



**PICTURING SPACE, DISPLACING BODIES: ANAMORPHOSIS IN EARLY MODERN THEORIES OF PERSPECTIVE**

by Lyle Massey. Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA, 2007. 192 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 978-0-271-02980-1.

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I can still remember the first time vanishing-point perspective was explained to me. I was already in my 20s and, to put it mildly, I was shocked to real-

ize that something so marvelous had never clearly entered into my thinking as an artist. A classically trained artist conducted my initiation into this aspect of art. The “lesson” included, among other things, walking down long corridors and my drawing of a scene I saw through a window onto the glass with a marker. My vocabulary is not rich enough to capture the psychological impact of watching the drawing take form on the clear plane after he instructed me to shut one eye and then trace the buildings I saw on the other side of the window. Following our discussion of what perspective is “about,” I spent the first few days after this experience feeling as if I had slipped into an alternative universe, as I walked around my neighborhood with new eyes.

Looking back, it seems inconceivable that I had never explicitly conceptualized that objects appear to recede to a point, and that forms further away appear significantly smaller than those that are closer to me. It also seemed, at least initially, that the sky was falling as I looked at it meeting the pavement in the distance. For many months I spent every spare day climbing in the Berkeley Hills, with sketchbook in hand, where I could look down at the city of Berkeley and out at the San Francisco Bay in the distance. As I thought about how the sizes I saw differed from actual sizes, how part of objects were hidden from my view, and other types of impractical questions that arise when we contemplate what our world looks like, I eventually found myself more intrigued with how what we see with two

eyes differs from the distinct monocular view that one can trace onto a window with one eye closed. Yet, as I hope my decision to start with this episode conveys, I never lost my sense that there is something magical, almost otherworldly, about perspective theories.

Given my enthusiasm for perspective studies, it is perhaps not surprising that I was eager to read Lyle Massey’s new book, *Picturing Space, Displacing Bodies: Anamorphosis in Early Modern Theories of Perspective*, which offers a comprehensive and timely examination of problems related to both seeing and depicting what we see. Her main argument centers around the idea that Cartesian perspectivalism collapses into incoherence once the body is re-inserted into the history and theory of perspective. In other words, she adopts the view that the body is historically treated either as a problem that interferes with the demonstration of the geometric and scientific character of perspective or as a point of reference for exploiting the illusory nature of representational space. *Picturing Space, Displacing Bodies* speaks to this dichotomy through a presentation of evidence that anamorphosis, a form of perspective used to produce hidden or trick images, offers an excellent vantage point for seeing how theorists of perspective tried to negotiate a relationship between these two sides of its history, rather than treating them as separate problems.

Divided into five chapters, the book seems to start in the middle, going backward and forward simultaneously in its attempt to negotiate the problems posed in examining the illusory nature of pictorial space, which, according to the author, are particularly apparent in the treatment of anamorphosis. I am not sure if this integration device helped the study or made it harder to follow, but it did allow the book to pose the questions raised in an intriguing fashion. Suffice it to say that Massey begins with the ongoing art-historical debate surrounding Velásquez’s *Las Meninas*, painted in 1656 and still a subject of controversy today. This chapter points out that the question whether there is something paradoxical about perspective has been central to one of the most important art historical controversies in the last two decades. Much of this debate is interwoven with Michel Foucault’s interpretation of the Velásquez painting and how recent debates encapsulate fundamental problems and contradictions between viewpoint and representational field.

Chapter 2, "Descartes's Point of View," examines the presumed connection between the perspectival viewpoint, the Cartesian *cogito* and extended space. Considering the work of a number of scholars, Massey argues that Descartes's principle of extended substances is incompatible with his notion of the mind's eye, which suggests it is an error to correlate the infinity of a projecting grid with the principle of extended space. Of course, Descartes never wrote about perspective (although he does talk about geometry and vision); so any analysis of Cartesian perspectivalism and why an infinite grid is (or is not) incompatible with Descartes's views on extended space is purely speculative, regardless of which position one chooses.

Chapter 3, "Straightening Out Anamorphosis," presents a challenge to the 20th-century tendency to interpret perspective through Alberti's metaphor of the window and is the key to Massey's argument. In an effort to make her case, she looks at contemporary scholarship; contributions of well-known historical figures such as Alberti, Piero della Francesca, Leonardo (who neither published nor widely circulated his manuscript), Dürer, and early perspective treatises, including those of Viator (Jean Pélerin), Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola's diagrams and Nicéron's explication of anamorphosis. Some of the more interesting passages of this chapter concern how Nicéron developed a method of producing anamorphic images that capitalized on the ambiguity of Vignola's diagrams. The accompanying illustrations show, for example, how Nicéron elongated a chair into an anamorphic form. This chapter, which reminds us that what might look deformed from one point of view can resolve itself from another vantage point, sets the stage for the examination of Chapter 4, "The Body and Its Devices," which turns to phenomenological issues and shows how the use of technologies influenced both perspectival ideas and practice.

The historical and theoretical ideas discussed in Chapter 4 aid Massey's discussion on how from its inception perspective included the idea that human intervention, the act of drawing itself, was a part of the exercise of converting the natural world into the perceived form. She points out, for example, that a camera obscura produces an unmediated reflection while work with perspective cannot claim a similar detachment. Also examined are theoretical views

that range from Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (including the latter's work on Cézanne) to how perspective devices speak to ideas. Well-chosen illustrations, for example Emmanuel Maignan's anamorphic perspective device, add some degree of support. Yet there is some irony here. The text discusses how the devices work, pointing out that, in a practical sense, they were often too cumbersome to use in any kind of comprehensive fashion. Similarly, the reader experiences the instruments as abstractions since they are on the printed page. Without hands-on experimentation, it is hard to fully conceptualize their value in providing what the artist needed to do in practice to achieve viable results.

The book closes by contrasting the 17th-century dispute between Abraham Bosse and Charles Le Brun at the *Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture* over academic instruction in perspective to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic interpretation of anamorphosis. I have never warmed to the idea of the Lacanian gaze, which may explain why the book's ending did not quite congeal for me. As I understand it, Massey's point is that with the Bosse/Le Brun dispute we start to see a shift in the perception of perspective that corresponds to a split between artists and mathematicians, later taken up by Jacques Lacan in his psychoanalytic interpretation of anamorphosis.

Overall, Massey presents an alternative history that she uses to raise questions about epistemological and ontological views in Western art and philosophy and then interweaves these ideas with contemporary views of perspective. In order to achieve this complex goal, she compares and contrasts ideas associated with medieval optics and/or mathematics (e.g. those associated with Erwin Panofsky, John White, Samuel Edgerton Jr., J.V. Field, David Lindberg and Martin Kemp) with those theorists who see broader philosophical and cultural implications (e.g. James Elkins, Jurgis Baltrusaitis and Hubert Damisch). Although she works hard to integrate theories and experiments with the discussion of anamorphosis, I was not quite able to follow it. She may mean that if we detach the eye from the body, there is a dissociation of the center of perspective projection from the location of the viewer's eye. If this is the case, I suppose, perspective collapses into anamorphism under these conditions. In any case, the anamorphosis techniques were put into prac-

tice shortly after the appearance of the first written explanations of common or regular linear perspective. These illusions, to Massey's eye, juxtapose disembodied and embodied notions of vision through their perspectival distortion of an object, making it viewable only from a certain angle. Little-known figures such as the Minim friars Jean-François Nicéron and Emmanuel Maignan seemed to have recognized some of the problems and, using anamorphosis, sought to demonstrate anti-Cartesian properties of perspective.

The biggest problem I had with the book is that Massey's philosophical position seems to respond more to recent trends than artistic praxis and the way perspective can excite us in a human sense, as I discussed in the early paragraphs of this review. I wondered, tongue-in-cheek: When was the body removed from art-making (and by whom), since only an embodied person can practice art and/or perceive "perspective" in the first place. More to the point: According to Massey, Cartesian perspective is now a commonly held view, one that has thinkers equating Renaissance perspective with Cartesian ontology. This equation, however, is actually a quite recent and highly fashionable idea that largely emerged in the 1980s through the work of Norman Bryson and Martin Jay.

Contemporary scholars interested in visual technologies, space, the body in the Renaissance and current interpretations of early modern art theory will no doubt find the publication very appealing. Related books that Massey cites include the anamorphosis books by Jurgis Baltrusaitis, which she draws on extensively; Jonathan Crary's work; *The Poetics of Perspective* by James Elkins (which, like Massey's work, offers an alternative picture of perspective theory); and Martin Kemp's comprehensive *The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat*. While in some ways *Picturing Space, Displacing Bodies* is a rich publication and offers a welcome addition to the literature on anamorphosis, perspective, representation, drawing machines, the relationship between art and phenomenological theory and related topics, it is not an easy book to digest. Those interested in looking closely at perspective per se might want to complement their reading of this publication with Thomas Puttfarcken's *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition: Theories of Visual Order in Painting, 1400–1800*, which traces the changing nature of

attitudes toward composition from the early Renaissance to the beginning of the 19th century. Another helpful resource is <[www.webexhibits.org/arrowintheeye/index.html](http://www.webexhibits.org/arrowintheeye/index.html)>, an on-line book by Michael Kubovy and Christopher Tyler adapted from *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art*, by Kubovy (originally published by Cambridge University Press in 1988), which offers an easy-to-follow overview. For more information on anamorphosis, I would further recommend visiting Thomas Weynants' *Early Visual Media* page at <[users.telenet.be/thomasweynants/history.html](http://users.telenet.be/thomasweynants/history.html)>. Weynants does a splendid job of discussing how these representations work, and he has uploaded images (including the visual reconstructions that result when the picture is viewed from the proper perspective).

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