

# ***Neither Here Nor Elsewhere: Displacement Devices in Representing the Supernatural***

Ken Wilder\*

*University of the Arts London*

ABSTRACT. How might the supernatural be represented in those religious paintings that imply a continuity between the virtual space of painting and the real space of the beholder? Such an implied continuity, dependent upon an engagement where the beholder imaginatively realigns her frame of reference to that of the picture, might be thought to threaten a necessary distance demanded of religious works. This paper examines how a number of painters exploited innovative displacement devices, utilizing inherent ambiguities as to where a painting is relative to its beholder through the withholding of perspectival distance and positional cues for a discrete section of the work.

## **I.**

In the *Ecstasy of St Francis*, from the Upper Church of the Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi, the Saint, enveloped by cloud, hovers between the heavenly and earthly realms. As Hubert Damisch notes in his *A Theory of /Cloud/*, the ‘cloud introduces a break into the fabric of dramatic and theatrical relations: it removes the saint from the common space and makes transcendence appear as an antithesis in a representation conceived in strictly “human” terms’ (2002, p. 101). Cloud is used as a signifying element within a pictorial structure that is characterised by a shallowness of space — what Erwin Panofsky refers to as an aggregate space (1991, p. 63). It is the signifying role of cloud that establishes the separation of supernatural and mundane realms. Given that the viewer’s position remains largely

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\* Email: k.wilder@chelsea.arts.ac.uk

undefined, this separation does not as yet impact upon the beholder's implied relationship to the virtual space of the painting. Damisch argues that 'From the motif (of cloud denoted by a signifier made "in its image") one moves, again with no break in continuity, to the *theme* (the miraculous vision, the opening up to divine space)' (2002, p. 20). As with Giotto's *Ascension*, from the Arena Chapel in Padua, it is the motif of cloud that here resolves the essentially two-dimensional division of the picture into different realms.

The integration of the supernatural element into a shallow pictorial space is thus realized primarily through symbolic means. But perspectival representation introduces its own difficulties with respect to depicting the supernatural. As Rona Goffen notes, 'Naturalism or Realism is not necessarily suited to the supernatural themes of Christian art' (1998, p. 2). With the shift from a late medieval aggregate space to the 'systematic' space of perspective, painters faced a real problem in how the supernatural might be plausibly depicted within the latter's unified spatial logic. It is a logic that includes (at least with certain works) the implied location of an implicit viewer relative to the pictorial space. While such positioning *is* a factor with some late Giotto works, the viewer is not located with any kind of precision. But for those perspectival works establishing a spatial continuity between real and fictive space, the implied presence of the beholder has a fundamental impact upon strategies for representing the miraculous within such an implied continuum and spatial proximity.

The use of signifying elements to depict the miraculous persists throughout the Renaissance and into the Baroque. But from Masaccio onwards, this is supplemented by new spatial strategies deploying specifically perspectival means to depict the supernatural realm. Displacement devices are introduced that selectively contravene, and yet are not inconsistent with, perspectival representation. These devices complement, and sometimes supersede, earlier models. It is fundamental to my argument that, unlike the Giotto model, these spatial strategies are dependent for their effect upon the overcoming of our externality to the self-enclosed world painting presents. But they also establish different levels of reality that place strict limits on the spectator's implied participation, providing what Sven Sandström terms a necessary distance for the religious image (Sandström 1963).

**II.**

Any abandonment of the beholder's externality is dependent upon a kind of imaginative engagement I shall loosely term, after Merleau-Ponty, *seeing-with*: a seeing *according to* the painting. This is a pictorial seeing ancillary to any perceived resemblance of content, and is subject to the will (i.e. a *use* to which we put pictures), where the propositional imagining of the beholder's physical presence is itself founded upon the work structuring an imagined face-to-face encounter. Now I have argued elsewhere that the *vehicle* of such imagining is a form of 'spatial' mental imagery, where imagined representational distances are integrated with, and penetrate, an occurrent perception of pictorial content. With such 'spatial' imagery the perceived shape and colour properties of pictorial objects are bound (or anchored) to our sense of extrapersonal space using depth and positional cues found within the painting. We imaginatively realign our frame of reference to that of the painting. There is a functional separation in how we process 'what' the picture represents and 'where' such content is experienced as being situated, a separation that is consistent with the functional dichotomy between the ventral and dorsal pathways of the brain, which in turn process object and spatial properties.

The structuring of such an imaginative encounter is a prerequisite for overcoming (and/or problematizing) the extraneousness of the viewer to the virtual world of the painting. The paintings I draw upon in this paper constitute specific examples of the kind of engagement afforded by such imagining, in that the distancing devices they utilize in turn depend not only upon an implied proximity, but importantly the potential for utilizing inherent spatial ambiguities in pictorial seeing to problematize the location of discrete sections of the painting.

**III.**

Masolino's *Foundation of Santa Maria Maggiore* offers what now seems a rather amusing early attempt to subject the vaporous element of cloud to the foreshortening characteristic of perspective; yet the painting still relies on a combination of aureole and cloud, 'read' *as* signs, to effect the required separation of earthly and heavenly realms. This separation is pri-

marily registered in terms of the two-dimensional organisation of the picture surface, rather than in terms of pictorial depth. The same is essentially true for Mantegna's Uffizi *Resurrection*, where, despite the greater apparent realism, the enclosing hills limit the work's implied depth. Mantegna sharply distinguishes between the stylised clouds, which bear the weight of Christ, and the realistically rendered atmospheric clouds of the work's background. The former, along with the cherubim, delineate an enclosed mandorla, establishing the requisite separation.

Giovanni Bellini, by contrast, makes no such distinction in his later version of the *Resurrection*, from the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, abandoning stylised clouds. Christ, while loosely associated with the naturalistic clouds in the background, rather disconcertingly ascends, defying gravity. He has no visible means of support. The disquiet follows from the implication that Christ floats in an undifferentiated space: cloud, *as* sign, no longer functions as support or spatial marker (in much the same way that Bellini relinquishes the need for Christ's halo). And yet His position introduces a new ambiguity, in that perspectival cues to Christ's location are withheld. As Goffen notes of this work, 'Christ is not — cannot be — delimited by spatial boundaries' (1989, p. 143).

Contrary to Masolino's attempt to do so, it is the fact that *cloud defies perspectival means to represent it* that allows it to persist as 'a constructional ploy ... to introduce a divine group or symbol into a perspective construction' (Damisch 2002, p. 42). For Damisch, cloud serves the role of perspective's 'necessary counterpart' (p. 82). Correggio's *Assumption of the Virgin* might serve by way of example. Here, the octagonal domed ring, part of the real architecture of Parma Cathedral, opens up onto a virtual space that, in contrast to the space the viewer occupies, is unbounded or infinite: an amorphous or nebulous 'celestial' space that abandons architectural definition and perspectival representation. There is a radical asymmetry between the fictive and viewing space, although the work still orientates itself towards an 'instinctive' viewpoint, a position that John Shearman observes is 'at the bottom of the steps' that cross the nave just prior to the western supporting arch (1992, p. 186). The threshold between realms is seen as one that calls into question the very reality of the supporting architecture.

And yet the work is dependent for its experiential impact upon the very

architecture it seeks to negate. The viewer is situated by the processional demands of the physical building, and the painting draws this religious architecture into its content. As such, I believe it is a fundamental mistake to assume that Correggio's intent is purely, or even primarily one of illusion; rather, while undoubtedly utilizing illusory devices, such paintings draw upon the imaginative consent of the viewer, whereby the spatial schemata is allied to the works' religious content. This is illustrated by Correggio's *The Vision of Saint John*, which similarly creates a fictitious opening onto a celestial realm. As Shearman observes, two viewing positions are implied: a position in the nave of San Giovanni Evangelista, Parma, where Christ — in His second coming — floats in a way that is consistent with the heavenly perspective, the viewer a direct recipient of the vision; and a second position, which is reserved for the Benedictines in the choir, a viewpoint from which Saint John, obscured by the overhanging cornice from the nave, is revealed as the original recipient of the vision, in a less emotionally charged but more intellectually demanding experience of the scene (1992, pp. 183-184). This integration into the ceremonial functioning of the architecture acknowledges *differentiated* viewers, belying the notion of a work that is simply to be experienced as a *trompe l'oeil*.

#### IV.

If, as Damisch suggests, *cloud* remains 'a key term in the figurative vocabulary of Correggio', then it is a theme that, 'contradicts the very idea of outline and delineation and through its relative insubstantiality constitutes a negation of the solidity, permanence, and identity that define *shape*' (2002, p. 15). Yet while the signalling role of cloud is retained, I would argue that the spatial impact of Correggio's ceiling paintings is dependent upon situating a spectator within an architectural context that *frames* the fictitious celestial space. While cloud functions as the very antithesis of perspectival construction, the effect follows from Correggio's integration of the threshold between realms into both host architecture and fictional space, into the painting's inner and outer apparatus. This is consistent with the type of relationship that is afforded by works implying an external spectator as part of their content. This imaginative engagement, which draws in the spectator's experience of the surrounding architecture, is key

to the emotional affect of the dramatic rupture of such a situated relationship that the fictitious opening onto the celestial realm represents. This is not the mere 'reading' of signs, but a dynamic *interaction* between fictional space, host architecture, and an embodied viewer.

## V.

The work that perhaps demonstrates my position best is Masaccio's *Trinity*. As many commentators have noted, Masaccio structures a metaphysical distinction between different parts of the fictive realm by differentiating those parts of the painting that are depicted in front of the frescoed surface, including much of the architecture, the patrons and *memento mori*, and the religious scene implied as lying beyond. To quote Sandström, Masaccio ensures that 'the gradation of reality is made in accordance with the logic of the picture's content' (1963, p. 30). *Trinity*, however, includes a further gradation in reality, which is noted first by John White, and is picked up upon by, among others, Norman Bryson.

If the religious representation 'behind' the picture surface is itself differentiated from the viewer's reality, the Trinity (which exists *outside* of time) involves a further ambiguity as to its placement in space, and conforms to a viewing position located far above our heads, '*in a zone the body of the viewer cannot occupy*' (Bryson 1983, p. 108). Bryson refers to this as a 'post-Albertian point', a 'theoretical punctum' which contrasts with the empirical perspective of the first vanishing point. White, by contrast, explains it away pragmatically as Masaccio's refusal to excessively foreshorten the figures of Christ and God (1972, pp. 139-140). I would argue, however, that it is an astonishing conceptualization of the very real problem that I have been arguing faced early Renaissance painters, and constitutes a distinct mode for depicting the supernatural within the unified space of perspective. Allowing the cultic presence an independence from spatiotemporal markers that locate the external beholder, Masaccio devises a fundamentally new method for implying a necessary distance within an unprecedented proximity: *a proximity which directly results from the activating of the beholder's space*. The 'visionary' impact of such a spatial and temporal displacement refers back to earlier traditions of Christian art, while also registering the effectiveness of new perspectival means

to relate the virtual space of the painting to the actual church architecture. It offers a spatial metaphor to match the symbolic message of the representation of the Trinity.

I do not claim to be the first to note this, but I believe the role of *seeing-with* intensifies the significance of Masaccio's strategy. As Goffen has observed:

Removed from time, the Trinity is also removed from space, and despite Masaccio's dazzling perspectival illusion (or rather because of it) one cannot say with certainty where God the Father actually stands with his crucified Son. In other words, there is no precise answer to the question, 'Where exactly is the Trinity in Masaccio's *Trinity*?' (1998, pp. 22-23)

It is only by integrating the work's frame into its architectural context, and into both its inner and outer apparatus, that the inherent difficulty in saying '*where* the painting is' can be applied to a discrete fragment of the painting associated with the Trinity. This ambiguity exploits an anomaly of perspective: that while it can locate with precision an object in pictorial space, it can also withhold the necessary cues required to reconstruct this position. (We have already noted this in relation to Bellini's *Resurrection*.) This is why attempts to reconstruct the space of *Trinity* miss the point. As Goffen notes: 'Certainly, this spatial imprecision is purposeful, and its purpose is to place the Trinity beyond spatial limits and constraints, literally immeasurable, ultimately and profoundly mysterious' (p. 23). It is therefore no coincidence that *Trinity* occludes its horizon. It is the deliberate withholding of the vital information necessary to locate the Trinity in space, combined with the insistent frontal depiction of Christ and God, that introduces the required ambiguity of positioning in space — a device entirely dependent upon an otherwise strongly felt spatial continuum. The Trinity thus occupies another realm, another reality: an impact that is particularly apparent from a kneeling position, from a height that (particularly for a contemporary viewer) removes us from our normal spatial relation to painting.

In contrast to the use of cloud *as* sign, this is a solution that uses means entirely internal to the system of perspective in order to depict states *beyond perspectival means of representation*. As a break from the so-called

‘mathematical space’ of perspective (and yet not inconsistent with its internal logic), it constitutes a spatial equivalent to the role Damisch argues cloud plays, as perspective’s ‘necessary counterpart’. A discrete space is opened up within the painting, a visionary ‘gap’ in reality (the ‘unrepresentable’). Such a displacement is dependent for its impact upon the implication of an inviolable, sacred or dream-like space to which we are excluded, both spatially and temporally. This impact, in turn, is founded upon the kind of situated relationship and implied continuity provided by aligning our own sense of extrapersonal space with that of the painting. In other words, the impact of such a spatial displacement is predicated upon the imaginative (rather than illusory) engagement of an external beholder, an embodied presence *where the internal and external spectators fuse*, blurring the boundaries between real and fictive, inner and outer reality. If this situating of a viewer is largely achieved through a work’s framing, combined with perspective, then the subsequent spatial ambiguity follows from the concealment of the very means by which perspectival depth is implied, and by a corresponding rupture between such a displaced space and the work’s bounding frame.

## VI.

Some other examples might now help to make the argument more concrete. Perhaps the most extreme construction of a secondary viewpoint is Andrea del Castagno’s *The Trinity Appearing to St Jerome*, the top section of which includes an extraordinary view of the Trinity as if seen from above, from Heaven itself. The impact of the Corboli Chapel painting would have perhaps been even greater without the two child-seraphim, which were probably added later. And yet while this might arguably appear as a more radical departure from a consistent perspective than Masaccio’s *Trinity*, this later work nevertheless utilizes new perspectival means in a way that is more obviously consistent with earlier models in terms of the work’s surface disposition. Unlike the Masaccio, it does not directly engage our implied participation. However, as Michael Podro notes, ‘the embedding of one perspective within another’ does again register ‘divine intervention’ (1998, p. 29).

Mantegna's *Assumption* in Padua is more directly related to Masaccio's model. This has a centric point placed approximately at eye level, at a height just below the platform on which the saints stand. 'Our' space is infringed by the arm of the apostle, who embraces the column on the left; the frame is thus integrated into both the work's inner and outer reality. Like the earthbound saints, we gaze up at the vision of the Virgin, who seemingly floats towards our space as she ascends towards heaven, while occupying a space behind the painted architectural frame. Unlike *Trinity*, here we can verify the exact location of the second 'vanishing point', as it is indicated by the orthogonals of the column capitals, which conspicuously contradict those of the column bases. It is also playfully indicated by the two diagonally placed putti. Mary occupies a space that is impossible to locate in depth, consistent with her role as an intermediary between heaven and earth. In a sense, the last vestiges of cloud on which she stands, and the cherubim that frame her (forming a mandorla), are now partially, if not entirely, redundant as signs. While their role is certainly not superseded, it is allied to a spatial metaphor unimaginable without the discovery of a consistent perspective.

In Piero della Francesca's Sansepolcro *Resurrection*, the centric point indicated by the work's frame is about a foot below the sloping ground on which the soldiers sleep, and a foot or so above the viewer's eye level. The life-sized soldiers, asleep on sloping ground, conform to this viewpoint, painted with great care as if from below. But as in Masaccio's *Trinity*, White notes how Christ, here in His Resurrection, is depicted frontally — 'there is no foreshortening in the body or the head of the figure of Christ' (1972, p. 196). White observes that 'the viewpoint is laid aside as unimportant by the very artist who, for the first time, produced a thorough-going exposition of the constructional problems involved in the rigid application of the laws of artificial perspective' (p. 196). Yet I would argue that this is not a case of a diminishing of the importance of viewpoint; on the contrary, the registering of a deliberate break in mathematical perspective is entirely consistent with the idea of establishing a necessary distance within such an implied continuity. J. V. Field is surely right to suggest that 'on the theological level one can no doubt make a good case for taking Christ, risen from the dead, as belonging to an order of reality different from that of the everyday world inhabited by the soldiers and by the spectator'; how-

ever, I cannot agree with Field that this represents ‘a rather literal-minded interpretation’ of such a theological truth (2005, pp. 227-228). On the contrary, the subtle effect is not at all immediately apparent. The impact is most noticeably felt in the fact that while Christ’s eyes meet ours, they somehow pass through us. He again occupies a different realm, a gap in ordinary spatial experience.

The *Resurrection* thus divides into two clear zones, that of Christ and that of the sleeping guards. The background landscape symbolically registers the miraculous event by depicting the trees to the left-hand side without leaves, and the trees to the right-hand side in full leaf. Spatial and symbolic means for registering the miraculous thus combine; the means by which they impact upon the viewer, however, fundamentally differs. While the former requires our imaginative engagement, the latter is ‘read’ as sign.

## VII.

To summarise, the works I have been considering incorporate a distancing or displacement device in order to depict the supernatural within the unified logic of perspectival space. These devices are features of works that otherwise situate a viewer, where the architectural surrounding of the painting is imaginatively drawn into a direct relationship with the virtual space of the painting. Here the implicit and external beholders might be said to fuse in the resulting spatial continuum between fictive and real. But faced with a potential loss of necessary distance, the works also draw attention to the architectural frame and picture surface as temporal and spatial markers, integrated into a work’s inner and outer reality. The metaphysical divide between realms is allied to religious content. These works establish a further inviolability by opening up a ‘gap’ within perception — a space that is implied as being *outside* of normal spatiotemporal relations. This gap might alternatively be instituted by the suggestion of an opening onto an amorphous space that defies delineation, or a secondary viewpoint contradicting the work’s principal vanishing point. The former *selectively* abandons perspectival representation; the latter creates a deliberately ‘non-mathematical’ placement of a figure (or figure group) within an otherwise ‘rationally’ constructed pictorial space.

The experiencing of these respective distancing devices is dependent upon a particular kind of pictorial seeing where seeing-in is supplemented by iconic imagination. An imaginative engagement is necessary precisely because the *affective* aspect of such a ‘gap’ in perception is dependent not upon the disinterested ‘reading’ of signs, but the implication of a spatial proximity that is felt, and a continuity that is then broken: a gap that is experienced rather than decoded as a sign. Moreover, this gap is experienced in a way *that is constitutive of the work’s meaning*. *Seeing-with* provides the necessary vivid experience of pictorial space on which such reciprocity depends.

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