crowther will provide this, but before setting out the chapter-by- chapter arguments of our study as a whole, it is worth briefly considering the limitations of existing alternative attempts to develop Cassirer's understanding of the relation between art and symbolic form.

The most substantial attempt to do this is a book-length study in German by Marion Lauschke.[22] She offers a profound understanding of the intellectual origins of Cassirer's approach to art in German thought (in particular, the aesthetic theory of the Enlightenment and early Romantic period). The other half of her book addresses art as a symbolic form. It provides important material – especially in thinking through the role of beauty and style in art, but it does not offer any significant account of the spatial basis of pictorial art. Nor does it address the question of progressive articulation.

Carmen Metta has written a short book about Klee's theory and practice in relation to Cassirer's philosophy.[23] This is very interesting as far as it goes, even if its use of technical terminology is sometimes hard to follow. Unfortunately, Klee's own ideas about representation often provoke many more questions than they provide answers. The question of pictorial art in general is not addressed (but, to be fair, this is not a part of the book's remit in the first place).

A much more directly relevant consideration of Cassirer and pictorial art has been offered by Peer F. Bundegaard.[24] He rightly holds that, in Cassirean terms, for visual art to be considered a genuine symbolic form, it must involve ways of constructing meaning that have their own distinctive aesthetic "grammar." For example, "if the painting expresses some meaning, it should be possible to define the pictorial means thanks to which this meaning is articulated in the painting."[25] Bundegaard explores this in relation to perspective and the notion of a "non-generic viewpoint" derived from cognitive psychology.

His treatment of perspective is very interesting in its details, and one of his examples will be made good use of later in this book. However, his approach also has a significant limitation. Bundegaard treats perspective as a symbolic form in its own right – but if it is, then so are all the other ways of unifying pictorial space, or the major stylistic ways of presenting it. Symbolic forms are everywhere. However, it is much more philosophically economical to regard perspective as just one aspect of a developing universal pictorial idiom. To understand it, we must first identify how the basic symbolic function is embodied in picturing as such. (We will do this in much detail in Chapter 4.)

Bundegaard's other key notion – the "non-generic" viewpoint – is, alas, just about unworkable. It arises through perceptual phenomena such as the Necker Cube – when our striving to identify the constant that subtends different appearances of the same object is rendered difficult, and has two incompatible outcomes. Bundegaard supposes that if this occurs in art, the perceptual nuisance value of non-generic appearances will be removed. Indeed, he thinks this will provide a useful way for thinking of visual art as a symbolic form.

However, the point of non-generic perception is that it is based on the failure of perception to attain exact recognition of what some given object or state of affairs actually is. But in the case of seeing the different aspects of a picture – say as a material object and as a three-dimensional "space" – there is no similar conflict. We can identify the different aspects and think of them as different ways of regarding the object without any problem. These aspects do not at all conflict in the way that non-generic perceptions do. If anything, exactly the opposite is true. The two aspects complement each other when considered as features of an artistic whole. We hold, accordingly, that much better models are available for understanding the different perceptual aspects of pictorial art.

This is true also of the philosopher of art usually most closely linked to Cassirer – Suzanne Langer. She refers to Cassirer at a number of points in her celebrated *Feeling and Form*,[26] and, indeed, the book as a whole is dedicated to his memory. There are also some illuminating discussions of "semblance" and "virtual space" that are very useful, but (as we saw earlier in this chapter) she is unable to make good on the unique spatiality of the pictorial, and she certainly does not consider pictorial art's progressive articulation as a symbolic form.

II. Our Strategy in this Book

In Chapter 1, we explore Cassirer's approach to the basic symbolic function as a foundation of objective knowledge. We argue that if it is to work, it must be linked to an adequate theory of imagination. For this purpose, we use Crowther's critical revision of Kant's schematism, not only because Cassirer often affirms the importance of schematism but also because Crowther's treatment of it is perfectly congruent with the way Cassirer approaches this ontogenetically. Cassirer also suggests that the possibility of objective knowledge is necessarily connected to the unity of subjective experience, and imagination has an important role to play in this. To explain this, we use Crowther's extensive recent work on the imagination in general.

Having established a basic Cassirer/Crowther theory of cognition, we move on, in Chapter 2, to look at how this works in the experience of space. We emphasise the way it is progressively articulated through the historical intersection of different symbolic forms, notably myth, mathematics and science. We take particular note of the way the human perception of space is expressed through the acquisition of language. Attention is paid to the way specific symbolic forms engage with this expression. We trace, also, the transition from mythical to astrological conceptions of space. The argument then focuses on the modern scientific conception of space, emphasising the way Cassirer shows how this conception gradually becomes less and less dependent on models and concepts abstracted from the world of sense perception.

Chapter 3 considers the spatial basis of pictorial art and its relation to the imagination. We start by expounding Cassirer's own relevant points and their significant limitations. We then turn to Crowther's detailed theory of pictorial art, emphasising how he dwells mainly on the way its virtual space transforms how "real space" appears. He gives special attention to the unique planarity of pictorial art and to the importance of linear perspective. We also consider his important move in theorising abstract art as an "allusive" version of pictorial art that evokes possibilities from what Crowther calls "transperceptual space." We then consider the aesthetic basis of pictorial art by emphasising the role of style and imagination in it.

Having established a theory concerning cognition and the cognition of space, and also a theory of space and aesthetic structure in pictorial art, in Chapter 4 we make the move that brings all this together. The chapter begins with a recapitulation of the progressive articulation of space per se described in Chapter 2. Consideration is then given to the way the concept

of pictorial space might also be understood as receiving such articulation. To show what is involved here, we analyse pictorial representation in Cassirean terms as a symbolic form produced through powers of human artifice. It is then argued that the production of pictorial space has a logical structure whose constituent principles can be identified through reference to ideas in Hildebrand, Panofsky, Wölfflin and Crowther. These 'basic functional principles' (as we call them) together define the logical scope of pictorial representation as a way of representing three-dimensional phenomena in a two-dimensional plane. They relate to the generation and unification of pictorial space and to different ways of making it determinate. Through these strategies we show how pictorial space can be said to be progressively articulated in terms of its internal logical structure.

In Chapter 5, we finally make the move from the progressive articulation of pictorial space as such to the progressive articulation of pictorial art. According to Crowther's general normative theory of art, the vast majority of pictures are formulaic, and produced so as to serve definite functional ends. However, when a work is original in its configuration – and especially when this originality centres on innovation or refinement in relation to the basic functional principles – it draws attention to the specific way it engenders pictorial space. It becomes aesthetically significant. This is not a case simply of enjoying form. Pictorial representation becomes art when, through its originality, we are made attentive to its formative power of space construction. When these original developments also engage with the basic principles described in Chapter 6, we have a case for arguing that art has been progressively articulated – it has advanced to a new phase. However, this is a non-hierarchical advance because the previous stages of artistic material can provide material that is reinterpretable in new ways.

At the end of the chapter, matters are taken much further through arguing that Crowther's book *The Language of Twentieth-Century Art: A Conceptual History* shows how new functional principles founded on reciprocal relations (or the "existential subconscious") have developed in twentieth-century pictorial art. Crowther regards this as a new phase of pictorial space but does not see the connection between his own position and Cassirean progressive articulation. This leads him to misinterpret the work of Mojca Oblak – an artist he addresses in detail. If he had understood her work correctly, he would have seen that it portends a progressive articulation of pictorial space that is far more radical than the 'new' phase of pictorial space he describes.

Finally, in our Conclusion, we summarise the main steps in the argument and give consideration to the broader meaning of pictorial art.

We conclude that symbolic function and imagination allow space to be progressively articulated, and that we have shown how pictorial art is a continuation of this – the creation of a unique aesthetic space in the fullest sense.

Notes

[1] See, for example, Dominic MacIver Lopes's *Understanding Pictures*, Clarendon Press, 1996.
[2] Robert Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience: A Philosophical Inquiry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.
[3] Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, Thames and Hudson, London and New York, 1987.
[4] In Chapter 1 of *POAV*, 9–28.
[5] Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, Routledge Kegan-Paul, London, 1963, 85.
[6] See, for example, Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' included in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter. Harper and Row, New York, 1975, 15–87; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, Northwestern University Press, Evanston Ill., 1993; Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: the Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith, Continuum, London and New York, 2003.
[7] Crowther has criticized all these thinkers in the very greatest detail. For Heidegger, see *POAV*, Chapter 3, 45–60; for Merleau-Ponty, *POAV*, Chapter 5, 79-114, and also *TPMA*, Chapter 4, 102–131; for Deleuze, see *TPMA*, Chapter 1, 14–56.
[8] See the works by Crowther cited in the previous note.
[9] See, for example, Jacques Ranciere, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott. Verso, London and New York, 2007.
[10] W.J.T.Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2006, 7.
[11] W.J.T.Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, University of Chicago Press Chicago, 1995, 5. A useful survey of different ways of reading visual images can be found in Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001.
[12] An interesting exception to the reductionist aspect of the tendencies just described is John Lechte's *Genealogy and Ontology of the Western Image and its Digital Future*, London and New York, Routledge, 2012. Lechte describes his own approach as a 'genealogy' but does not use the term to reduce the meaning of the image to the different historical conditions under which it is formed. He wants instead to emphasize that he is choosing one avenue of analysis from the many enabled by the image's flexible ontology. His acknowledgment that the image's

many historical realizations are informed by such ontology may be a parallel to Crowther's use of iterability. Lechte's account is also strong through its notable attentiveness to the different historical nuances of the aesthetic as a recurrent mode of experience.

[13] The only thinker to emphasize space over vision is David Summers in his magnificent book, *Real Spaces: World Art History and Western modernism*, Phaidon, London and New York, 2003. This book deserves to be even more influential than it is because it provides an astonishingly comprehensive study of the history and varieties of pictorial space. Naturally, it touches on many philosophical issues, but does not develop them as much as one would hope. This is especially the case with Summers' treatment of the relation between pictorial space and imagination.

[14] Lechte, *Genealogy and Ontology*…, op.cit., 3.

[15] Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Guard and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge Mass., London; 1985, MIT Press, 3.

[16] *LTA*…, 10.

[17] Ibid, 11.

[18]Especially important are *LTA*, *THI*, and *PAP*. *PAP* is of special importance, as it develops a complicated theory of culture, value and knowledge on explicitly Cassirean lines. Chapter 3, indeed, is a substantial study and critical development of Cassirer's epistemology; see 49–65. As far as we know, no one in the field of Cassirer scholarship has paid any attention to these discussions.

[19] Ibid 11.

[20] *PSF*, Vol. 1, 106.(See also *EM*, 225–226).

[21] See Crowther *PAP*, 23.

[22] Marion Laushke, *Ästhetik im Zeichen des Menschen: Die ästhetische Vorgeschichte der Symbolphilosophie Ernst Cassirers und die symbolische Form der Kunst*, Felix Meiner, Hamburg, 2007. From the viewpoint of the present book, it is surprising that Laushke does not give more consideration to Cassirer's relation to Panofsky.

[23] Carmen Metta, *Forma e figura. Sul problema della rappresentazione in Ernst Cassirer e Paul Klee*, Quodlibet, Macerata, 2009.

[24] Peer F. Bundegaard, "The Grammar of Aesthetic Intuition: on Ernst Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Form in the Visual Arts." *Synthese*, Vol. 179, No.1, 2011, 3 – 17. A further recent discussion of Cassirer and aesthetics is Thora Ilin Bayer's "Art as Symbolic Form: Cassirer on the Educational Value of Art", *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* Volume 40, Number 4, Winter 2006, 51– 64. Bayer's account takes into consideration two lectures on aesthetics that Cassirer did at Yale in the 1940s. Her account is very interesting in tracing the relation of Plato to Cassirer's aesthetics, but her conception of Cassirer's understanding of art as a symbolic form is somewhat generalized.

[25] Bundegaard, ibid., 49.

[26] Langer, *Feeling and Form.*…, op. cit.

CHAPTER ONE

SYMBOLIC FUNCTION AND IMAGINATION

Introduction

The present chapter first considers Cassirer's account of the general symbolic function. We then consider the emergence of this function on the basis of Crowther's theory of imagination, and finally introduce Cassirer's account of symbolic form.

I. The Basic Symbolic Function

Cassirer asserts that philosophical speculation began with the Pre-Socratics, but it was Plato who effected the major shift of which the philosophy of symbolic forms was an eventual outcome. Cassirer argues that the Pre-Socratics identified being with the existing thing and took it as a fixed point of departure whilst Plato recognised this as a problem to be solved. He did not inquire into the order, condition and structure of being but rather into the meaning of being as a concept [1]

In so doing, Plato throws that concept into a state of flux wherein, as thought about it develops, the unity of being becomes comprehensible as the goal rather than the beginning of the philosophical project. Cassirer conceives philosophy's general task as based on a survey of the 'special sciences' as a whole – asking whether the individual symbolic structures through which they articulate reality merely exist alongside one another, or whether they are expressions of the same basic human function. If the latter is the case, then philosophical critique has to uncover the universal conditions of this function and its underlying guiding principle.[2] This is the basic task of the philosophy of symbolic form. Cassirer's goal is to comprehend the specialised structures of different forms of knowledge, relate them to one another as a whole, and through this identify the basic formative principle exemplified in them all.

Cassirer, like Hegel, requires that this search for unity take into consideration how the forms of knowledge develop, internally and in

relation to one another, as a *logical and historical progression.* He sees the immediate antecedents of his own project lying in a crisis of modern philosophy, which was eventually resolved by Kant.

For both rationalism and empiricism, the concepts are abstracted from data presented to consciousness in basic acts of attention. [3] However, Cassirer argues that if this theory is examined more closely, it can be seen to involve a vicious circle in which what is sought is confused with what is given, and actually takes that which is to be proven as its premise.[4] Kant's Critical Philosophy overcomes this philosophy by shifting the question of the concept away from its ontological sense – as abstracted from the given – towards an epistemological grounding. This new grounding means that

> instead of starting from the object as the known and given, we must begin with the law of cognition, which alone is truly accessible and certain in a primary sense; instead of defining the universal qualities of *being*, like ontological metaphysics, we must by an analysis of reason, ascertain the fundamental form of judgement and define it in all its numerous ramifications; only if this is done can objectivity be conceivable.[5]

In Kant's general epistemology, the objectivity in question here is that described by the laws of science and, in particular, mathematical physics. However, even Kant found this notion of objectivity too narrow, and broadened his notion to include ethical freedom (in the second *Critique* and other writings) as well as art and natural organic forms (in the third *Critique*). The fact that Kant himself inaugurates a process of logical articulation and differentiation of the nature of objectivity in relation to different universes of discourse is taken as an important clue by Cassirer. Kant's Copernican Revolution no longer refers to the logical function of judgement exclusively but also encompasses every feature and principle through which the human cognition forms reality.[6]

Cassirer, accordingly, investigates these different symbolic forms and the formative principle that underlies them. We must, however, make a qualification. Cassirer calls his own method Critical Idealist, and clearly derives a great deal of inspiration and a lot of working concepts from Kant. However, he need not be tied exclusively to this Kantian framework. Indeed, the focus of our book goes beyond it and centres on the way Cassirer traces the basic formative principle (or symbolic function as we call it from now on) to its origins in embodiment. His means of doing this are found in his phenomenological descriptions of the ontogenesis and phylogenies of the symbolic function – features that go far beyond the Kant framework. To state it in workable terms requires, however, that his

position is expanded through an adequate theory of imagination. We will use Crowther for this.

II. The Basic Symbolic Function and Crowther's Theory of Imagination

The crudest form of perceptual relation that higher animals have to their environment is described by Cassirer as "expression." He holds that in non-human animal consciousness, the sensory field is perceived in terms of "sensory melodies"– rhythms of attraction and repulsion, allure and indifference, and the like. A similar expressive dimension features in human consciousness and is of major cognitive importance. For Cassirer, this "expressive" character is not a mere subjective appendage added to the objective content of sensation; it is actually an essential feature of perception and the "original colour" of reality. The reason for this is that reality apprehended in its most original form is not that of the determinate world of things existing independently of the subject; it is instead our certainty of a "living efficacy" that is basic to experience. This access to reality is more a kind of felt orientation we reach towards than a datum of sensation. Expression is the experience of things as meaningful and important for us. Through it, reality is characterised.[7]

The importance of this cannot be stressed enough. It is all too easy to think of cognition as involving purely psychological mechanisms, but Cassirer's point[8] emphasises that reality is experienced through our affective and emotional involvement with it. This expressive dimension is gradually absorbed in broader symbolic functions but always retains a vital role; for example, in the intonations of speech.

This leads us to a difficult interpretative issue concerning the relation between the genesis of the symbolic function and the expressive level. What complicates matters is Cassirer's deep fascination with the mythical dimension of human consciousness and its important relation with the expressive. Again, this is focused in a useful passage.

> What is characteristic of primitive mentality is not its logic but its general sentiment of life. Primitive man does not look at nature with the eyes of a naturalist who wishes to classify things in order to satisfy an intellectual curiosity. He does not approach it with merely pragmatic or technical interest. …All his thoughts and feelings are still embedded in his lower original stratum. His view of nature is neither merely theoretical nor merely practical; it is *sympathetic*.[9]

The "sympathetic attitude" mentioned here is an expressive one that conceives all life – human, animal, organic, inorganic – as profoundly indistinguishable. The world is conceived as a kind of "society of life." This is the foundation of the myth as a form of articulating the world, and it is clearly connected to the expressive level. J.F. Krois has gone so far as to declare that "Cassirer places myth in the sphere of expressive meaning, *before* the spheres of common sense and theory."[10] Indeed "primitive man's basic relationship to the world is neither observational-theoretical nor practical-manipulative, it is simply 'sympathetic'…"[11]

This is a problematic reading of the passage from Cassirer. Cassirer does not place myth *before* the factors as Krois states. Rather his point is that in the overall mentality of primitive man, more advanced cognitive competencies are heavily immersed in the expressive dimension, and it is this that gives primitive mentality its "characteristic" mythic orientation.

However, Krois' misreading here is actually symptomatic of the great awkwardness in Cassirer's general discussions of myth in relation to the origins of cognition. The problem is that whilst Cassirer gives the impression that the mythic plays a role in the emergence of higher cognitive competencies, it also looks to be very much already in play for mythic formulation to be possible.[12]

Rather than struggling through Cassirer's theory of myth, however, we shall now focus on the "law of the formation of the whole," or symbolic function, which is the base of all cognition. First, for Cassirer, expression (as has been shown) is the most basic human orientation. Human sounds and gestures are able to articulate the expressive qualities of the environment through mimesis and analogy. Whatever its exact origins, however, the symbolic function has a distinctive character that Cassirer describes in the following terms:

> Out of the mass of impressions which pour in on consciousness in any given moment of time certain traits must be retained as recurrent and "typical" as opposed to others which are merely accidental and transient; certain factors must be stressed and others excluded as non essential. Upon such a selection, which we apply to the raw material of perception as it presses upon us from all sides, rests the sole possibility of relating perception to any object whatsoever.[13]

As already noted, for Cassirer, the selection involved here is not a process of abstraction. Rather it involves partial aspects or qualities being taken as representative of greater wholes whose total set of aspects or qualities are not immediately given alongside the particular aspect or quality to which attention is being directed. Cassirer also declares

> Only where we succeed, as it were, in compressing a total phenomenon into one of its factors, in concentrating it symbolically, in "having" it in a state of "pregnance" in the particular factor – only then do we raise it out of the stream of temporal change; only then does its existence which had hitherto seemed confined to a single moment in time, gain a kind of permanence: for only then does it become possible to find again in simple, as it were, punctual "here" and "now" of present experience a "not-here" and a "not-now". Everything that we call the identity of concepts and significations, or the constancy of things and attributes, is rooted in this fundamental finding-again. [14]

This is the most basic and 'natural' symbolic function. It is not merely formalised by language but makes language itself possible (a point that will be returned to again in a few moments). The symbolic relation Cassirer is describing here involves reciprocity of the particular and more general.[15] The particular can only be identified as a particular aspect, quality or instance (etc.) because we have a conception of that more general form of which it is an aspect (etc.). But reciprocally one could not have such a conception without having in some sense generated it on the basis of the previous experiences of these particular aspects (etc.).

This requires that a complex set of basic – natal even – cognitive capacities are in place. One of these is an achieved sense of the unity of the body; the others are a capacity to retain traces of sensory perception and a capacity to generate images of things. The retention of traces as a requirement will probably come as no surprise to most readers, but the capacity to generate images may strike some as a surprising precondition of the symbolic function. Again, this takes us into a very complicated interpretive issue.

What is involved here is a theory of imagination. Cassirer holds that humankind is able to view the form of things through making internal images of them and then manifesting these images. It is through this embodying and fashioning that the world attains a shape and bodily nature based on borders and definition. [16] However, as D.P. Verene noted, Cassirer does not have a well-developed theory of the image and imagination as such.[17] He tends rather to draw on Kant as an authority on this, and Kant defines the imagination in general as a capacity to represent in sensible terms that which is not immediately given to perception.[18] He also distinguishes between images, which are the province of the reproductive imagination and governed by laws of empirical association, and productive imagination, which is the actual capacity to generate images in the mind. Reproductive imagination is, in effect, the empirical use of the productive mode. However, this latter mode also has a

transcendental use because it furnishes conditions whereby the pure concepts of understanding that organise experience as an objective unity are able to apply. These are the *transcendental schemata*.

Kant's explanation of these is complex and obscure. The many commentators on him tend to treat his approach exclusively in the context of the *Critique of Pure Reason's* epistemology. Crowther is one of the very few commentators to argue for it having a more general cognitive importance, and he states it in a way that releases it from necessary dependence on Kant's general epistemology. Even better for our purposes, he does this by following the very route that Cassirer himself follows (when explaining the symbolic function); namely the relation between ontogeny and embodiment.[19] Indeed, we shall find later that Crowther's general theory of imagination (of which schematism is just one aspect) provides the vital connection between consciousness, memory and pictorial art.

Crowther's rethinking of schematism goes like this. Concepts are essentially rules (applied through specific judgements) whereby appearances are grouped together in a framework of objective connections. Any such ordering activity must encompass different periods of time. A causal connection, for example, can only be understood if we see it as an effect of previous connections and an instigator of future ones. To grasp this connection as an objective law implies, in other words, that we take it to have application, in principle, to other times and places than those presently experienced.

This suggests, in turn, that if concepts are to be formed and applied, then what Crowther calls a "trans-ostensive" capacity is required. Something can only be conceptualised as an object or event if our experience of time is stable. This stability is possible only if we have a representative power whereby we can track moment-to-moment changes of phenomenal appearance and, if called upon, project possible appearances of states of affairs that are not immediately present.

What Kant calls the "transcendental schemata" are the most fundamental employments of this capacity. Crowther interprets them in a particular way. They involve patterns of tracking and/or projecting appearance that enable our knowledge of objects as such. There are two aspects to this; on the one hand, in order to recognise specific individual phenomenal objects and states of affairs, we must know what the hidden aspects of them might be like (even if we have never actually seen them); on the other hand, to recognise something by means of a concept is to relate that something to membership of some class whose members can be encountered in places and times other than the ones presently given.