

OSMAN LINS, PAVEL FLORIENSKI AND THE SENSES OF NON-PERSPECTIVISM

OSMAN LINS, PAVEL FLORIENSKI E OS SENTIDOS DO APERSPECTIVISMO

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Abstract: This essay confronts Osman Lins ideas about aperspectivism in modern art presented in his book *Lima Barreto and the space in the novel*, and Pavel Florensky's reflections on the distortions of perspective - explicit in the Middle Ages and subtle in the Renaissance. Osman Lins sees in the abolition of perspective in modern art the overcoming of the humanist view promoted by the Renaissance. Florensky argues that the distortions of perspective used by medieval artists did not result from lack of knowledge, but it was intentional, in order to a better expression the theocentric view of the world. In his analysis of paintings, Florensky observes that Renaissance artists often violated the laws of perspective in order to give their achievements better expression. Following this comparison, I analyze some elements that characterize the aperspectivism of Osman Lins' narrative art from the collection of short stories *Nove, novena* (1966) and in the novels *Avalovara* and *The Queen of Prisons in Greece*. Among the elements which contribute to non-perspectivism in the narrative of Osman Lins, we highlight the ornamental ambience, as cosmic representation; the representation of the same character simultaneously in three phases of life; and the oscillation of narrative focus.

Keywords: Osman Lins, Pavel Florensky, non-perspectivism, reverse perspective.

Resumo: Este ensaio confronta as ideias de Osman Lins sobre o aperspectivismo na arte moderna, apresentadas em seu estudo *Lima Barreto e o espaço romanesco*, e as reflexões de Pavel Floriensi sobre as distorções da perspectiva – explícitas na Idade Média e sutis no Renascimento. Osman Lins vê, na abolição da perspectiva na arte moderna, a superação do olhar humanista promovido pelo Renascimento. Pável Floriensi defende que as distorções de perspectiva utilizadas pelos artistas medievais não resultavam de falta de conhecimento, mas era intencional, com o objetivo de expressar melhor a visão teocêntrica do mundo. Em suas análises de quadros, Floriensi observa que também os pintores do Renascimento frequentemente violavam as leis de perspectiva a fim de conferirem melhor expressão aos seus quadros. Seguindo esse confronto, analiso alguns elementos que caracterizam o aperspectivismo da narrativa de Osman Lins a partir da coletânea de contos *Nove, novena* (1966) e nos romances *Avalovara* e *A rainha dos cárceres da Grécia*. Entre os elementos que contribuem para o aperspectivismo na narrativa de Osman Lins, destacamos a ambientação ornamental, como representação cósmica; a representação de um mesmo personagem simultaneamente em três fases da vida; e a oscilação de foco narrativo.

Palavras-chave: Osman Lins, Pavel Floriensi, aperspectivismo, perspectiva inversa.

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From *Nine, novena* (1975 [1966]) on, Osman Lins inaugurates a way of narrating that, following a suggestion of the writer himself, I denominate non-perspectival. It is a decentralized way of constructing the fictional world, which breaks radically with linearity (not only by altering the chronological order of actions, as it has been since Homer, but by exploring a sense of simultaneity). This new way of narrating imposes drastic changes in the discursive structure of his fiction, among which I highlight the abrupt changes of time and space; the oscillation (not simple alternation) or even mixture, of narrative focuses; and the use of ornament in both the setting and the characterization, in which the cosmic character of the grotesque body is explored.

This turning point in his artistic achievement stems from the attentive and systematic observations of medieval art, a disciplined work which he did when he traveled to Europe as a scholarship student of the *Alliance Française*. Osman Lins did not only notice the absence or the alteration of perspective in Medieval Art: he also - contrary to ingrained prejudice - evaluated it positively, associating such a treatment of perspective with the situation of contemporary world. From then on, he sought ways of expressing an apperspectivist representation of the world, seeking to represent simultaneity, in this essentially temporal art, which is a narrative.

In *Lima Barreto and the space in the novel*, Osman Lins, recalling an observation by Philippe Hamon on the narrative focus, comments on the problem of the perspective in the visual arts associating it with the elements of the narrative. Lins highlights the relationship between perspective and world view, associating non-perspectivism with religious view of Middle Ages and perspective with the humanist view of the Renaissance. Quoting Anatol Rosenfeld, Osman Lins observes that the contemporary world no longer maintains the same faith in the Renaissance values that contributed to the development of perspective, which, from the twentieth century on, gives rise to a new non-perspectivism in the visual arts. On this new situation, the author says:

The non-perspectival vision, expansion, and transfiguration of the omniscient narrator, now free from human limitations and evoking a spiritualization not unlike that which the medieval artist knew, hints at contemporary fiction. By announcing a space as sacred, as opposed to the profane space of the Renaissance, a deeper perception of the world will soon provoke more subtle resources of insertion of space, with which plausible resources will no longer be indispensable - open window, visit etc. - which Philippe Hamon lists. Not only in time, but in space itself, the contemporary novel will express its distrust

in the "privileged position of human consciousness in the world" which Renaissance artists erected into dogma. (LINS, 1976, p.94)¹

Long before Osman Lins, the mathematician, theologian, physicist, geologist, electrical engineer, Art historian and Russian Orthodox priest Pavel Florenski wrote a daring work with the intention of reinterpreting and revaluing non-perspectivism in medieval painting. His essay, *Reverse Perspective*, was written in 1919, but the political vicissitudes that led to his execution in 1937 prevented its publication before 1967. According to Florensky, the deformation or lack of perspective in medieval painting did not derive from primitivism nor ingenuity of its artists, but resulted from a conscious aesthetic design. Florensky argues that linear perspective is not an invention of Renaissance, since it goes back to studies on the composition of the theatrical scenario by the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras and has its theoretical bases in the works of Euclid and Vitruvius. Commenting on the innovation of Giotto's use of the principles of perspective, Florensky asks: "But could painting ignore them? It is difficult to imagine, since the Elements of Euclid were known" (FLORIENSKI, 2012, 62). Even in the remotest antiquity among the Egyptians, Florensky believes that it is unlikely - given the architectural achievements - that the perspective was entirely unknown. Similar is the case of the Middle Ages, whose absence or deformation of perspective in painting was, according to Florensky, deliberate:

In this way the presence or absence of perspective in the painting of an entire historical period can not be regarded as equivalent to skill or inability, but are rooted more deeply in the meaning of the primordial will whose creative drive is directed in one direction or another one. Our thesis - to which we shall return again - states that the reason there are periods in the history of artistic creation in which the use of perspective does not apply is not due to the fact that its figurative artists "did not know" how to use it, but because they decided to ignore it. Or, to be more exact, they preferred to use another principle of representation, distinct from that of perspective; and if this was his wish, it is because the genius of his day perceived and understood the world in such a way that this procedure of representation was immanent to him. On the contrary, at other times, people forget the sense and meaning of the non-perspectival representation, lose their sensitivity to it, since the complete transformation of the understanding of time leads a perspectival representation. (FLORIENSKI, 2012, pp. 53-54)²

¹ My translation.

² My translation.

However, even the systematic and generalized use of perspective by Renaissance artists does not quite abolish perspective violations. That these artists were fully aware of the laws of perspective testifies to the fact that many of them were also authors of treatises on the subject, such as Filippo Brunelleschi, Paolo Uccello, Leon Battista Alberti, Piero Francesca, Donatello and Albrecht Dürer. However, the very accurate analyzes of paintings by Leonardo Sanzio, Paolo Veronese, El Greco, Albrecht Dürer and Peter Paul Rubens by Floriensi show that these artists permitted violations such as the unity of perspective (although these were disguised violations, in instead of assumed, as in medieval painting). By denying the ingrained notion that the perspicacious gaze is the most natural, Florensky comments:

The verisimilitude of perspective, if indeed such a verisimilitude exists, is so not because of its external resemblance, but because of the deviation from itself, that is, in its inner sense, for it is symbolic. In addition, on what "likeness" we can speak that there is between, for example, a table and its perspectival representation, since the evidently parallel contours are represented by convergent lines; the right angles as sharp and obtuse; the segments and angles equal to each other as having unequal dimensions and unequal dimensions as equal? The representation is a symbol. Any representation, both perspicuous and non-perspicuous, whatever it may be, is a symbol. And the images of the visual arts always differ from each other, not because some are symbolic and some are supposedly naturalists, but because being non-naturalists are, at bottom, symbols of different sides of an object, different perceptions of the world, different degrees of synthesis. The various forms of representation are distinguished from one another not as an object differs from its representation, but on the symbolic plane. (FLORIENSKI, 2012, pp. 94-95)³

According Florensky, Renaissance painters use perspective not to copy the referent with all naturalistic rigor. Nor do they compose their pictures in order to illustrate principles of Geometry, but to create atmospheres, to emphasize impressions, to convey values. Associating this procedure with the concepts of Osman Lins about space in the novel, we can say that the Renaissance painter subtly distorts the perspective to create a certain ambience, because, as the Brazilian writer states, "for the measurement of space, we take our experience of the world; to judge about ambience, where the expressive resources of the author are evident, a certain knowledge of narrative art is required " (LINS, 1976, p. 77). Similarly, one can say that in order to appreciate a Renaissance picture, with its subtle distortions of perspective, knowledge of geometry is not enough, but the ability to interpret "ambience".

³ My translation.

Continuing the analogy between painting and narrative, I ask: How does Osman Lins elaborate the non-perspectival view by creating ambience? Let us recall the classification of the ambience by the author. The frank ambience is the one which is constructed by the "pure and simple introduction of the narrator" (LINS, 1976, p.79), and can be "mildly mediated by the presence of one or more characters" (p. 79). The reflected ambience is the one which results from the impressions of the environment on the character, being often projections of the psychological states of characters in their relationship with the space as ambience. The oblique or disguised ambience is that which results from the character's actions, being usually presented by fragments as the action is performed in the foreground. However, for the analysis of non-perspectivism in Osman Lins' narrative, I propose to add another kind of ambience (or perhaps a subdivision of the frank ambience), which is the ornamental or cosmic ambience.

I denominate ornamental or cosmic ambience the one that establishes associations between the individual human event and the representation of the cosmos. The adjective "ornamental" is justified because, according to Lins, the ornament has the role of cosmic representation, never being reduced to a simple adornment. In "Lost and Found," for example, the narrative about a missing boy on the beach is interspersed with descriptions of the animal world millions of years ago, like this:

True scorpions, the ancestors of those which exist today and forerunners of life on the deserted continents, have appeared in the Silurian. Then, from *malacacheta*, mud, refracted light, darkness and salt, the fish are formed, ravenous from the beginning. They devour each other and with every millennium they are more numerous. Great convulsions modify the earth, promontories submerge, lakes become dry. Seas empty themselves. (LINS, 1975, p.214)⁴

The same type of description introduces each one of the chapters (called mysteries), in "Retable of Santa Joana Carolina", like this opening of the First Mystery:

Shooting stars and those which remain, fireballs, comets that traverse space like reptiles, great nebulae, rivers of fire and magnitude, ordered agglomerations, unfolded space, expanses reflected in the mirrors of Time, the Sun, the planets, our Moon and its four phases, all measured by the universal scale, with the pollen on one plate, on the other, the

⁴ My translation.

constellations, and which regulates, with the same certainty, the distance, the vertigo, the numbers. (LINS, 1975, p.87).⁵

Similar sense has the description of the carpet in *Avalovara*:

But if I saw the whole on the rug, I would see beyond the limits, and then I would see nothing else. I have here the world, but it is still inviolate, and therefore it does not exist, in the open flowers, in the carefree birds, in the hares that are alien to eventual persecutors, the slightest shadow of destruction and any kind of horror. There is an air of immunity in every respect, and even the distracted gaze quickly guesses, not without nostalgia, that the beings here woven are immortal. The carpet is Paradise, and with the sounds of the city, around the wall constituted by the quintuple bar, roars death. (LINS, 2005, p.331)⁶

Ornamental ambiances such as these (in this case, variations of the frank ambience) may seem dysfunctional at first glance, especially the first two examples, since they do not seem to be fully integrated with the actions of the characters. In the case of "Retable of Santa Joana Carolina", these purely descriptive introductions precede the properly narrative discourse. That recalls the pictorial ornamentations of old books. But this type of description, sometimes purely static, as in "Retable of Santa Joana Carolina", far from being mere scenery, adds a cosmic sense related to the actions narrated. In *Avalovara*, this cosmic sense goes beyond the ambience, also participating in the characterization of some characters, whose bodies are composed by a heteroclite profusion associated with the cosmos, which I analyze in another paper (NUTO, 2016).

Yet the cosmic setting is not the only trace of non-perspectivism in the Osman Lins' achievement. Important features are the alternation of points of view, coming to abrupt oscillation, as we find in "A point in the circle" and "Lost and found". In "The Confused Ones", the non-perspectivism of narrative focus is taken to the extreme, because the views of the two characters not only oscillate, but merge. In "Engagement", non-perspectivism mixes temporality and characterization, presenting simultaneously the same character in three different phases of his life (also using the grotesque style of physical characterization): "The two old Mendonça, now so silent, stand up, say goodbye. It's always like this: they never go together this Mendonça and the other ones, they never come together and they never appear alone" (LINS, 1975,

⁵ My translation.

⁶ My translation.

p. 198). Space-time non-perspectivism is very pronounced in the novel *Avalovara*, whose paragraphs alter space, time, and narrative focus from one period to another. Such an oscillation is further accentuated in the short-story "The Pentagon of Hahn," in which different points of view and temporalities oscillate within the same period. In a commentary that we can associate with non-perspectival representation, one of the characters of *Avalovara* states:

"It may be that everything exists simultaneously and that we have of time not a correct or true idea, but one that preserves our integrity. We must believe that we are a point, not a straight or sinuous trait: we learn things, not the sum of their displacements" (LINS, 2005, 134).⁷

In the novel *The queen of the prisons of Greece*, non-perspectivism appears in the time-space representation of the novel by Julia Marquezim Enone, in a description which, by rejecting naturalism, fuses the city of *Recife* with the one of *Olinda* and the contemporary time with the period of Dutch occupation in *Pernambuco*, creating the impression of space-time simultaneity, or overlapping spaces, as Marcia Rejany de Mendonça denominates it, in a study on *Nine, Novena* (MENDONÇA, 2008). As the narrator character of *The Queen of Prisons in Greece* comments about the presence of elements of colonial *Pernambuco* in the contemporary city of *Recife* represented in Julia Marquezim Enone's novel:

Those soldiers in arms do not alter the fable at all; but they significantly alter the nature of space. Without them, the imaginary operation with which Julia Marquezim Enone makes surreal the scenario of the book would ignore time, would be limited to a single category; with them, the relics of a bygone era, a ubiquitous temporality arises, from which the whole space will permeate itself. Mobile / fixed reconciliations, liquid / solid, overlap with today and yesterday, simultaneous. The smooth facades of recent constructions coexist with the geometric interlacing of the Mudejars; the walls covered with adobe; the asphalted roads of now, with paved alleys of old, meandering and undiscovered, large balconies on them. (LINS, 2005, p 129).

Just as non-perspectivism and reverse perspective seem like defects to one who takes perspective representation as *the* pattern, ignoring possible other senses sought by the non-perspectival representation, also the oscillations persevering in the work of Osman Lins may seem incoherent or puzzling to a reader who is used to the linearity of narrative - and verbal discourse in general. Osman Lins associates

⁷ My translation.

perspectival representation with the profane view and perspectivism to the sacred one. Pavel Florensky also associates non-perspectivism with the divine view. As for the perspective, Florensky considers that his first motivations were raised not by painting, but by the scenography, as much in the Antique theater as Medieval one, having its principles already studied by philosophers. Renaissance humanism contributed to the intense and systematic use of perspective, but does not prevent it from being violated for the purpose of artistic representation.

Osman Lins, by mentioning the abolition of perspectivism in contemporary art, asserts that this evokes "a spiritualization not very different from that which the medieval artist knew" (LINS 1976: 94). Medieval spirituality was based on theocentrism, to which Florensky associates the distortions of perspective. However, Florensky observes that non-perspectivism is not only a representation of whatever is sacred. It is convenient by observing the spiritual mood contemporaneity, to verify if this really resembles the spiritual mood of Middle Ages. In fact, contemporary technology suggests a non-perspectival view, which appears, for example, in television channels that can be changed quickly by remote control (zapping); in the alternation of internet pages opened on the computer; in surveillance cameras that allow to visualize several enclosures at the same time; in the very notion that technology can be used as a panopticon. However, this impression of oscillation or simultaneity, though associated with non-perspectivism, is completely profane. I would say that it is not the contemporary non-perspectivism of modern Art that approximates the contemporary art of the spirituality of Middle Age, but the literary achievement by Osman Lins, who was a great admirer of medieval art. Thus he brings that that spiritual mood, by using non-perspectivism and ornament in order to articulate the mundane event with the cosmos and the sacred.

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