Visual Culture in Early Modernity

Leon Battista Alberti and Nicholas Cusanus

Towards an Epistemology of Vision for Italian Renaissance Art and Culture

An Ashgate Book

Charles H. Carman

Leon Battista Alberti and Nicholas Cusanus

Providing a fresh evaluation of Alberti's text *On Painting* (1435), along with comparisons to various works of Nicholas Cusanus—particularly his *Vision of God* (1450)—this study reveals a shared epistemology of vision. And, the author argues, it is one that reflects a more deeply Christian Neoplatonic ideal than is typically accorded Alberti. Whether regarding his purpose in teaching the use of a geometric single point perspective system, or more broadly in rendering forms naturalistically, the emphasis leans toward the ideal of Renaissance art as highly rational. There remains the impression that the principle aim of the painter is to create objective, even illusionistic images. A close reading of Alberti's text, however, including some adjustments in translation, points rather towards an emphasis on discerning the spiritual in the material. Alberti's use of the tropes Minerva and Narcissus, for example, indicates the opposing characteristics of wisdom and sense certainty that function dialectically to foster the traditional importance of seeing with the eye of the intellect rather than merely with physical eyes. In this sense these figures also set the context for his, and, as the author explains, Brunelleschi's earlier invention of this perspective system that posits not so much an objective seeing as an opposition of finite and infinite seeing, which, moreover, approximates Cusanus's famous notion of a coincidence of opposites. Together with Alberti's and Cusanus's ideals of vision, extensive analysis of art works discloses a ubiquitous commitment to stimulating an intellectual perception of divine, essential, and unseen realities that enliven the visible material world.

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VISUAL CULTURE IN EARLY MODERNITY

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To Karen

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Preface: *Perspectiva ut Poesis*

Having become interested in the how and why of single point perspective, I greatly anticipated plunging into the intriguing title *The Poetics of Perspective* by James Elkins.[1] This was after a long initiation into the history of how perspective was viewed, and it became quickly apparent that this was very much the substance of Elkins's book. In the meantime, I had decided that among the different approaches, one rather pragmatic and another more poetic, my sympathies lay distinctly with the latter. Not only did this approach hold my interest but more importantly, it seemed to suggest a correlation between the treatment of subject matter and the symbolic; or at least suggestive and therefore more poetic than prosaic meanings given to its artistic employment. I was, however, disappointed in the book, not for its lack of information, for it is the most complete discussion of the uses of perspective, its various meanings, and those who have written about it. Rather it was the lack of an emphasis, despite the title, on what I have come to see as something like a poetics of perspective. In all fairness, nevertheless, one comes to appreciate the fullness of the author's undertaking, and certainly the caution he advises in the tendency to read into the use of single point perspective either too little or certainly too much. But his was a much broader undertaking that anything intended in this project.

In any case, I am convinced that disagreements will persist over whether the aim of perspective is a purely "meaningless" endeavor,[2] by which Elkins means those who assign only a mathematical/geometrical and non-interpretive significance to its use, or whether it has symbolic significance. Many will continue to see perspective as a purely rational feature of Renaissance naturalism. After all naturalism—by which I mean the depiction of people and things that appear more or less as the eye sees them in nature—is the most generally distinctive feature of Renaissance art that distinguishes it from the relatively more abstract art of the preceding Medieval period. The Renaissance, now commonly termed Early Modern, is linked inexorably with the advances leading steadily towards the modern world. And while

1 James Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).
2 Elkins, *Perspective*, 42.

we all know there is much to contend about that, and surely a great deal to be said about what the Renaissance has in common with the Late Middle Ages (at least), there seems to be a lingering view that pays only lip service, however overtly or subtly, to what the fifteenth century has in common with the preceding two centuries, not to mention what it has in common with art thereafter. Indeed even though religious subject matter continued to prevail in the fifteenth century, *it is* clothed in the new look of naturalism: full bodied, proportionally arrayed with ever more accurate reflections of how the eyes sees motion and expression, and, of course, set within equally convincing depictions of space. It would seem then quite understandable and justifiable that the subject matter can still be spiritual but that the interpretation of it leans toward an admiration of secular, worldly concerns. But here is where the poetry gets lost and the prosaic sets in. To understand and describe the varying degrees of sophistication in how Renaissance artists render their world as we see ours presupposes a pragmatic, and at the very least proto-scientific mentality. The problem is that this may not be as accurate as it is tempting.[3]

Much of what I am exploring in the following pages is based upon a concerted effort to find the sacred in the worldly. What I have discovered in the process—greatly influenced by other scholars whom I will point out, though none more so than the late S.K. Heninger Jr.—was the ever-present sense of a dialectical relationship between vision as that which reads the world in full bodied sensuous terms and vision as that which sees with the mental, intellectual/spiritual eye. For, if we bear in mind this dialectical frame as the constant interpretant of what is seen, perceived, and consequently acted upon, then we might temper the tendency to read a pragmatic naturalism into our view of the Renaissance, and we might more easily see that it is ever so subtly yet powerfully veiled by a poetic reading between the "this" of physical vision and "that" of a mental, intellectual, and especially spiritual vision. The former seeks this world's haptic richness; the latter uses it to discover an immaterial essence. So, to take the introduction of single point perspective in purely rational terms is to deprive it of the possibility of having been intended to enhance a spiritual context for interpreting the religious subject matter that the perspective system indicates. To put my point in somewhat dramatic

[3] I have been very taken by the view of Renaissance individualism set forth by John Jeffries Martin in his *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2006). Especially in his concluding chapter "Myths of Identity—an Essay," (123–33) he summarizes his view that individualism in the Renaissance is neither that of Burckhardt's proto modern person of confident, assertive and creatively self-made secular individuality that seemed to so capture the modern view of mankind (and hence of the Renaissance in retrospect) nor that of a postmodern person as self fashioned (Greenblatt) in response to superficial stimuli. Rather Martin sees, and I think accurately, an identity responding both to inner and outer reality: "the defining problem of identity in the Renaissance … [was] the question of how the experience of the inner world of each person was related to the larger social environment in which he or she lived" (130–31). Though seemingly simple he has avoided a reading of secularism back onto the Renaissance, leaving open what I understand as the crucial dialogue of worldly and spiritual, self and God, secular and divine that is so helpful in reading the way just such dialogue or dialectic works in Renaissance religious imagery.

terms, one does not see God or how He was presumed to have created. The very theology of how God and his creativity were understood must be the substance of Renaissance art, not merely the fact that illustrations of New Testament teaching were beginning to look "naturalistic." If so, the very fact that this geometric perspective system houses theological messages might suggest that it was intended to enhance their understanding.

This is not to say, however, that others have not explored and continue to seek out how theological content is made manifest within the burgeoning naturalism of the Renaissance, for there are many such authors whom I will draw upon and reference throughout.[4] My focus, however, is not on elucidating these studies per se; rather, it will be on addressing what I perceive as a tension in how Alberti's role is emphasized. For it is he who first fully recorded the role of single point perspective and laid the context for understanding its role in his book *On Painting* (*Della pittura*) from 1435. Still, as I will endeavor to point out, his text is often, though by no means exclusively, read from a conservative and in that sense highly rationalist point of view. What I hope to stimulate as part of the larger question of how this tension of the natural and spiritual plays out is what I have come to see as Alberti's seminal role in articulating the importance of single point perspective for complementing a deeply theological meaning.

More broadly, as I have read the relevant works on perspective, there are two interrelated problems: either there is no recognition of a spiritual/theological implication of perspective, or there is little if any analysis of Alberti's text itself that might support a spiritual view. As we will see even where authors admit of some spiritualizing portent in the use of single point perspective it is all too often *not* in an analysis of Alberti's text that this view finds justification. The result as I have come to see it is that there is a lack of connection between what a work of art emphasizing such a perspective system might be interpreted to mean and the articulated context of that very system by Alberti and, which is very important, Brunelleschi before him. Regarding the latter, I will also argue that the very invention of the perspective system, conceived by Brunelleschi some ten years before Alberti's comments in *On Painting*, and carried out as a demonstration within the highly charged sacred context of the piazza San

[4] Of the rich vein of sources nourishing this view perhaps none is greater than that of Augustine and the iterations of his teachings throughout The Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. On the ideas of Augustine, among which is the importance of inner and outer seeing, see Meredith J. Gill, *Augustine in the Italian Renaissance: Art and Philosophy from Petrarch to Michelangelo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Particularly useful as well is Margaret Miles, "Vision: The Eye of the Body and the Eye of the Mind in Saint Augustine's *De trinitate* and *Confessions*," *The Journal of Religion* 63 (1983): 15–142. Among earlier art historical studies that strive to capture religious content as important for understanding meaning in Renaissance works Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, first published 1972) stands out for its culling of cultural contexts that can suggest religious, spiritual importance. This is particularly strong in his second chapter "The Period Eye," though the section ends with a somewhat tepid conclusion that "this sort of explanation is too speculative to have much historical use in particular cases" (108). The more recent work of Peter Francis Howard, which I will draw from especially in Chapter 5, proves to be more assertively successful in suggesting important cultural/religious influence in Florence.

Giovanni in Florence, ought to be understood to play a major role in how Alberti's text is interpreted.

Exploring Alberti's writing in relationship to more explicitly theological notions of vision that are relevant to how the painter conceives a work and elicits a sympathetic response in the viewer is, then, one major theme of this work. My emphasis here on a poetics of perspective and naturalism in general aims to address the metaphoric and transformative power that Renaissance thinkers inherited and encompassed as the means for seeing between the realities of the physical and the spiritual. It is, for example, no accident that Dante's work still loomed so large in the minds of humanists and theologians (often the same figures),[5] so prominent for its ever rich evocations of the pilgrim's—the *viator's*—journey through life, and most importantly a life that included the enfolded ever present sense of the soul's experience during that journey all the way to the unseen but poignant reality of God "face to face" (Paul, 1 Cor. 12–13). Heaven, the fullness of God's creative and sustaining, though unviewable brilliant light was ever the goal, and its pallid prescience ("in a mirror enigmatically," again Paul, 1 Cor. 12–13) always the attraction that the spiritual intellect could seek out. There, in that mirror, a place of speculation rather than recognition per se, we might discover what works of art were produced to celebrate. So too Petrarch and Boccaccio had elaborated notions of spiritual seeing that Alberti drew on by invoking Narcissus in his text *On Painting* as "the inventor of painting," a figure who I will argue has critical implications in understanding Alberti's notions of vision and is a powerfully poetic force in stimulating spiritual identification with self and the material world.

Between those two worlds, the one physically seen and the one reflected, I have sought to find ways of seeing how the sacred is manifest. Moreover, in order to complement and indeed strengthen what Alberti and painters aim for, it seemed important as another major theme to develop the importance of Nicholas Cusanus as Alberti's theological counterpart. While Alberti was the first to describe and recommend a full context for the naturalism of painting that includes the use of single point perspective, I will argue that Cusanus provides a theological complement to the basics of Alberti's view. After all, if Alberti articulates a notion of vision still grounded in theology then we ought to look for something similar in a prominent theologian, especially one who might speak of the importance of vision. While attempting to draw parallels to Cusanus I do not mean, however, that we know he and Alberti consciously cooperated either directly or indirectly for there is no confirming evidence to that effect. Nevertheless, much has been made of their probable but unproven relationship and what they seem to have had in common. I certainly agree with many that they likely knew each other. But more important is the way in which we might understand how their thinking reflects a shared poetics of perspective, of seeing into and through the material to the spiritual.

[5] See Simon Gilson, *Dante and Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

I only want to add here that I do not claim any singularly correct reading of Alberti or Cusanus, nor that they are exclusively necessary to understanding the Renaissance, but rather that they are extremely useful and I believe provocatively so in understanding what I am setting out as a poetics of perspective, or perhaps more broadly the poetics of a dialectic interaction between sensuous and intellectual vision that enlivens this new naturalism. Nor do I consider myself an expert on either Alberti or Cusanus. While I have immersed myself as much as possible in their work and the ever-abundant interpretations of it, I have looked especially to their concern with vision. In the case of Alberti the primary text is his treatise *On Painting* (*Della pittura*), which he wrote in Italian and then translated into Latin during the years 1435–1436.[6] With Cusanus I have tried to choose from his many works those that most emphatically draw upon vision as a means of gaining knowledge about the world and God, especially but not exclusively from his *Vision of God* (*De visione Dei*, 1453).

Finally, however, I must stress that the abiding sense of how we might have confidence in their similarity is only possible to the extent that the ideas they share are actually manifest in works of art. There I think we will discern an abundance of metaphors shared by both writers and artists alike: geometry of perspective to be sure, but much else as well. A great deal of what I have found helpful has come from outside my discipline, though one will find here many references to the art historical works I have consulted, especially regarding Alberti, and in many cases to what extent I agree with them. The volume of material on Alberti is daunting and I have tried to stick to sources that portray the principal ways in which his treatise *On Painting* has been understood. Works on Cusanus are also numerous, and though his role is increasingly seen as significant for understanding Renaissance intellectual life he has not the same firmly-planted reputation as his erstwhile companion Alberti.[7] In using the ideas of each I have carefully consulted both translations and original languages of their texts with the aim of interrogating the depth of their notions of what vision means. In some cases with Alberti, this has entailed questioning aspects of currently used English translations and offering alternatives. In all cases my aim is to match what they seem to think with what the painters portrayed.

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[6] See Rocco Sinisgalli, *The New De Pictura of Leon Battista Alberti* (Rome: Kappa, 2006), 25–6; and Lucia Bertolini, "Leon Battista Alberti," *Nova informazione bibliografica* 2 (2004): 255.

[7] I am delighted to note that the relatively recent volume *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) contains an article by Dermot Moran ("Nicholas of Cusa and Modern Philosophy") who states on page 173 that Cusanus is "one of the most original and creative intellects of the fifteenth century." In the meantime, works on Cusanus continue to appear.

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1

Alberti and Cusanus: An Overview

Roberto Rossellini's film *The Age of Cosimo de' Medici* (1972) pairs the humanist writer Leon Battista Alberti and the theologian/philosopher Nicholas Cusanus, invoking the storied but undocumented belief that they knew each other.[1] He includes as well the scientist and mapmaker Paolo Toscanelli in the conversation. During the film an array of famous artists, writers, political leaders, and important church figures widens, all thriving and competing under the aegis of Cosimo's generous patronage. Among the artists mentioned are Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, Masaccio, and Donatello, while Michelozzo and Bernardo Rossellino are actually present. Cosimo himself is the featured political figure along with allies and enemies, while the archbishop Antoninus makes a brief appearance. Recently completed art works are viewed, notably Masaccio's *Trinity*, and his *Tribute Money* in the Brancacci Chapel. One of Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* scenes among the cells of San Marco is also visited. Brunelleschi's dome for the Cathedral is admired as evidence of the city's unique creative energy. Even Alberti's new façade for *Santa Maria Novella* eventually makes its debut. We see a world recreated according to a civic humanist ideal notion of dedication to church, city, the new learning, and not least, mercantile prosperity.[2]

Perhaps Rossellini had in mind examples of Florentine Renaissance painting in joining historical figures together in the same spaces, which so often unite saints from disparate time periods, sometimes with contemporary identifiable personalities.[3] Such images evoke the power of memory, binding past moments into the full conscious present of the inextricably intersecting

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1 Karsten Harries opens a recent essay invoking the same film, "On the Power and Poverty of Perspective," in *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, ed. Peter J. Casarella (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 105–26. I first sketched out this section prior to reading Harries's essay and have decided to retain it in as much as Rossellini's film offers such a stunning evocation of both the tenacity of the story of this relationship presumed by so many writers, as well as its powerfully suggested civic humanist environment that encompassed these thinkers, despite their seemingly different vocations.

2 It is Rossellini's avowed intention to bring to life a particularly idealizing point of view regarding the Renaissance.

3 One thinks of Masaccio, Fra Angelico, Benozzo Gozzoli, and Ghirlandaio to name a few of the more prominent artists to include contemporary figures in their images.

domains of the secular and the sacred.[4] A particularly provocative scene occurs before Masaccio's *Trinity* (1426–1427). While Alberti and company comment on its modernity of naturalism and perspective, a nun observing them offers the opposing view that the artist's naturalism—his modernity—is shamefully irreverent, essentially reducing the divine to the mundane. Clearly for the other protagonists she has missed the point. Yet by introducing her view, which must have been inevitable and therefore historically accurate, Rossellini has captured the crux of what became a continuous division of how to see the sacred in the ordinary—a debate that as yet haunts modern viewers, however sympathetic they may be. Our age certainly appreciates Masaccio's accomplishments of naturalism but has perhaps settled with less concern for the sacred. And though it is unclear whether Rossellini's Alberti in the film is sufficiently cognizant of the as yet sacred revelations that Masaccio offered, the Alberti as we may come to understand him would have indeed understood.

Even as Alberti in the film proclaims the glory of geometry, mathematics, and mapmaking in order to penetrate the essence of creation, Cusanus responds with the desire to map the heavens, invoking his belief that God unfolded his unity into the multiplicity of existence, which allows for endless discovery and progressive knowledge of divine creation. A "coincidence of opposites" is thereby offered as what finite humanity can know of and about the infinite. In this way Rossellini brings Alberti into direct contact with one of Cusanus's most fundamental principles expressed in his text *On Learned Ignorance* (1440), no matter that it was written after the presumed date of the encounters taking place, which begin in 1434 with Alberti's return to Florence in the entourage of Eugenius IV.

These scenes, like individual paintings, are feigned stories (istorie). Much as Alberti describes in his text *On Painting*, the subject to be interpreted in the scene of a painting is a reworking, a remaking of remembered events; and as we know even from ordinary experience memory necessarily shapes, re-assembles, and designs the fragments of what is mostly long gone into expressions of lessons learned. Memory returns to its fragmentary past and passes on what is understood to be important. For Rossellini, Cusanus's and Alberti's point is to stimulate creativity, to exercise what Italian humanists (including Alberti) often refer to as *ingegno*, meaning the ability to have insight and create new meaning.[5]

[4] See Michael Silverman, "Rossellini and Leon Battista Alberti: The Centering Power of Perspective," *Yale Italian Studies* 1 (1977): 128–42, in which the author points out the central importance of Alberti, not only as the protagonist/spokesman for Renaissance accomplishments but as the champion of a perspective system that centralizes an interfacing of sacred and secular meaning. While he does not go as far as I will in framing the symbolic, sacred function of single point constructions as used in the Renaissance, his suggestions in that direction are insightful.

[5] Alberti uses the term in his preface to the Italian edition, which is dedicated to Brunelleschi, and throughout the text. For the Italian, Latin, and English see Rocco Sinisgalli, *The New De Pictura*. On the importance of the meaning of *ingegno* see Ernesto Grassi, *Renaissance Humanism: Studies in Philosophy and Poetics* (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1988), 23–34, 67–8.

Whether artists addressed by Alberti in his treatise *On Painting*, or subsequent viewers of their works, all participate in a world visually remade. Therein, imaginative recreations of sanctioned, traditional stories that are recognized and in that sense, remembered, encourage transformations in understanding. Rossellini's conceit, his *ingegno*, if you will, allows us to revel in the complete believability of the exciting and probable intellectual exchange of these important Renaissance thinkers. He creates, to take the analogy to Renaissance practice even further, a kind of theatrical stage space hosting a collective series of shifting scenes that constitute known historical circumstances and places, much like naturalistic fifteenth century painting in which history is rewritten, reimagined to accommodate the goals of the chosen narrative, the *istoria*, as Alberti himself would conceive it. As in the works we will examine, so in Rossellini's rhetorical space actors make real a reimagined history that expresses their highest goals of intellectual, artistic, and scientific collaboration for the benefit of citizens in their relationship to church and city.

Rossellini fashions in this exchange, moreover, a conjectural space in which we can imagine Cusanus to know Alberti's *On Painting*, though this is unstated, and again the actual dates preclude Alberti having known Cusanus's text (1440) at the time of his writing the treatise (1435). Discussion, nevertheless, of the latter's notion of a "coincidence of opposites" and the former's single point perspective construction constitute what stimulates the viewer, and certainly this writer, to ponder how they would have developed those topics.[6] There is much that can be said for the intellectual fertility of such an imagined exchange. And, as has often been pointed out the paths of these men frequently crossed, in addition to having common friends, lending credibility to Rossellini's cinematic conjecture and the possibilities it invokes regarding what we can hardly resist imagining they thought about and would have discussed.

Briefly, and without pretention to an all-inclusive survey, I will touch on some of the recent writers and their thoughts that may help us to understand Rossellini's choice, and our present concern. Early on, the Italian scholar Giovanni Santinello summed up the circumstantial evidence of Alberti's and Cusanus's relationship in an appendix to his book on Alberti in 1962.[7] He recounts how they could have known each other through friends and affiliations with the papal court, within the circumstances surrounding the councils of Ferrara and Florence (Rossellini's context) during the years

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6 Harries, pointing to the exchange between Cusanus and Alberti does not advocate for their ideas being similar ("Power and Poverty," 105). Of particular interest to this essay, and as Harries points out but does not develop in the way I will, is Cusanus's notion of a coincidence of opposites and Alberti's description of the single point perspective construction. They are, in my view, very much one like the other as I will argue in Chapter 4. Cusanus did own a copy of Alberti's shorter treatise on *The Elements of Painting*, but there is no discussion of the development of perspective in this work.

7 "Nicolo Cusano e Leon Battista Alberti: Pensieri sul Bello e sull'Arte," Appendice to *Leon Battista Alberti: Una Visione Estetica del Mondo e della Vita* (Florence: Sansoni, 1962), 265–96.