Introduction

by Christopher S. Wood

Panofsky's early theoretical voice has proved both resonant and elusive. This capacious essay on perspective, in particular, enjoys a reputation well outside the professional territory of art history. Yet that reputation has often overwhelmed the finer modulations of Panofsky's argument and obscured its theoretical provenance. To listen to the voice of the perspective essay again, to attend to its undertones, is a project of more than merely biographical interest. Panofsky, who was born in 1892, belonged already to a second generation of German critics of positivistic historical scholarship. These critics generally shared a vision of a more comprehensive science of culture, a scholarly practice that would seek to understand and not simply to accumulate data. Panofsky also belonged to a subset of critics sensitive to the inevitable deficiency of cultural history, namely the underestimation or neglect of a dimension of meaning proper to certain kinds of objects (texts, images), a dimension intractable to historical explanation. Artistic products, Panofsky wrote in 1920, "are not statements by subjects, but formulations of material, not events but results." Any historical treatment would have to acknowledge the autonomy of such an object, the impossibility of deriving the object from its phenomenal circumstances. This was the necessary first stage of any nonmaterialist cultural history.

This preliminary isolation of the work of art resembles the maneuvers of Russian Formalism and New Criticism. For both these parallel refinements of reading practice served, in different ways, the long-term
purpose of sharpening our sensitivity to the social character of the linguistic sign, and ultimately to the inextricability of the text from the world. The strategy was to isolate the work temporarily in order to grasp more clearly its deep structural principles, and then ultimately to reinsert the work into its primordial environment on more legitimate grounds. Indeed, Panofsky in “Perspective as Symbolic Form” was working within a methodological framework built by the early art historical Formalists: Heinrich Wölfflin and, above all, Alois Riegl. This is not an altogether obvious point. For it was not least Panofsky’s own (later) scholarly achievements that finally discredited art historical Formalism, indeed helped turn virtually the entire profession against it.

In his essay on Riegl’s term Kunstwollen, Panofsky condemned both the wild and irresponsible concession to the irrational power of the art object (the “Expressionist” art history of Wilhelm Worringer or Fritz Burger), and any resigned retreat into skeptical historicism. Panofsky endorsed instead Riegl’s “more-than-phenomenal” treatment of artistic phenomena. In Riegl’s visionary synchronic Weltanschauungphilosophie, tempered by a certain deliberate philological myopia, Panofsky saw the germ of a new art history, a reconciliation of materialist and idealist histories; he called it a “serious Kunstphilosophie.”²

Riegl had commenced his cultural history by introducing a new repertoire of formal categories. Haptic and optic, internal and external unity, coordination and subordination – like Wölfflin’s famous “principles” – were deep structural attributes of the work. Analysis of structure at this level transcended not only history, but also questions of function or value, beauty or meaning. Structural analysis revealed a pattern behind the temporal sequence of works of art, an internal telos or motivation, which Riegl personified as Kunstwollen or “artistic will.” Cultural history, then, would proceed by coordinating that will with something called the general Wollen of the epoch. Riegl said in the closing pages of Spätrömische Kunstindustrie that the Kunstwollen of an epoch, the prevailing structural principles of its artistic phenomena, “is plainly identical to the other main forms of expression of the human Wollen in the same epoch.” There is no doubt what to call that general Wollen: man is an active and sensory being disposed to interpreting the world “in
the way most oper and accommodating to his needs (which vary among peoples, places, and times). The character of this *Wollen* is embraced by that which we call the respective *Weltanschauung*.'

In the end, however, Riegl declined to answer the last synchronic questions about artistic phenomena. This reluctance to interpret has usually been condemned as an aestheticizing insulation of the art object from life. Riegl’s immediate purpose, clearly stated in the introduction to *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, was indeed to undermine the materialist art history exemplified by the work of Gottfried Semper. Riegl dismissed function, materials and technology as merely negative restrictions on form, mere “frictional coefficients,” and instead asserted the autonomy of formal development. Riegl scrupulously avoided confusing form not only with the functions that the physical work might have once served, or still serves, in the world, but also with the possible references to the world made by form, and the possible meanings that those references might have generated or still generate. This is why the *Kunstwollen* has been called a Husserlian “bracketing device.”

The art historian’s disengagement of objects from the world may very well stand as a correlative to various, more general convictions about the superiority of spirit to matter, or imagination to reason; about the detachment of the artist from society; about the inescapably self-reflexive and circular nature of interpretation; about artistic tradition carrying more weight than individual gestures of innovation. Early art historical Formalism was associated with versions of all of these. “The effect of picture on picture as a factor in style,” Wölflin said, “is much more important than what comes directly from the imitation of nature.” Wölflin’s aphorisms are the most often remembered, although others said similar things. But this does not mean (except in some extremely general and meaningless sense) that these methods were allied with aestheticism. On the contrary, the Formalists generally thought of themselves as emancipated from aesthetics: these were antimaterialist yet positivistic histories, sciences of the spirit. This is a paradox, for clearly the attribution of dependence or independence is related to the initial criterion of selection of the objects. It is generally easier or more natural to attribute independence to a sequence of objects selected by
an aesthetic criterion, for the work of art since Kant is normally defined as discontinuous with the very conditions that made it possible (the "world"), and underivable from those conditions. An authentically "aesthetic" history of art would altogether detach certain formal qualities from the work and hyponatize them as "style"; the history then becomes a pure morphology, a study of changes in form that are only incidentally played out in material works. Riegl, on the contrary, was hostile to any absolute or supra-historical aesthetic category; at any rate he would not incorporate such a category into his historical project. "Works of art" for him were simply man-made objects with some high level of artificial formal organization. He wrote about applied art or even entirely ordinary objects because, like works of art, they are subject to independent formal logic. For Riegl the primary level of facts was not style itself (the morphology), nor even the sequence of objects, but the Kunstwollen of an epoch, just as for Wölflin it was the form of seeing.⁶

It would be a mistake to dismiss Riegl, and for that matter Wölflin, as doctrinaire formalists who underrated the fullness of the relationship between the work of art and the world. Riegl was not blind to those grand images of cultural totality sketched by Burckhardt or Dilthey, and which would later animate Aby Warburg. Rather, the operation of filling in that image was simply too delicate and hazardous for his temperament. He was too scrupulous a philologist, too much a nominalist at heart, to complete his own project. Riegl truncated his Weltanschauungsphilosophie almost as a matter of conscience. Perhaps he was postponing the fulfillment of those ambitions to an old age which he never lived; or perhaps he was willing to leave the risks to his students.⁷

The most successful and at the same time most disastrous extensions of Riegl's Weltanschauungsphilosophie were indeed carried out by his own immediate successors and students, including Max Dvorak, and above all Hans Sedlmayr, Guido von Kaschnitz-Weinberg, and Otto Pächt, the core of the so-called Second Vienna School. They sought to drive Riegl’s structural analysis farther along its synchronic axis by refining and elaborating the categories of the initial pictorial analysis. Their ambitions were superbly ascetic. The latent structural principles of the work would alone yield the insight into the world that produced that work.⁸

10
The flaws of Viennese Strukturanalyse were the flaws of any structuralism: it was driven by a certain sentimental faith in the organic integrity of culture, in the mysterious interconnectedness of events; and consequently it tended to leave the crucial link between work and world strangely unexamined. The bracketing device that cut all the ordinary ties between work and world was originally a way of heading off crude propositions about the relationship between work and world; it set preliminary limits on what could be said about synchrony, about context. But this was a calculated risk. The initial bracketing often made it more difficult, or even somehow unnecessary, to find a path back to the world of ordinary events. Here is where Sedlmayr went astray. He discovered in works of art an appealing parallel universe, a "Welt im Kleinen," almost a parody of Heidegger's radically autonomous Kunstwerk whose adequacy to the world was no longer at issue. Strukturanalyse degenerated into a kind of nostalgic aestheticism with theological and even theocratic (not to speak of Fascist) leanings.

Any successes or failures of this method, then, followed from the inability of its practitioners to resist a temptation presented by Riegl. It is not far-fetched to cast this in ethical terms, for it is in just such terms that the Second Vienna School was repudiated, in America already in the thirties, in the German-speaking countries after the war. Panofsky in the teens and twenties was obviously exposed to the same temptation; what has been difficult to see is the extent to which he was vulnerable to that temptation. The distinction between aesthetic insulation and ascetic bracketing was one that Panofsky appreciated. Moreover, he thought he could resolve those antagonisms between philosophy and philology that had paralyzed Riegl.

Panofsky preserved Riegl's Kunstwollen only by fragmenting it. The concept survives in Panofsky only in shards, strewn about his argument in the form of a "Stilwille," in the verb "wollen," in words like "striving" and "ambition." He resisted the Kunstwollen because there was something amateurish about it. Indeed, Riegl used it precisely because it was not clearly derivable from academic philosophy, which he mistrusted; it was a homemade concept, and so Riegl used it with a certain confidence, and little anxiety about its ultimate legitimacy. Panofsky actu-
ally accepted Riegl's framing of the problem, but needed, on the one
hand, to camouflage or disperse his simplistic philosophical machinery
and, on the other hand, to replace it with a more professional model,
the philosophy of the "symbolic form." In effect Panofsky was trying
to buttress Riegl with neo-Kantianism. He reinterpreted the Kunstwollen
as the immanent Sinn or meaning of a sequence of artistic phenomena,
and then insisted that this Sinn was accessible only through analysis of
those phenomena according to a priori formal categories. This would
be Riegl with philosophical substance.

This adaptation often resembles the Vienna School adaptations of
Riegl. Panofsky's rhetoric was less bombastic and aggressive, and need-
less to say free of nationalist or racist undertones. Panofsky was more
attentive to philological matters and had more historical scruples; he
also relied more heavily, almost instinctively, on texts. Panofsky's struc-
turalism is hard to recognize because it is obscured and dissipated by
his philological habits (a resistance to systems, a tendency to wander
away from argument, a natural sobriety of tone). But his aims and even
his actual practice overlapped with those of the Strukturforscher. The
affinity between them now looks more important than the breach —
along the Kantian-Hegelian fault — described by Sedlmayr in 1929. The
image of the American Panofsky choosing history over philosophy is
thus rather misleading. In fact, he had made the essential move toward
a reconciliation of philology and philosophy well before emigration.
Panofsky's adaptation and extension of Riegl was more or less rounded
out by the mid-twenties, in the book on German medieval sculpture
and above all in the essay on perspective. And it is not obvious that that
move was reversible, that the philosophy could be disentangled from
the philology.

The precondition for the move from the level of "form" to the level
of "structure" was the disengagement of the work from the category of
the aesthetic. Riegl managed this quietly, in part by simple abandonment
of conventional terminology, in part by refusing to draw distinctions
between works of art and other artifacts. Panofsky, again, wanted more
substantial philosophical justification. He decided to consider artistic
perception as a special case of cognition. On the last page of Idea (1924),
Panofsky makes the fundamental neo-Kantian point about the incommensurability of cognitive models:

In epistemology the presupposition of this "thing in itself" was profoundly shaken by Kant; in art theory a similar view was proposed by Alois Riegl. We believe to have realized that artistic perception is no more faced with a "thing in itself" than is the process of cognition; that on the contrary the one as well as the other can be sure of the validity of its judgments precisely because it alone determines the rules of the world (i.e., it has no other objects other than those that are constituted within itself).

In a footnote, however, Panofsky admits a distinction between artistic perception and cognition in general:

The laws which the intellect "prescribes" to the perceptible world and by obeying which the perceptible world becomes "nature," are universal; the laws which the artistic consciousness "prescribes" to the perceptible world and by obeying which the perceptible world becomes "figuration" must be considered to be individual — or..."idiomatic." 12

To some extent the perspective essay collapses this distinction. It does this by taking perspective as its subject in the first place. Perspective made a promising case study not because it described the world correctly, but because it described the world according to a rational and repeatable procedure. Perspective overrode the distinctions of the idiomatic. This is what Panofsky means when he calls perspective the "objectification of the subjective" (p. 65, below), or the "carrying over of artistic objectivity into the domain of the phenomenal" (p. 72). Perspective encourages a strange kind of identification of the art-object and the world-object. It is perspective, after all, that makes possible the metaphor of a Weltanschauung, a worldview, in the first place.

Naturally Panofsky was self-conscious about his project to write the history of Western art as a history of perspective. In the second section, after the hypothesis about Vitruvius and curved perspective, he offers an initial justification of his topic:
Granted, this looks more like a mathematical than an artistic matter, for one might with justice point out that the relative imperfection, indeed even the total absence, of a perspectival construction has nothing to do with artistic value (just as, conversely, the strict observance of perspectival laws need in no wise encroach upon artistic “freedom”). But if perspective is not a factor of value, it is surely a factor of style. Indeed, it may even be characterized as (to extend Ernst Cassirer’s felicitous term to the history of art) one of those “symbolic forms” in which “spiritual meaning is attached to a concrete, material sign and intrinsically given to this sign.” (pp. 40–41)

This is not simply a plurality of possible meanings but a hierarchy. The first is the künstlerisch or artistic, which is made equivalent here to the aesthetic. Panofsky implicitly disparages “value” as a merely local and self-serving category; in the same stroke he grants artists their “freedom” and then dismisses their decisions as arbitrary or idiomatic. The second level of meaning is style as it was isolated and concretized by early Formalism, by Wickhoff, Riegl, Wölflin; perspective is at least this kind of meaning, and therefore a legitimate object of a scientific art history. But the most profound level is the “symbolic form.” This is the structural level so deep that the ordinary functions of form are suspended and excluded from the historical analysis. The essence of Cassirer’s theory of symbolic forms (as Panofsky read it) was the notion of a core symbolizing activity. The different spheres of human creativity were the “forms” produced by this activity. We recall that for Riegl, art had been merely one among various expressions of a central human Wollen, or a drive toward a “satisfying shaping of a relationship to the world.”13 Thus the symbolic form provided a philosophical vindication and completion of Riegl’s incipient Weltanschauungspolitik.

But how sharp was the resolution of Panofsky’s image of Cassirer? The proposed “application” of the symbolic form is never theoretically justified beyond the initial statement in the second part of the essay. This is somewhat discouraging. The practice or tactic of the essay is to juxtapose an art-historical narrative and a characterization of a Weltanschauung (which is often achieved by a narrative about intellectual history), and then marry them in a brief and dramatic ceremony. This
Junction does not necessarily bear up under close scrutiny. In the first section, for instance, after showing how difficult it has been since the Renaissance to overcome the habit of seeing in linear perspective, Panofsky makes the point that this habit was no mere arbitrary imposition upon the public eye: for the linear perspective employed by the painters is “comprehensible only for a quite specific, indeed specifically modern, sense of space, or if you will, sense of the world” (p. 34). What does it mean to slide from Raumgefühl to Weltgefühl only by way of an informal “wenn man so will”? Welt carries a heavy burden here; it is more than the physical universe, it is shorthand for experience in general. Does this mean that the experience of space is somehow central to or generative of other experience?

This association of experience in general with the experience of space is the first of two successive links that together connect world-views to paintings (and to other concrete formulations of thought). The second link in the chain is the relationship between the experience of space and the construction of paintings. In the sentence immediately following the remark just quoted about Weltgefühl and Raumgefühl, modernity is characterized as “an epoch whose perception was governed by a conception of space [Raumvorstellung] expressed by strict linear perspective.” This “expression” is evidently a simple and derivable relationship; it is a species of equivalency or mimesis. The expression of the Raumvorstellung in the picture entails no loss or transformation.

The same double linkage is proposed after the discussion of Greco-Roman painting in the second section: “Antique perspective is thus the expression [Ausdruck] of a specific and fundamentally unmodern view of space [Raumanschauung]...[and] furthermore the expression of an equally specific and equally unmodern conception of the world [Weltvorstellung]” (p. 43). Again there is an initial link between “space” and “world,” this time accomplished by a chiasmus that crosses the familiar term Weltanschauung with the new term Raumvorstellung. But what is the precise mechanism of the other link, the “expression” of the view of space in the painting? Panofsky divulges this by reformulating the famous question posed by Rodenwaldt about why Polygnotus did not paint naturalistic landscapes, and then reformulating his own answer
to that question offered in the *Kunstwollen* essay. To ask whether the antique painter “could not” or “would not” paint a certain way, Panofsky argued then and now, is to pose a false question. The matter was in fact out of the painter’s hands altogether, for the artistic “will” is properly an impersonal force. Panofsky speaks in Riegl’s voice: antique painters did not overlook Euclid’s Eighth Axiom and arrive at linear perspective “because that feeling for space which was seeking expression in the plastic arts simply did not demand a systematic space.” It is the *Raumgefühl* that “seeks” and “demands”; the artist is an instrument of *Kunstwollen*, and the exponent of the “immanent meaning” of the period.

This is a complicated piece of conceptual machinery. It functions slightly differently every time it is set in motion. In the context of seventeenth-century perspective, Panofsky argues that

the arbitrariness of direction and distance within modern pictorial space [*Bildraum*] bespeaks and confirms the indifference to direction and distance of modern intellectual space [*Denkraum*]; and it perfectly corresponds [*entspricht*], both chronologically and technically, to that stage in the development of theoretical perspective when, in the hands of Desargues, it became a general projective geometry. (p. 70)

Here the relationship between the *Bildraum* and its mathematical formulation is one of “correspondence”; elsewhere it is “expression”: “Once again this perspectival achievement is nothing other than a concrete expression [*Ausdruck*] of a contemporary advance in epistemology or natural philosophy” (p. 65). The most precise and complex statement of the various relationships is the final sentence of section 11, after the discussion of antique philosophies of space:

And precisely here it becomes quite clear that “aesthetic space” and “theoretical space” recast perceptual space in the guise of one and the same sensation: in one case that sensation is visually symbolized, in the other it appears in logical form. (pp. 44–45)

Thus art and philosophy are parallel transformations of empirical real-
ity, and both are in some sense controlled by an Empfindung which can only be the Weltanschauung. Only art, however, is a symbolic form: the relationship of philosophy to the Weltanschauung is logical and thus not problematic. This is why the diagnosis of art can refer interchangeably to the Weltanschauung and to the formulations of philosophy.

In a sense, it is unfair to extract Panofsky’s propositions from their contexts, as if to suggest that his arguments consisted of nothing but a series of imprecise manipulations and recombinations of philosophical terminology. But then he does argue in a peculiar rhythmic fashion, in cycles of quite sober philological and pictorial analysis culminating in brief synthetic pronouncements, like the conclusion to section II just quoted. These are rhetorically ambitious moments: they thrive on parallelism and paradox; they claim a certain aphoristic autonomy; in effect they offer closure and explanation in the form of linguistic, even grammatical, operations. This kind of writing certainly has its purposes; it can serve a cultural criticism, or a philosophical history. But Panofsky’s cultural history also claims a certain historical verisimilitude. Panofsky’s account of the morphology, the sequence of works of art, is understood as reliable; this is his métier, in a sense. But the verisimilitude of the entire cultural history is contingent upon the reliability of that double link between the history of art and the Weltanschauungen. If it is a function, it must be regular and intelligible; it must be capable of being both differentiated and integrated. Otherwise the linkage will have no diagnostic value.

This may look like an unreasonable demand. But most cultural histories, and certainly Panofsky’s, do claim diagnostic power, that is, the ability to derive initial conditions from cultural products. Such histories are still operating within a framework established by the natural sciences. They survive on a postulated causal relationship between a primary layer of conditions or events and a secondary layer of symptoms or documents. The limits of the explanatory power of this diagnostic model – the limits of its scientific claims – are set by archaeology or some other philological procedure. As a general rule, close historical scrutiny will always disrupt and invalidate causal relationships. (Philologies are of course themselves methods subject to limits, and can
claim no more objectivity than any given method of scientific observation. They are corrected by more exacting philologies, and these in turn by still more exacting disciplines; and so on in an infinite regression, until some threshold of human sensitivity or tolerance is crossed, and the method is found persuasive.) For philology is always hostile to philosophical explanation, to determinations of meaning grounded in scientific principles of inquiry. In order to satisfy the exigencies of philology, Panofsky was in the end constrained to reduce the symbolic form to a species of merely adequate or mimetic representation.

This antagonism between the historicist scruple and the structuralist imagination is revealed most graphically in Panofsky's awkward chronological coordinations of art history and intellectual history. Synchrony is never better than approximate. Modern projective geometry as worked out by Desargues corresponds to the directionless space of Descartes, but it also corresponds to Alberti's costruzione legittima and to Kantian epistemology. The conceptions of space of Democritus, Plato and Aristotle all correspond to Greco-Roman landscape painting. The Aristotelian revival of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries corresponds to High Gothic sculpture. These are great blind spots in Panofsky, spectacular moments of irresponsible synthesis, forgiven because they serve as mere rhetorical punctuation of lengthy and substantive arguments. But what do they reveal about those arguments? The two kinds of events, philosophical and artistic, run in parallel because they derive from a common Weltanschauung. Because their relationships to that Weltanschauung are different — one is logical, the other symbolic — the time scales may diverge. But once they are out of synchrony, we lose our grip on the Weltanschauung. We are reduced to coordinating entirely unrelated sequences of events without any sense of why they should be coordinated. The Weltanschauung is stripped of its historical reality, exposed as the hypothetical least common denominator between art and philosophy.5

Philology is especially lethal to diachronic structures. This is why Riegl was so suspicious of teleologies. The only one he accepted was the one he built himself, upon synchronic foundations. Panofsky installed a new diachronic structure: the problem-solving model. Pictorial devices like perspective solve technical problems that arise when previous
INTRODUCTION

devices are no longer considered effective. The evolution of the representational devices is presented as a series of resolutions of conflict, of “conquests” (p. 55). This agonistic rhythm is mirrored on a grander temporal scale in Panośky’s dialectical model of historical change. Panofsky conceived of historical movement as a series of syntheses. This is still conspicuous in Early Netherlandish Painting (1953) and in Renaissance and Renascences (1960). In the perspective essay it surfaced at the beginning of section III, in the theory of “reversals”:

When work on certain artistic problems has advanced so far that further work in the same direction, proceeding from the same premises, appears unlikely to bear fruit, the result is often a great recoil, or perhaps better, a reversal of direction. Such reversals, which are often associated with a transfer of artistic “leadership” to a new country or a new genre, create the possibility of erecting a new edifice out of the rubble of the old; they do this precisely by abandoning what has already been achieved, that is, by turning back to apparently more “primitive” modes of representation. (p. 47)

It is hard to say whether the local problems and solutions are mere symptoms of the universal dialectic, or on the contrary the dialectic is composed of countless particular dialectics. At any rate, this is well beyond Riegl. The source is not hard to find; Panofsky elaborated in Die Deutsche Plastik:

The Hegelian notion that the historical process unfolds in a sequence of thesis, antithesis and synthesis appears equally valid for the development of art. For all stylistic “progress,” that is, each discovery of new artistic values, must first be purchased with a partial abandonment of whatever has already been achieved. Farther development, then, customarily aims at taking up anew (and from new points of view) that which was rejected in the initial onslaught, and making it useful to the altered artistic purposes. (p. 28)

This places a special burden on the historian, needless to say: he or she will want to show that historical individuals conceived of these problems in this way. Philology will virtually always show that they did not.
Moreover, this abstract diachronic will is incompatible with the synchronic will, the will of the culture or the worldview to express itself in art. One of the two perpendicular wills must be dominant; they cannot both claim mimetic power. If the diachronic will is so strong as to be almost predictive — at one point Panofsky says: “we can almost predict where ‘modern’ perspective will unfold!” (p. 54) — then the synchronic will is reduced to a simple, necessary copying function. One suspects the opposite to be true as well: if one has faith in synchronicity, then the destiny of the diachronic will is no longer a mystery. Antiquity, for example, recognized direction as an objective attribute of space “by intellectual-historical necessity” (p. 70).

It is telling that philology is somehow less disruptive in those passages in the perspective essay on medieval sculpture. Since here the topic is not really perspective at all, the analysis can proceed outside the dominion of the perspectival heuristic model. These are the most difficult passages in the essay, and the closest to Riegl. The analytical model is introduced already in section II, when anthropomorphic and corporeal (haptic) classical art is compared to painterly and spatially unified (optic) Hellenistic art:

Yet even the Hellenistic artistic imagination remained attached to individual objects, to such an extent that space was still perceived not as something that could embrace and dissolve the opposition between bodies and nonbodies, but only as that which remains, so to speak, between the bodies. Thus space was artistically manifested partly by simple superposition, partly by a still unsystematic overlapping. Even where Greco-Roman art advanced to the representation of real interiors or real landscape, this enriched and expanded world was still by no means a perfectly unified world, a world where bodies and the gaps between them were only differentiations or modifications of a continuum of a higher order. (p. 41)

The manipulation of a priori structural categories is abstract and flexible enough to permit a direct comparison with modern Impressionism, and later with Expressionism. Once the categories are established, Panofsky can stretch the horizons of his argument. Section III begins by pro-
longing this analysis into a general morphology of medieval art, a vast Hegelian schema of advances and reverses. This morphology is conducted in terms of framing devices, surface values, the binding power of the plane, coloristic unity, the homogeneity of space, the emancipation of bodies from mass. The morphology takes place in the historical present tense: it is an explanation rather than a narrative. These pages are indeed what Hubert Damisch calls Panofsky’s real *contribution* to the philosophy of symbolic forms, and not merely an application of that philosophy to art history. They are the true outline for a philosophical art history, not pre-positivist (Hegelian) but post-positivist.

The hostility of philology to explanation is more conspicuous in the relatively well-documented periods — antiquity and especially the Italian Renaissance. Panofsky’s own philological work contributes to the erosion of synchronic systems simply by interposing networks of biographical and circumstantial detail between theories and pictures. Moreover, since Panofsky has imbedded his analyses of antique and Quattrocento paintingly perspective within a much vaster synopsis of Western representations of space, embracing even the relationship of sculpted figures to architecture, rationalized linear perspective comes to look merely like one of many available tactics for representing space, and not necessarily the central and most prestigious achievement of Renaissance painting. In some ways perspective was only a compositional device, or perhaps even a stylistic gesture. The finer the grain of historical detail, the harder it becomes to justify the power conceded to perspective within the *Weltanschauungphilosophie*.

And yet painterly perspective remains the dominant motif of the essay; indeed, in a footnote Panofsky says that the essential purpose of the essay is to differentiate antique and modern perspectival systems. This is in part because perspective remains an irresistible heuristic model, because it encourages the symbolic unions he proposes. Panofsky exploits perspective constantly in double entendres encapsulating the symbolic relationship between art and worldview. He concludes, for example, that the spatial system of Trecento painting was constructed out of “elements” already present in Byzantine painting (projecting cornices, coffered ceilings, tiled floors and so forth); “it merely required
the Gothic sense of space to join these *disjecta membra* into unity" (p. 55). The epistemological achievement of perspective is equally an art historical achievement: perspective brings space and architecture into coordination, just as Giotto and Duccio synthesized Byzantine and Gothic art. Nor can Panofsky resist using an unhistorical but systematically expedient concept of a *Sehbild* or internal visual image (which is closely related to but evidently not quite identical to the retinal image). The fundamental distinction between Panofsky’s antique and Renaissance perspectives is this: the ancients produced superficially false pictures because they would not abandon what they knew about the truth of perception (p. 43). This assumes that the object of representation was not the thing itself but our mental image of it, our *Sehbild*. But surely it is far from obvious why anyone would want to reproduce the results of vision. (Indeed, Wittgenstein wondered how one ever could do so.) As Joel Snyder has pointed out, it is the modern perspectival picture that furnishes the idea of a *Sehbild* in the first place. Perhaps there was even something aberrant in Alberti’s and Leonardo’s desire to depict the way objects look, rather than to depict them the way they actually are and then simply to allow subjective vision to operate upon the depiction.

It is in the end this chimerical *Sehbild* that brings down one of the most sensational ambitions of the essay. Panofsky began with the promise of undermining the claims to legitimacy or naturalness of linear perspective. This project, born of an ascetic relativism worthy of Riegl, has always been the basis of the perspective essay’s celebrity. It is this claim that has attracted the attention of philosophers and perceptual psychologists. Whether or not perspective is in fact an arbitrary convention is not the issue here. For Panofsky in any case fails to fulfill his own promise; indeed, he rather quickly backs off from extreme relativism. The *Seabild*, or retinal image, becomes an objective criterion of realism. Antique perspective is more faithful to the truth of perception than Renaissance perspective because it attempts to reproduce the curvature of the retinal image; the truest of all perspectives would be a complete curvilinear construction.

This is not to say that the *Sehbild* has the last word. Renaissance perspective, although unfaithful to perception, nevertheless had in
Panofsky’s eyes the virtue of instituting a perfect equilibrium between the claims of the subject and the object. Panofsky was always drawn to tripartite schemas, to the reconciliation of opposites. Linear perspective, like Kantian epistemology, involves a necessary abstraction from empiricism. In the end, Panofsky makes the literalism of Greco-Roman perspective look as pedantic and pointless as Hume’s skepticism. Linear perspective may be vulnerable to attacks from positions of extreme subjectivism or extreme objectivism. But its occupancy of the moderate center is perfectly secure; Panofsky grants it the same universality that he grants Kant’s reconciliation of rationalism and empiricism, which he calls “critical philosophy.” He found in the a priori categories an absolute standpoint. He saw no way out of the problem that Kant had framed, and no reason to seek a way out.

That way out, paradoxically, might equally have been generated by perspective. “Perspectivism” since the Renaissance also means relativism: it suggests that a problem is always framed from a particular point of view, and that no point of view is intrinsically superior or more reliable than any other. In granting Renaissance linear perspective special status, Panofsky moved away from Riegl. The extension of Riegl’s project in the opposite direction, toward an absolute historical relativism, was never carried out, except insofar as it has been proposed by the philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend. Feyerabend radicalizes Thomas Kuhn’s model of the history of science as a sequence of incommensurable paradigms by arguing that paradigms do not change for any rational or even intelligible reasons. Here Feyerabend actually invokes the art history of Riegl. Moreover, his prime object-lesson is fifteenth-century perspective. For even here, where painting is sometimes indistinguishable from science, there is simply no stable criterion by which the accuracy of the representational model can be evaluated. Linear perspective is just another artistic (and scientific) “style.”

Panofsky said as much; but then he went on to say, in effect, that perspective was more than a style. He was unprepared to accept, as Feyerabend would, the arbitrariness of the history of culture, of history itself. Feyerabend ridicules the Hegelian assumption “that the change of an idea must be reasonable in the sense that there exists a link between
the fact of change and the content of the idea changing. This is a plausible assumption as long as one is dealing with reasonable people.”

Feyerabend’s position is the natural extension of a rigorous and anti-contextual philology. At the moment when Panofsky invoked those two volitional mechanisms, the problem-solving model and contextualization (the symbolic form), he moved beyond philology.

And yet it would be a mistake to interpret Panofsky’s iconology as a retreat to philology, as is so often done. Although Panofsky in America abandoned entirely the rhetoric of will, the essential diachronic and synchronic structures of the perspective essay remained intact. And once these structures had been installed, any further philological work was destined only to expose and perpetuate their inadequacies. Iconology, in the end, has not proved an especially useful hermeneutic of culture. What it tells us about a culture is usually tautological (something like: this was the kind of culture that could have produced this work). For Damisch, Panofsky departed essentially from Cassirer when he accepted the totalizing metaphor of the Weltanschauung. Panofsky was unwilling to perceive a divergence of symbolic systems, to suffer a culture with “faults.” Philology would have corroborated exactly such a divergence.