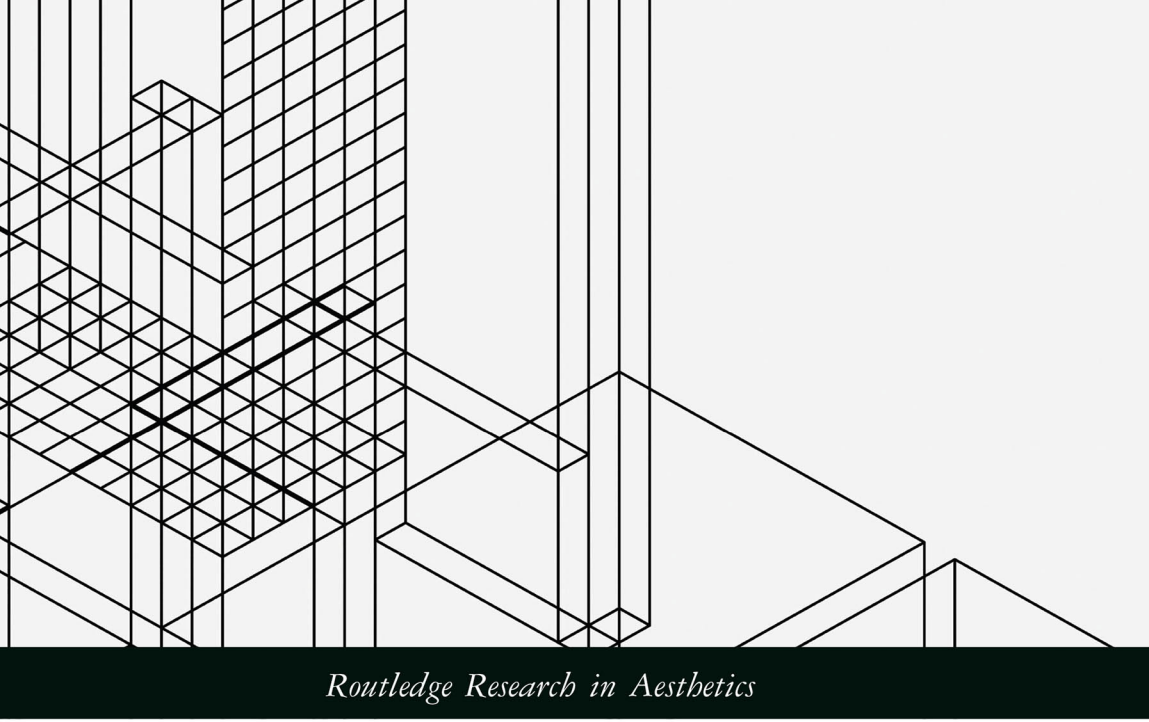
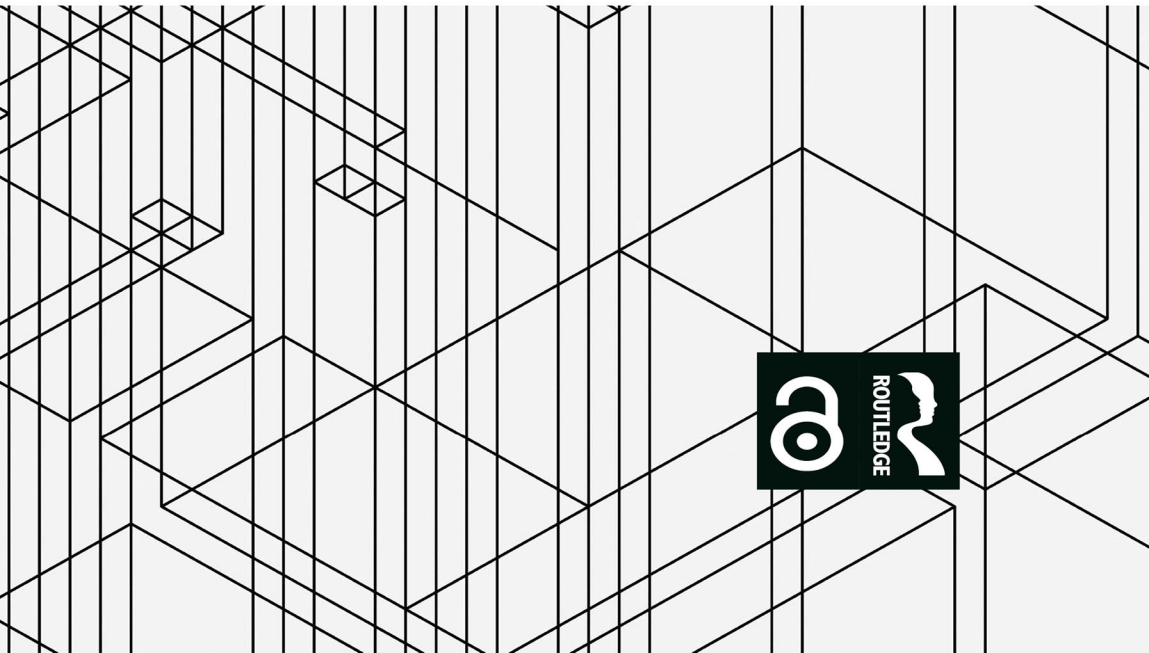


Routledge Research in Aesthetics

THE SHARE OF PERSPECTIVE

Emmanuel Alloa



"No other book brings together so many disciplinary fields, object domains, and historical periods in a consistently reasoned analytical overview that convincingly demonstrates the impossibility of any absolutistic generalization. Between universalism and relativism, both untenable and damaging, Alloa succeeds in synthesizing what cannot be isolated, without unduly lumping together so many different aspects of visual experience. 'Perspective,' usually considered subjectivist, and 'sharing,' considered an appeal to community, are patiently led into a lively conversation, with philosophers and visual analysts, artists, and students bringing in their different views. History and contemporaneity, also, are shown to be compatible, even in need of each other, so that conceptions that kept transforming throughout the centuries retain, not in stability but in movement, their relevance for the turbulent world of today. The itinerary through this amazingly rich treasure of knowledge and insight constantly stays captivating, for us today, eager to understand what we see better."

Mieke Bal, *Co-founder of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA)*

The Share of Perspective

This book is a defense of perspectivism in the age of post-truth. At the crossroads of science, art, and philosophy, it unearths a tradition that we must rediscover: the point of view is not only what divides, it is also what is shared.

Today, perspective is associated with individualism and personal viewpoints. But in an age of post-truth, the only robust answer to relativism lies in fact in a reappraisal of perspectivism. In discussion with contemporary new realisms of various sorts, this book makes a case why perspectivism alone can avoid us falling back into epistemological naivetés. A journey into the history of optics, art, philosophy, and social psychology, this book unearths the forgotten tradition of *perspectiva communis*, which makes perspective the vector of a common horizon. This book argues that vision is never immediate. Rather, to see *through* is the key to understanding the perspectival operation. We never see by ourselves—all seeing must pass through something other than itself, through the mediation and the detour of an apparatus or the witness of a third party. Besides the theoretical framework for this new approach to perspective, this book presents a series of case studies ranging from innovative interpretations of classical authors and key moments in the history of art—from ancient painting, trompe l'oeil, and Brunelleschi's experiment in Renaissance Florence—to the issue of perspective in the work of contemporary artists such as Robert Smithson.

The Share of Perspective will be of interest to scholars and advanced students working in aesthetics, phenomenology, art history, and the history of sciences.

Emmanuel Alloa is Professor of Philosophy and Chair for Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art at the University of Fribourg. His books in English include *Resistance of the Sensible World: An Introduction to Merleau-Ponty* (2017) and *Looking Through Images: A Phenomenology of Visual Media* (2021). He currently serves as President of the German Society of Aesthetics.

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The Share of Perspective

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Foreword

Martin Jay

Ever since its transformation from a term in the discourse of visual geometry to a synonym for subjective opinion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, "perspective" has been the source of diffuse and persistent anxiety. Take, for example, the ambivalent way it functions in that pioneering exercise in the sociology of knowledge, Karl Mannheim's 1929 *Ideology and Utopia*.[1] Reacting to what was then called "the crisis of historicism," in which not only the objectivity of historical knowledge but also the universal validity of ethical values had been called into question,[2] Mannheim acknowledged that the search for timeless absolutes was fruitless. Against the Marxist distinction between science and ideology, he conceded that all opinions were ultimately ideological because all were partial and grounded in different life experiences. To avoid the negative connotation of "ideology" as "false consciousness," however, Mannheim urged that we speak "instead of the 'perspective' of a thinker. By this term we mean the subject's whole mode of conceiving things as determined by his [sic] historical and social setting."[3] Having qualitative rather than merely formal implications, perspective "signifies the manner in which one views an object, what one perceives in it, and how one construes it in his [sic] thinking."[4]

Instead of vainly seeking universal truths and despairing when they elude us, it would be wiser to realize that "knowledge arising out of our experience in actual life situations, although not absolute, is knowledge none the less."[5] Validity does not transcend genesis but is instead enabled by it. For it is possible, Mannheim contended, to totalize all of the different partial perspectives expressing different life situations into a complementary assemblage that could do justice to the object in question. Or at least that might happen if we recognize that such perspectives can be identified with different social groups rather than with singular individuals trapped in solipsistic isolation. What he called "relationism" was thus an antidote to the debilitating relativism that fueled the crisis of historicism and left modern men and women adrift in a world without cognitive or moral certitude.

Mannheim, however, could not easily assuage the anxiety that accompanied the recognition of the grounded nature of the partial viewpoints that he claimed were ultimately reconcilable. For without the Marxist belief that a "universal class" with totalizing potential was latent in the proletariat, it was necessary to find a socially recognizable mechanism by which relationist complementarity could be realized. Looking around for an alternative, Mannheim hit on the expedient of what he called the "free-floating" or "unattached" intelligentsia (*freischwebende Intelligenz)*, which could somehow become "detached" from the partial perspectives of the groups out of which each member had emerged, each of which had access to only a portion of the truth. Working together, they could totalize the partial perspectives of specific social groups and resolve the conflicts engendered by "situationally determined" opinion. Objective knowledge could thus be generated once a common denominator underlying all of the disparate perspectives was found.

Mannheim's solution did little, however, to dispel the anxieties raised by the relativist implications of perspectivism, and critics were quick to raise cogent objections. Why assume that all perspectives are inherently complementary rather than antagonistic? If they are grounded in different life experiences, don't those antagonisms reflect the still unresolved conflict of interests—even, in Hegelian Marxist terms, contradictions—between different social groups, such as classes? If the reconciliation of perspectives were nonetheless possible, why assume the object whose partial aspects they fused into a whole was the fractured society of the present rather than a potentially mended society of the future, which Mannheim himself conceded was envisaged through utopian imagination rather than ideological—or perspectival—description? Why, furthermore, assign the role of universalizing class to unattached intellectuals who could harmonize the perspectives of the social groups out of which they had emerged, when in fact they themselves had institutional identities and particular interests, even after they transcended their original social origins, that belied their claims to float freely above the fray? Indeed, why assume that detachment and distance from one's initial standpoint will combine with others to generate a totalizing, integrative perspective rather than a flattened out and more abstract one, lacking the ability to perceive granular differences?

Mannheim's relationism and its limitations are not directly addressed by Emmanuel Alloa in *The Share of Perspective*. The closest he comes is in considering what he terms "irenic perspectivism" or "aspectism" and identifies with philosophers ranging from Leibniz with his optimistic faith in preestablished monadic harmony to Gadamer with his hope for the "fusion of horizons." And yet in a way, Alloa has taken on the same challenge that motivated *Ideology and Utopia*'s attempt to mollify the anxiety and lift the melancholy unleashed by perspectivism's undermining of trust in

our ability to achieve epistemological certainty, hermeneutic consensus, and ethical accord. Like Mannheim, he resists the equation, whose effects he traces in many literary representations of the issue, of perspectivism with compartmentalized isolation, its "reclusive" reduction to what he calls fragmented "shards" rather than complementary "shares." He does so, however, not by embracing Mannheim's sociological solution in which a privileged elite can provide a post facto "additive" remedy to the relativizing implications of individual points of view. Instead, he builds on the argument he made in his previous book, *Looking Through Images,* which drew on a phenomenological analysis to provide "a rehabilitation of images as irreplaceable agents of our everyday opening up of world."[6] By tarrying with the mediating role of appearances as more than transparent vehicles for the manifestations of objects in themselves—"saving the appearances" in the famous formulation attributed to Plato by the sixth-century Neoplatonist Simplicius[7]—he endeavored to free images from the suspicion that they were imperfect, even distorting imitations or representations of the real. For as Hegel among others understood, it was only through the multiplicity of appearances that ontological reality manifests itself, thus the importance of a logos of phenomena or a phenomenology. When later philosophers like Theodor W. Adorno talked of "an emphatic concept of truth," they drew on the Platonic notion of *em-phanein* or "entering into appearance."

Rather than moving then too hastily from the realm of visuality, where perspective was originally located, to its metaphoric function as a synonym for partial knowledge, *The Share of Perspective* provides a richly nuanced exploration of the connection between the two. As in the case of images in general, Alloa uses the tools of phenomenology, along with an extraordinary mastery of the history of philosophical, scientific, and art historical musings on vision, to enhance our appreciation of the ways in which our intercourse with the world is mediated by the inevitably perspectival way in which we encounter it. This means, among other things, situating the sense of sight in the living body with its two restless eyes and other sensual interfaces with external reality. It means taking into account the intersubjective mediations of those interfaces, which can never entirely shed their refraction through specific genetic contexts. It means acknowledging the temporal dimension of perspectival sight, which precludes not only an impossible "view from nowhere," to cite Thomas Nagel's famous phrase, but also a no less dubious view from what might be called "nowhen." It means putting pressure on the metaphor of a "standpoint" in which perspective is conceptualized as static and punctual rather than dynamic and ongoing and thus able to gaze forward into a probable future as well as bring formal order into the chaos of the past. And it means recognizing the inevitable role that external objects in a perspectival field play to

limit the sovereign imposition of a subject's given "point of view" on the production of knowledge about the world, thus acknowledging the "realist" moment of perspectival cognition.

Alloa's gamble is that any hope for a *perspectiva communis* or shared perspective, at least as an asymptotic telos, must draw on the lessons of actual visual experience rather than move quickly past them to purely epistemological or sociological remedies. It must register the sensual reality of perspective, which is more than just a symbolic form. The major lesson is that our visual experience of the world is always already mediated rather than passes unimpeded through a transparent window separating a seeing eye from the object of its gaze. That eye is itself inevitably blind to the conditions of possibility which allow it to see, those occluded "origins" that Husserl identified not with beginnings *ex nihilo* but with prior institutions and practices. Even the apparent "democratization" of perspective through the substitution of different individual subjects successively occupying the same standpoint—like waiting patiently for a turn at a telescope looking at the moon—fails to register the full phenomenological implications of transperspectival visual experience prior to any successive occupation of the same point of view. Instead, it tacitly duplicates what Foucault made famous as the "transcendental-empirical" doublet of bourgeois thought, in which an abstract universal macro-subject is instantiated in a no less abstract micro one.

This "democratizing" solution to solipsistic perspectivism is thus inadequate, but another approach, which Maurice Merleau-Ponty called intersubjective co-perception, promises to be more effective. It acknowledges the tangle of prior contexts or situations out of which the seemingly isolated subject emerges. These include a common affective environment. Although two or more bodies cannot simultaneously occupy the same place, the desire that motivates the attention of our seemingly singular gazes, as psychologists (and literary critics like René Girard) have pointed out, is often mimetically triangulated. Even Nietzsche, Alloa tells us, understood the diffuse affective matrix of perception and rejected the perspectivism of putatively incommensurable individuals that was to become a synonym for debilitating relativism.

In addition to the overlapping emotional valence of perspectival experience, a dynamic rather than a static account of its development, according to Alloa, registers the possibility of a lateral movement in which "agonistic" rather than "antagonistic" viewpoints can find common ground.[8] Or at least interweave to create a constructive pattern of "dia-agonals" that cut across the parallel lines of static perspectivism. Here, pluralism and situatedness are virtues for those who no longer vainly lament the impossibility of a singular God's-eye view—or more precisely, the unmediated intuition of a divinity that needs no corporeal sense to know reality. Because of the

ongoing temporality of visual experience, it acknowledges that there can never be a retrospective, all-encompassing view like the one enjoyed by Minerva's famous owl. There is no sweet spot in the succession of perspectival views and no privileged focal point that best captures objective truth. Fashioning a *perspectiva communis*, an "enlarged consciousness" in Hannah Arendt's sense, is thus always a task before us, even if one that can never be completely accomplished. Only when we recognize both the power of co-perception and its limits will the futile, unattainable quest for absolute certainty cease being a source of melancholic despair.

Alloa's stress on the inevitable mediation of visual experience also serves to alleviate a second, if perhaps less prevalent anxiety about perspective, which ironically reverses the relativist fears of the first. Once it emerged as the hegemonic scopic regime of the modern era, some critics came to fear, pictorial perspectivism was naturalized in a way that excluded or at least marginalized all other possibilities. The "geometrization" or "rationalization" of space in a perspectival visual field, emblematized by what Alloa calls the "primal scene" of Brunelleschi's experiment and codified by Alberti in the fifteenth century, was mistaken for the discovery of space as it was inherently organized. There was no longer a difference between divine and human space, as there had been in previous religious painting. The restless movement of two embodied eyes was stilled in favor of a singular, motionless, unblinking gaze frozen in time and located in abstract, isotopic space rather than idiosyncratic, concrete place. The trick of rendering three dimensions on a two-dimensional canvas or *perspectiva artificialis* was conflated with *perspectiva naturalis*, which could not be corrected, *pace* Ernst Panofsky, by rendering both as curvilinear rather than rectilinear. What in *Looking Through Images* Alloa called "the pictorialization of vision" and identified with Kepler and Descartes meant the subordination of vision as experienced phenomenologically to a system of conventional signs.[9]

The problematic implications of a totalizing perspectival vision extended beyond the history of artistic representation. Heidegger, for example, famously claimed that "the fundamental event of modernity is the conquest of the world as picture,"[10] in which the scientific worldview placed the human subject in a position of mastery over the objects placed in a geometrically structured perspectival field enclosed by a frame. Turning Nietzsche against himself, he worried that the modern subject's privileged standpoint in that field was complicit with the hypertrophy of his will to power. With the medium dematerialized and rendered fully transparent, there was nothing to stop the subject from controlling the objects splayed before him, turning them into a "standing reserve" for his projects of domination. A similar concern, Alloa reminds us, was expressed by Ernst Cassirer, who is often cast as Heidegger's adversary because of their famous "Davos

debate" in 1929. In his work on Renaissance philosophy, Cassirer also understood that "the transition from an aggregate space to a systematic space is based on a homogenization and thus a functionalization of space."[11] In an inspired reading of Robert Smithson's site-specific installations, Alloa further shows that this anxiety could still motivate the efforts of late twentieth-century artists to resist it through their work.

If, however, we realize from the outset that the hegemonic scopic regime based on geometrization is itself an artificial construct, we can more easily appreciate alternatives that were already manifest, for example, in anamorphic interruptions of the dominant perspectival order and which have often informed non-Western art. Modern technologies like the cinema provide added experiential confirmation of such possibilities. As we've known since the 1920s and Dziga Vertov's explorations of the Kino-eye, the audience in a movie theatre, unlike one watching a live dramatic performance, can all share visual experiences that defy the coercive power of rationalized Albertian space. Instead of occupying a common subject position at the vantage point of a geometrically organized field of orthogonal lines that converge in a mirroring vanishing point, it experiences a co-perception that can move swiftly from one visual order to another. Perspectivism, in other words, does not necessarily entail a naturalization of the hegemonic scopic regime established by early Renaissance painting but can accommodate a decentered gaze that breaks the rules of what was once claimed to be the only "legitimate construction."[12]

Although the contrasting anxieties generated by perspectivism—its fostering of solipsistic relativism and its dubious naturalization of a single spatial order—may be alleviated by a phenomenologically thick description of actual visual experience, there is one issue that nonetheless remains open. "Every perspective is always a perspective *of* something," Alloa initially tells us, "it is a point of view *on* an object, it is about the object." He later nuances this claim to read: "perspectivity is not a question of multiple points of view on an object, it is a way to bring about the object to which we refer."[13] In whichever formulation, however, the focus is on a subject knowing an object, either given or constituted, which suggests that the doubt raised by perspectivism is essentially epistemological.[14] Understood as enriched through dynamic co-perception rather than reflecting only a static and isolated standpoint, Alloa shows that the knowledge of the world that comes to us through situated sight, while never absolute, does allow us to work toward a shared *perspectiva communis*.

If we return in conclusion to the crisis that drove Karl Mannheim to concoct relationism as an antidote to the incommensurability of ideologies, it will be recalled that the anxiety it sought to assuage involved not only uncertain knowledge but also meaning and values. Alloa's phenomenological strategy, which assures us that our visual experience of the world is always

already shared, may appear at first glance more persuasive when we talk epistemologically about the perception of objects than when we address the clash of hermeneutic or ethical "views," where there are no objects to be seen. It may seem questionable, in other words, to fall back on Hannah Arendt's claim, which Alloa approvingly cites, that "under the conditions of a common world, reality is not guaranteed primarily by the 'common nature' of all men who constitute it, but rather by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object."[15] For it is not obvious that questions of meaning and value can be addressed through analogies with subjects perceiving identical objects through sensual experience.

Alloa is, of course, aware that the rhetoric of perspectivalism has also been adopted for non-epistemological purposes. "The notion that every act of interpretation is a profoundly perspectival," he tells us, "is taken up throughout the history of modern hermeneutics, notably by Wilhelm Dilthey, Paul Ricœur, or Hans-Georg Gadamer who, in his definition of hermeneutics, considers the task of the interpreter to place himself in 'the perspective within which [the author] has formed his views.'"[16] Alloa acknowledges that even students of its role in the history of painting have expanded its reach beyond the canvas. Discussing Hubert Damisch, he notes that the art historian "highlights a signifying dimension that goes beyond the framework of painting alone: he demonstrates the *perspectival aspect of all signification*, including language."[17] When, for example, substitutable grammatical shifters, like "I," "you," or "he," are used, their meaning is context-dependent in the same way that an apparently abstract visual point of view is informed by the corporeal and cultural milieu in which it is situated.

If Alloa's phenomenological analysis of the importance of actual visual experience as shared co-perception is to have purchase beyond solely epistemological questions, where the same objects are viewed from different perspectives, the force of Damisch's claim has to be taken seriously. For it helps us challenge the categorical distinction between epistemological questions on the one hand, and hermeneutic and ethical ones on the other. That is, if we accept the premise that perception is always mediated by triangulated desire and situated in genetic cultural contexts that are prior to the isolated standpoint of a singular subject, then the hard and fast opposition between knowable facts and subjective values seems less secure. Despite all the complex issues raised by Gottlob Frege's famous distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* ("meaning" and "reference"), it is hard not to conclude after reading Alloa's subtle exploration of the corporeal/cultural nexus out of which perspectives emerge that the two are inextricably intertwined.

More than a technique of pictorial rationalization or a mere symbolic form, perspective is inherent in the way we live our lives, embodied and

active, intersubjectively situated, immersed in affective environments, and encountering a world outside of our interior selves. More than a source of anxiety or melancholy, it also inspires hope, Alloa shows us, to escape from the prison-house of our isolated subjectivity. Although, *pace* Arendt, we may not always be concerned with knowing the same object, we are grappling, from whatever perspective, with the same perennial questions and judging the value of the myriad answers that vie for attention in the shared world that we have inherited and must somehow pass on, improved or not, to posterity.

Notes

1 Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge,* trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1936). For a discussion of its place in the history of perspectivist thinking, see Kenneth Smith, *Perspectivism: A Contribution to the Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2023), chapter 2.
2 The tocsin was sounded by Ernst Troeltsch in 1922 in "Die Krisis des Historismus," in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 15: Schriften zur Politik und Kulturphilosophie (1918–1923), ed. Gangolf Hübinger, 437–55 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002). One way to think of the crisis was as a loss of faith in history as a meaningful process in which values were immanent, a belief that was shattered in World War I, especially for Germans who had believed they were favored by that process. In philosophical terms, to give it a shorthand description, it meant the triumph of Nietzsche over Hegel.
3 Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 239.
4 Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 244.
5 Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 76.
6 Emmanuel Alloa, *Looking Through Images: A Phenomenology of Visual Media*, trans. Nils F. Schott (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 3. His first book was *Resistance of the Sensible World: An Introduction to Merleau-Ponty*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).
7 One of Alloa's most arresting arguments is that Plato was not, as is often claimed, hostile to the superficiality of appearances in the name of the forms beneath them. Instead, the dialogic way in which he presents arguments shows performatively Plato's appreciation of the fruitful exchange of different points of view.
8 In pharmaceutical terminology, an agonist generates a response by binding to a receptor on the cell, while an antagonist opposes the action by blocking receptors and making them ineffective. Some political theorists, for example, Chantal Mouffe, have employed the same terms to oppose agonistic conflicts that are based on the adversaries' mutual recognition of the other's legitimacy, even if their goals are incompatible, from existential conflicts that turn adversaries into enemies to the death.
9 Alloa, *Looking Through Images,* 139–44.
10 Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, 57–85 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 71.
11 See below, 145–46.

12 See below, 53–65.
13 See, respectively, 41 and 62.
14 A secondary effect would concern aesthetic judgments, which came to be based less on the inherent qualities of an object, for example, its intrinsic beauty or form, than on the taste of a subject responding to it. Ever since Kant's *Critique of Judgment,* however, attempts have been made to locate universal claims in subjective judgments. Translated into the discourse of perspectivism, this quest roughly paralleled the search for the co-perception that would go beyond isolated points of view.
15 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 57; see below, 171–72.
16 See below, 84.
17 See below, 105.