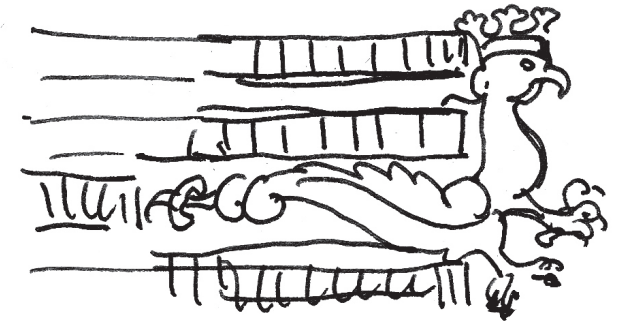
ANAMORPHOSES AND DEPRAVED PERSPECTIVES



The Rationality of the Irrational. Jurgis Baltrušaitis's Contribution to the History of Anamorphoses

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This paper discusses Jurgis Baltrušaitis's contribution to the history of anamorphoses, showing that his historical studies underpin a more general level of theoretical thought. It offers an analysis of anamorphic visions that continues Baltrušaitis's explorations of the life of forms in the Middle Ages and the fantastic images that arise within them, significantly complementing the study of perspective in art history. In addition, this paper shifts Baltrušaitis's historical research of anamorphoses to a theoretical level, revealing the presence of a distinctive ontology of the image and the imaginary in his studies that encompassed the dialectics of rationality and irrationality. On the one hand, manifestations of visionary worlds emerge in geometrical structures and optical machinations; thus, irrationality appears in a strict and rational system. On the other hand, the aberrations of visions that give birth to poetic fables and legends have certain regularities and metaphysical depths that Baltrušaitis sought to reveal.

Keywords: Jurgis Baltrušaits, anamorphosis, perspective, optical deformation, vision, gaze, Henri Focillon, aesthetics of the visionary, aesthetics of deformation

Introduction

In 1948, Jurgis Baltrušaitis, as a historian of medieval fantasy, was invited to give a lecture titled *Gemmes Antiques et Monstres Gothiques (Le Gryllos Gothiques)* at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts. While visiting the United States, he came across a catalogue of the exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, first published in 1936 at New York's Museum of Modern Art (reprinted in 1947). The fantastic art of the 16th and 17th centuries is presented in the catalogue as a precursor to surrealism. It includes artworks by Flemish painters Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Huys; by analyzing these works Baltrušaitis later completed his research on the fantastic Gothic, showing that reworked fantastic cycles were reborn in the cultural imagination, reintroducing a whole series of surreal plots and monsters.

The aforementioned catalogue reproduced several grotesque compositions by Giuseppe Arcimboldo, in which one image is composed of others and appears differently when viewed from different distances. Arcimboldo's work eventually became a separate area of interest for Baltrušaitis.[1] In

1 He devoted a paper to this Italian mannerist, which was published in a special issue: Jurgis Baltrušaitis, "Prima dell'Arcimboldi: mostri e bizzarie medievali," *Arcimboldi e l'arte delle meraviglie*, *Dossier d'art*, No. 11, 1987, pp. 7–21.

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the same exhibition catalogue, Baltrušaitis discovered anamorphic pictures: an engraving by Albrecht Dürer's student Erhard Schön, *Vexierbild* (1534), from the MoMA collection, and several paintings from the Jacques Lipchitz collection ("Portrait of Charles V" and "St. Anthony of Padua" by unknown 16th-century artists). This catalogue partly served as an impetus for the art historian to study anamorphosis.

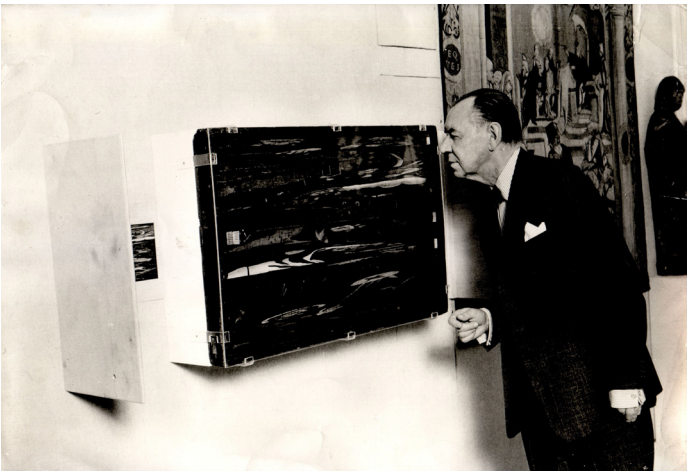
Baltrušaitis began his career under the supervision of Henri Focillon, the founder of formal art history. At the center of Baltrušaitis's work were the deformed and the disfigured, the monstrous and the grotesque. For instance, he showed that in the capitals of Romanesque churches all forms of fantastic creatures appear in the *entrelacs*, ornamental and abstract architectural structures, which reform and distort reality in a disciplined way. Likewise, in the margins of Gothic manuscripts the initial letter and abstract decorations regularly produce deformed beings and monsters. This development culminated in anamorphoses, where geometrical purity and mathematical order create disorder and monstrosities out of nothing but themselves.

It is therefore natural that the riddles of anamorphic paintings included in the catalogue have led Baltrušaitis to the realm of strict laws of perspective. Erwin Panofsky's fundamental study *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*, published in 1927, continued the tradition of positivist art history. In Panofsky's view, the regular "geometric construction" of central perspective remained dominant until the time of the French mathematician and engineer Girard Desargues (1591–1661), who laid the foundations of projective geometry. Having exchanged Euclid's "visual cone" for a multidimensional geometric structure, 17th-century mathematicians and artists returned to the problems of optical illusion. Perspective became the "kingdom of visionaries," returning to the Platonic view of the ghostly existence of the image. However, Panofsky concluded his study with these considerations. It was here that Baltrušaitis began his own research into distorted perspectives, showing that the history of perspective is not only a move toward artistic realism, but also a history of illusion, full of fantastic images and visions.

Baltrušaitis's *Anamorphoses ou perspectives curieuses*, first published by Olivier Perrin in 1955 (reprinted as *Anamorphoses ou Magie artificielle des effets merveilleux* in 1969), attracted great interest, especially after the exhibitions "Anamorphoses, spel met perspectief" in Amsterdam and "Chasse à l'anamorphose" in Paris were held in 1975 and 1976 (fig. 1).[2] His book showed that perspective has a fantastic, magical side, directed beyond the boundaries of reality. It was the first work to study the phenomenon of anamorphosis in detail.

This paper demonstrates Baltrušaitis's contribution to the history of anamorphoses and focuses on the notion which laid the foundation for his historical research – that in the world of distorted forms one can still find strict rules. It aims to shift Baltrušaitis's historical research of anamo-

2 Baltrušaitis wrote the exhibition catalog's introduction: *Anamorphosen, spel met perspectief / Anamorphoses: jeu de perspective*, F. Keeman (ed.). Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum; Paris: Musée des arts décoratifs. Köln: M. DuMont Schauberg, 1975.



1. Jurgis Baltrušaitis at the exhibition dedicated to anamorphoses. Photo from J. Baltrušaitis's archive.

rphosis to a theoretical level, showing how anamorphosis also includes the ontology of the image. Moreover, it demonstrates that all of Baltrušaitis's works are connected by an interest in the aesthetics of deformations.[3]

Historian of the Imaginary and the Monstrous

In the field of art history, Jurgis Baltrušaitis is an atypical figure who explored the unusual. He was interested in curiosities, marginal phenomena, and aberrations; at the same time, geometry and optics attracted him. The point of contact of his varied interests was an effort to bring to light "the rules of the unruly," "a secret geometry" of visionary worlds, in short, a hidden aesthetic order within apparent disorder.

Baltrušaitis started out as a medievalist. In 1931, he published his doctoral thesis *La stylistique ornementale dans la sculpture romane*,[4] in which he reconstructed the morphological system of Romanesque sculpture. In this study, Baltrušaitis demonstrated how ancient geometrical forms and simple plant motifs shaped figurative representation in Romanesque capitals, as it shaped the medieval art of Georgia and Armenia. For Baltrušaitis, ornamental stylistics, far from being a subsidiary matter, hold the key function of balancing the rigors of constraint and the outburst of fantasy. Going further, he studied monumental Romanesque sculpture displaying exuberant decoration and hybrid forms, and found it to obey the laws of the abstract ornament. Based on his findings, Baltrušaitis proposed a theory of *orna-*

3 This is a revised part of the paper: Odeta Žukauskienė, "Orderly Ugliness, Anamorphosis and Visionary Words: Jurgis Baltrušaitis' Contribution to Art History", in *Ugliness. The Non-beautiful in Art and Theory*, Andrei Pop, Mechtild Widrich (eds.), London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014. I am grateful to Jean Baltrušaiti for the opportunity to explore Baltrušaitis's archive, which was in his house for many years.

4 The book was reprinted by Flammarion in 1986 as *Formations, déformations: la stylistique ornementale dans la sculpture romane*.

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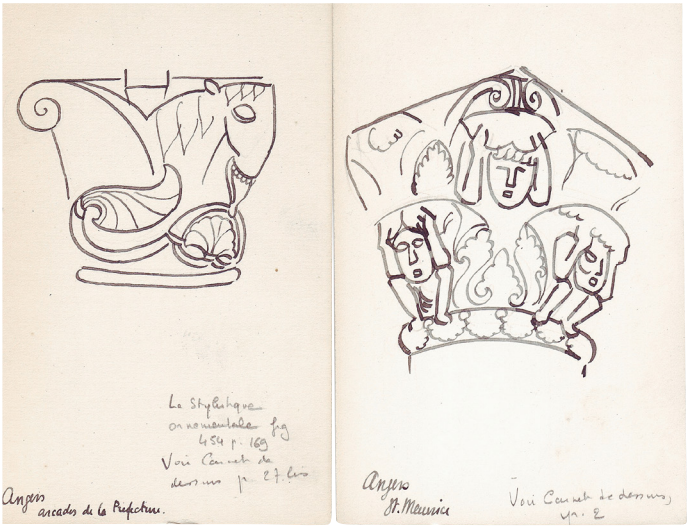


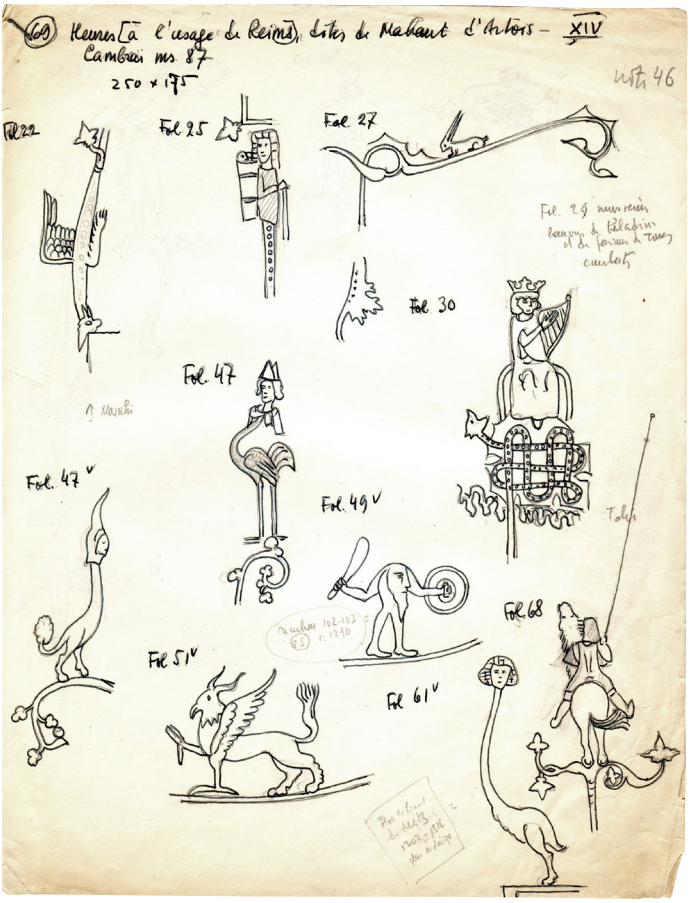
2. Jurgis Baltrušaitis, sketchbook drawing of Romanesque capitals.

mental stylistics linking the ornament to figurative style (fig. 2).

Baltrušaitis argued that monsters and hybrids spring from the geometry of the ornament, rather than primarily reflecting religious or cultural concerns. Ornamental stylistics overwhelms the forms of reality, without attempting to annihilate them, but rather to recreate them in a supernatural or suprareal world. Baltrušaitis concluded that Romanesque teratology is wholly dependent on this formal law of the ornament.[5] The upshot of this study is almost modernist: an abstract pattern is the fundamental characteristic of the Romanesque grotesque.

In his later studies, Baltrušaitis claimed that even in terms of representing reality, medieval art had never lost its fantastic aspect. And he traced the history of the drollery in his remarkable *Réveils et Prodiges* (1960), insisting that the Gothic repertoire had already existed in Romanesque art and, enriched with exotic forms, survived and evolved through the Renaissance. Baltrušaitis's key contention is that ornamental stylistics, predominant in Romanesque architecture, invaded the margins of manuscripts in the 13th and 14th centuries (fig. 3). Throughout the Middle Ages, monstrosities grew and spread in evangelical culture: in zoomorphic and vegetal decorations of initial letters, illuminations of bestiaries, margins of manuscripts and sculptural decorations. According to Baltrušaitis, these fantastic combinations of so-called gothic marginalia revived the

5 Schapiro's 1933 critique of Baltrušaitis's *Stylistique* was strongly colored by his political beliefs. Meyer Schapiro, "Uber den Schematismus in den romanischen Kunst," *Kritische Berichte zur kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur* 5, 1932–33, pp. 1–21. Focillon's and Baltrušaitis's approach was directly opposed to that of Shapiro, "for whom the disorder of Romanesque sculpture was a sign for its expressivity and its primitivism," as Alexandra Gajewski-Kennedy notes in "Henri Focillon (1881–1943)," *Key Writers on Art: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Chris Murray, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 110. See also Walter B. Kahn, "Schapiro and Focillon," *Gesta* 41/2, 2002, pp. 129–136.



3. Jurgis Baltrušaitis, drawing after marginal images in Gothic manuscripts.

repertoire and paved the way for a new invasion of exotic forms.[6]

This interest in the anticlassical tradition and visionary nature of the ornament, though unique in its detail, was not random or isolated. Baltrušaitis learned from Focillon, whose concept of the *life of forms* was the common methodological approach of his school and left a large footprint on the formation of Baltrušaitis's worldview.

6 Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Le Moyen Age fantastique: antiquités et exotismes dans l'art gothique*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1955; *Reveil et Prodiges. Le gothique fantastique*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1960.

Focillon's Aesthetics of the Visionary

In the beginning of the 20th century, Henri Focillon became a leading figure in art history in France. Like the theorists of the Vienna school (Franz Wickhoff, Alois Riegl, Otto Benesch, and Max Dvořák), though for different reasons, he rejected the tradition that celebrated classical art. The representatives of the Vienna school, as well as avant-garde artists, refused to acknowledge the traditional connection between beauty and truth. In 1926, Focillon published his paper *Esthetique des visionnaires*, where through a

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discussion of works by Rembrandt, Piranesi, Turner, Tintoretto, El Greco, and Daumier he aimed to establish the concept of visionary art.[7] According to him, visionaries do not alter nature, but imbue it with a striking vivacity, intensity, and profundity. In other words, form is not replaced but intensified. On the other hand, they interpret more than imitate and create phantasmagorias as illusory constructions. To this group of visionaries he assigned artists having extraordinary powers used in creating *imaginary worlds* that intertwine reality and irreality.

In 1924, after having taken lead of the newly founded Institut d'Art et d'Archeologie at the Sorbonne, Focillon encouraged his students to research fantastic aspects of medieval art. In 1938, while lecturing at Collège de France, he prepared a cycle on 15th- and 16th-century visionary art: Bosch's "nightmarish visions," Andrea Mantegna's "convulsive paintings," and Matthias Grünewald's "glory of the ruins of mankind."[8] He opposed the art of visionaries to *Renaissance Latin*. In his later reflections, Focillon turned to certain iconographic features of visionary art: fantastic landscapes, ruins, towers of Babel, nature's monstrosities, demons.[9] According to André Chastel, Focillon was fascinated by "what is anxious, strange and distorted."[10] To the circle of visionaries he added canonical Renaissance artists concerned with fantastic mythologies and astronomical motifs (Piero di Cosimo, Botticelli, and others). Visionaries, as Focillon wrote, deeply twist the light, the proportions, and even the density of the sensible world.

In *Vie des forme* Focillon focused on the morphological nature of art. This meant shifting attention from the artist to the artwork that exists as a form. Actually, Focillon argued that art existed only as a technique for expressing the emotional and physical aspects of human nature.[11] Technique is not merely artistic practice, but also a creative process full of formal metamorphoses and poetry. These and other morphological considerations led Focillon to assert that technique itself contains *a visionary mechanism*. Technique helps in releasing the artist's imagination; it embodies nocturnal dreams and visions as well as conscious intentions.

In Focillon's view, form as a verbal sign "lavishly expresses certain aspects of the life of the mind, of the passive and active

7 Henri Focillon, "Esthétique des visionnaires," *Journal de psychologie*, 1926. Reprinted in *Maîtres de l'Estampe*, Paris: Henri Laurens, 1930, pp. 193–212.

8 Henri Focillon, "L'art visionnaire à la fin du Moyen Âge et pendant la Renaissance," in *Esthétique et l'histoire de l'art. Extrait de l'annuaire du Collège de France*, Paris, 1939, pp. 4–7.

9 Pascal Schandel, "Henri Focillon, l'eau-forte et les artistes visionnaires," *Histoire de l'art*, No. 52, 2003, p. 76.

10 André Chastel, "Henri Focillon et son enseignement," in: *Victor Focillon et Henri Focillon*, Dijon, 1955, p. 17.

11 In his book *In Praise of Hands*, Focillon stressed that it is generally believed that visionary artists "are carried away by their visions suddenly, utterly and despotically, and that they transfer them intact to any medium whatever by a hand guided from within, like those automatic artists who can draw in reverse. Nothing is less certain, however, if one examines one of the greatest of these visionaries, Victor Hugo. No mind is richer in inner spectacles, in flamboyant contrasts, in verbal surprises that depict the object with an enthralling exactness. One would willingly believe, as he did, that he was inspired like a magician and possessed by presences impatient to become apparitions, complete and already three dimensional in a world at once solid and convulsive." Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*. Translated by Charles Beecher Hogan and George Kubler. New York: Zone books, 1989, pp. 178–179.

aptitudes of the human spirit. It exhibits a wonderful ingenuity in the various processes of the distortion and the ultimate extinction of words. But to say that it wastes away, that it proliferates and that it creates monstrosities is equally true."[12] Even a plain linear perspective, according to Focillon, is prone to strange fictions and paradoxes. A life of form "creates various new geometries even at the heart of geometry itself."[13]

These Focillon's ideas anticipate Baltrušaitis's work on anamorphoses, in which he argued that the principles of perspective functioned not only as a technique for appropriating reality, but also for hallucinatory and disconcerting purposes. The history of perspective is related not only to artistic concern with "realism" and beauty, but also to the history of making visible irreality and deformation.

The Origins and Definition of Anamorphosis

Between 1946 and 1960, Baltrušaitis's attention turned from the Middle Ages to the optical games of the Renaissance. In *Anamorphoses* (1955), Baltrušaitis argued that

> instead of reducing forms to their visible limits, anamorphoses are projected out of themselves and are dislocated in such a way that they only fall back into place when they are looked at from a predetermined point of view. The method is established as a technical curiosity, but it contains the poetics of abstraction, the powerful mechanism of optical illusion and the philosophy of artificial reality .[14]

Denis Diderot had already defined anamorphic representation as "a monstrous projection, a disfigured representation of an image on a plane or curved surface that nevertheless, when viewed from a particular point, appears regular and properly proportioned."[15] Baltrušaitis was interested in investigating how a visionary world full of deformations, spectral and playful forms emerges in the rational architecture of perspective and geometrical structure. He approached the problem broadly, examining not only deformations of perspective but also works by Arcimboldo, Cellini, Rabelais, the "monsters and prodigies" of the 16th century, which Eugenio Battisti called *Antirinascimento*, and Chinese catoptric images (meant to be viewed through a cylindrical mirror) of landscapes and erotica. On the other hand, he was attracted by the actual practice of geometry and read treatises about perspective, from which he concluded that the dialectics of central perspective are also those of anamorphosis.

Just what is anamorphosis? In a classic case, such as the elongated, unrecognizable skull in Hans Holbein's (1497–1543) picture *The Ambassadors* (1533, London, National Gallery), an anamorphic object appears unconnected to the space in which it is placed. When seen from the correct an-

12 Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, p. 40.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

14 Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Anamorphoses ou Thaumaturgus opticus*, Paris: Flammation, 1996, p. 7.

15 *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers.* Denis Diderot et Jean le Rond d'Alembert (dir.). Vol. I, Paris, 1751, p. 404. Quoted by Jurgis Baltrušaitis in *Anamorphoses*, p. 164.

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gle, the object appears to have its familiar shape in the normal perspective. The rest of the image, however, is thus obliterated or turned into an anamorphic abstraction of its own. Despite this visual competitiveness, what the two kinds of images have in common is their dependence on the spectator, according to whose assumed position three-dimensional objects are projected. Both participate in a subjective illusion. In one case the illusion is one of an immediately available three-dimensional space, while in the other – a three-dimensional space that may be seen by abandoning the first, immediately available space. Thus anamorphosis creates unlikely, phantomic, or spectral images, which are nevertheless tangent to the real. If perspective was "the aesthetic concept of proportion and symmetry that proclaimed the principles of 'divine' harmony and beauty, as handed down and continued by the ideals of Classical antiquity,"[16] anamorphosis was based on the same mathematical rules, applied to create a world not of plausible beauty, but of deformity and irreality. Thus, *anamorphoses are a rational means of generating the irrational*. It is no coincidence that Leonardo da Vinci called the anamorphosis "monstrous," for it represents a limit of representation.[17]

How does anamorphosis disturb vision? In anamorphosis, monstrous form recovers its natural proportions when the spectator assumes the indicated point of view.[18] Viewed directly, the anamorphic image appears as a shapeless, unintelligible mass. The observer must play an active part in re-forming the image. A kind of metamorphic grotesque exists in the process, "morphing from one thing or form to another."[19] It should be noted that undesired distortions also appear in the linear perspective if the observer's eye is not correctly positioned. Leonardo noticed that strange deformations result when eyes are too close to the picture. It is possible that the first deliberate anamorphic distortions were designed to compensate for such extreme viewpoints.[20] Quaintly, anamorphosis reveals the specificity of normal perspective. Anamorphic images exploit potential distortions and liberate viewers from the fixity of central-point perspective, while nonetheless confirming the importance of the observer's position. Anamorphosis displaces the viewer to another *locus*, one not directly opposite the vanishing point, hence not perpendicular to the picture plane.[21] An anamorphic object cannot thus

16 Dieter Mersch, "Representation and Distortion: On the Construction of Rationality and Irrationality in Early Modern Modes of Representation", in *Instruments in Art and Science. On the Architectonics of Cultural Boundaries in the 17th Century*, K. Schramm, L. Schwarte, J. Lazarding (eds). New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008, p. 25.

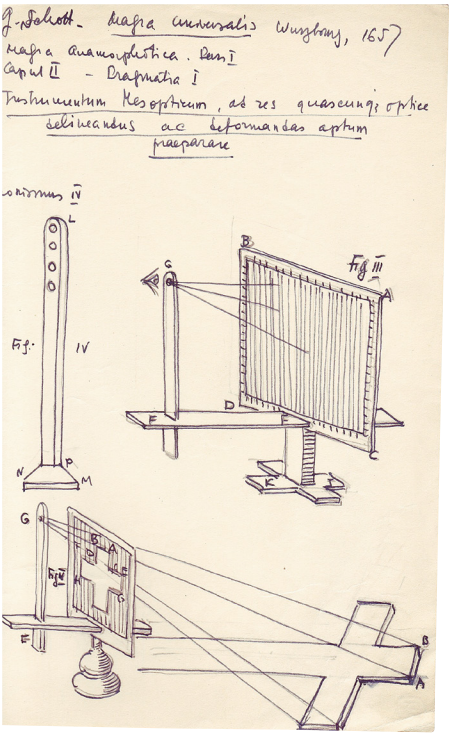
17 Quated in Mersch, p. 28. See also *Leonardo da Vinci. Leonardo on Art and the Artist*, ed. Andre Chastel. New York: Dover, 2002, p. 106: "If the eye looking at this representation in perspective moves slightly, all the images will appear monstrous to it."

18 In the seventeenth century, *perspective* and *optic* (the art of seeing) were used interchangeably. See Mersch, p. 28.

19 Frances S. Connelly, "Introduction," in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, Frances S. Connelly (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 3.

20 Kim H. Veltman, "Perspective, Anamorphosis and Vision," *Marburger Jahrbuch fur Kunstwissenschaft* No. 21, 1986, pp. 93–117.

21 Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History.* London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, p. 57.



4. Jurgis Baltrušaitis, drawing of optical instruments illustrated in G. Schott, *Magia Universalis* (1657–1659).

be reformed until it captivates and ensnares the observer.

According to Baltrušaitis, the term *anamorphosis* first appeared in the 17th century. Its inventor is generally thought to be the Jesuit polymath and experimental scientist Gaspar Schott (1657) (fig. 4).[22]

It is interesting that this practice of the late Renaissance should take so long to be codified, but not surprising. The history of perspective is full of conflicts, for it is both a science that determines strict dimensions and distances in space and an art of illusion that distorts and re-creates these forms. Baltrušaitis reminds us of a story told by Pliny the Elder concerning a contest held for building a statue to Minerva, intended to crown a high pillar. Alcamenes created a sculpture with harmonious proportions, while Phidias designed a figure with deformed limbs, open mouth, and stretched nose. When the sculptures were exposed to the public, the first was praised, while the other was almost stoned. But after putting the sculptures on a column, the verdicts were reversed: Phidias's sculpture shone with beauty, while the other became an object of mockery. Beauty and ugliness, insofar as they involve the perception of harmonious proportions, are dependent on the observer's point of view.

This story was familiar to the creators of anamorphoses in the 16th and 17th centuries, an epoch in which perspective dominated as the "queen of methods" (Niceron and Agrippa) and during which various

22 The word anamorphosis refers to the Greek *ana*, which means "the return of," and *morphē* – "form" or "shape." The words *anamorphosi*, *anamophotica* appear in Schott's four-volume *Magia universalis naturae et artis* (Wurzburg, 1657–59), in the third part of the book *Optica* (1657), called *De magia anamorphotica, sive de arcana imaginum deformatione ac reformatione ex optices atque catoptrices proescriptio*. Schott, like Niceron and Kircher, treated *optical* phenomena and visual effects in the context of natural philosophy and defined perspective as "anamorphic magic." However, the term *anamorphosis* was introduced long after the practice itself existed. Anamorphic drawings, engravings and paintings were particularly numerous in 16th-century Germany. But a consistent and clear definition of the artistic practice did not exist: the pictorial technique was usually described as "curious perspective" or "reversed perspective." See also Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 105.

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artistic and scientific theories of perspective and the gaze were developed. In the background of these researches emerged a wave of anamorphoses, a play with deformed-reformed, distorted-harmonious, and beautiful-ugly images. While looking straight at a painting, one saw disturbing, incoherent forms: intertwined lines, elongated curves and whirls, strange and repellent forms. Looking from another angle, or into a mirror, these distorted, meaningless forms interchanged and presented correct portraits, landscapes, religious or love scenes. From the chaos emerged a tangible world, from the disordered – orderly. It is thus hardly hyperbolic to say with Baltrušaitis that "anamorphosis is a rebus, monster, and prodigy."[23] For it is a technique by which the puzzling and the distorted are enjoyably yoked to an active spectator.

The History of Anamorphosis

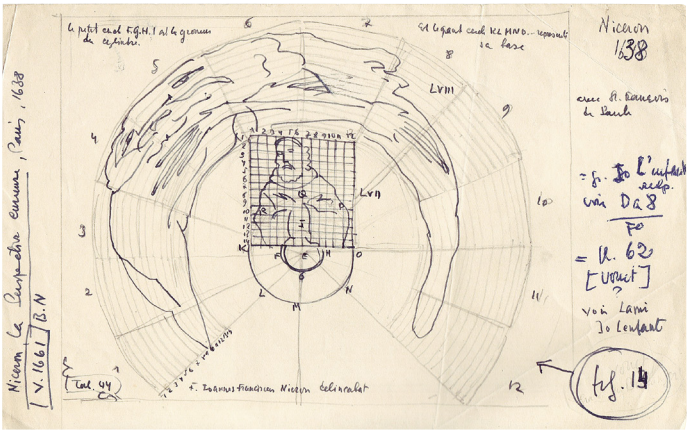
In aiming to show how precisely anamorphosis as an optical distortion relates to visionary art, we have to briefly discuss the historical developments of anamorphosis, as presented by Baltrušaitis. In this context, we should be reminded that Baltrušaitis was intrigued by the phenomenon of anamorphosis after encountering anamorphic images at the exhibition catalogue *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*.

In Schön's *Vexierbild* ("engraving with a secret"), a strangely curved landscape, if observed closely, turns into the four well-known profiles of Charles V, Ferdinand I, Pope Clement VII, and Francis I. Similar optic effects can be obtained in painting; interestingly, it is often rulers who are thus encrypted. While searching for historical data concerning this and other anamorphic portraits, Baltrušaitis discovered the journal of the German traveler Leopold Vedel, who in 1584 visited Whitehall and saw the anamorphic portrait of King of Edward VI (the Protestant son of Henry VIII, who died in 1553 aged 16) painted in 1546 by the Dutch mannerist William Scrots. He was shaken by the hideous figure which, when viewed through a small hole from a distance of sixty centimeters, turned into the elegantly proportioned face of the nine-year-old Prince.

Baltrušaitis discovered that not only royal portraits, but also religious themes were often hidden under disintegrated and prolix landscapes, and that the phenomenon, or at least meditation on it, spilled into literature as well. After all, similar deformations of form, caused by sorrow and contempt, were mentioned by Shakespeare: "For sorrow's eye, glazed with blinding tears, / Divides one thing entire to many objects, / Like perspectives, which, rightly gaz'd upon / Show nothing but confusion, ey'd awry, / Distinguish form [...]."[24] By disintegrating and distorting the visible object, sorrow turns it into a fusion of strange forms. Such anamorphosis of sorrow, rendering familiar scenes as fantastic images, is a standard literary manifestation of anamorphoses found in Renaissance art and

23 Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Anamorphoses*, p. 7.

24 William Shakespeare, *Richard II* (1595), Act II, Scene 2, v.16–20. This passage is pointed out by Jurgis Baltrušaitis in *Anamorphoses*, 1996, p. 34, with reference to Erwin Panofsky, *The Codex Huygens and Leonardo da Vinci's Art Theory,* London: Warburg Institute, 1940, p. 93.



5. Jurgis Baltrušaitis, drawing after the portrait of Saint Francis of Paola distorted into a cylindrical anamorphosis, from J.-F. Niceron, *Proposition III* of *La Perspective curieuse* (1638).

Mannerism in particular. For Shakespeare, the sorrowful gaze is like the distorted image, but there is nothing corresponding to the corrected anamorphic image, unless it is the absence of sorrow. What is striking in anamorphic images, on the other hand, is the absence of personal motivation for distorting the objects. They are deformed not by tears, or by emotion, but by a technical trick of perspective construction.

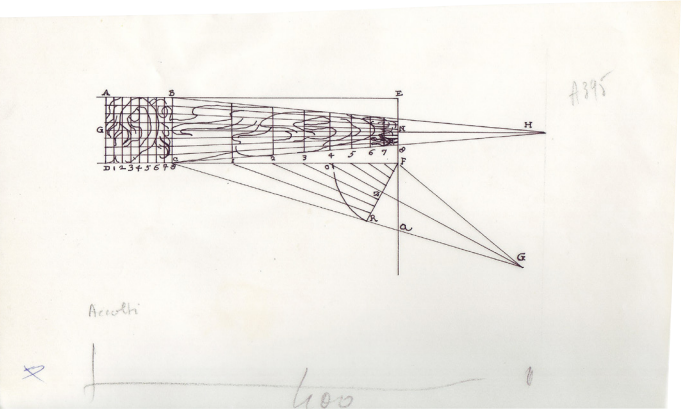
Baltrušaitis spent much time researching the technical circumstances of the 16th–17th centuries that led to the development of anamorphosis. The first methods were meant to insert one form into another – in other words, to hide one image in another. In *Pratica della Perspettiva* (1559), Daniele Barbaro wrote that figures must be disintegrated in such a way that their separate parts should integrate only while observed from one side. Thus, for example, while looking at a painting, it is not absolutely clear whether the artist depicts a head, because the nose looks like one thing, the forehead – like another, etc.[25] By these methods of image distortion, it was also possible, Baltrušaitis recognized, to produce images that were only "conceptually anamorphic," like the heads of Arcimboldo and his followers.

The first author to describe the peculiarity of the oblique gaze in terms of portraying perspective in mural painting was Leonardo da Vinci, who produced the first well-known example of anamorphosis. However, the first formal explanation of the straight, "linear" anamorphosis was provided by Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola in the book *Le due regole della prospettiva pratica* (1583). One illustration of the book depicts a head in profile stretched over an extended grid, drawn on the inside back wall of a box. The head is uncanny if seen from the front; but the regular image appears in the correct perspective, when observed through a peephole on the side of the box that positions the spectator's eye.

In the 17th century, strict geometrical methods for creating anamorphic images were gradually found. One of the first to do so was French scientist Jean-François Niceron (1613–1646), who in *Perspective*

25 Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Anamorphoses*, p. 49.

ISSN 2351-4728



6. Jurgis Baltrušaitis, drawing after P. Accolti's anamorphosis of an ear, from *Lo inganno degl'occhi* (1625).

curieuse (1638) and in the later Latin edition *Thaumaturgus opticus* (1646) taught "how to create diverse distorted figures"[26] (fig. 5). The mechanism for creating absurd and distorted forms was also treated like a precise science in the works of Salomon de Caus. Thus, anamorphosis gained scientific ground, based on the geometry of visual rays and precise calculations. Pietro Accolti's *Lo inganno de gl'occhi: prospettiva pratica* (1625) (fig. 6) and Emmanuel Maignan's *Perspectiva horaria* (1648) show images may be deformed by invoking Durer's perspectograph. In 1642, Niceron and Maignan, who were Minorite priests as well as professors of mathematics, painted the largest anamorphic frescos of the time, more than one hundred feet long, in the monastery of San Trinita dei Monti in Rome. Presumably, these monumental anamorphic projections could be matched to the dogmas of the Catholic Church, showing that "faith is hedged in by mystery, doubleness and fleeting glimpses of the truth."[27]

The new projective geometry was not necessary in practice, as the traditional Renaissance schema, called in Italian *costruzione legittima*, easily served as a mechanism of deformation. However, special rules and geometrical calculations were invoked in order to help create extended pictures. With such paintings walls could be decorated – and the larger painting, the greater was the effect. In *La Perspective pratique*, Jean Du Breuil describes monumental examples in which a whole room is painted with deformed figures and gigantic distorted heads. These compositions were viewed through holes which are pierced on a screen. These rooms, full of suddenly appearing and disappearing faces, were like rooms haunted by ghosts.[28]

Anamorphosis as a Spectral Form

Anamorphosis, born of Shakespeare's epoch, is a spectral figure which beyond its abstract forms and diversity contains other forms that cannot be seen by the

26 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

27 Eileen Rieves, *Painting the Heavens. Arts and Science in the Age of Galileo,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 239.

28 Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Anamorphoses*, p. 65, paraphrasing the claims of de Breuil.

spectator's eyes from the front, because the painting's uncertain depth is separated from its surface. The spectral aspect is also closely related to death. This is revealed in Holbein's 1533 *Ambassadors*. According to Baltrušaitis, in painting everything seems to be mysteriously precise and true, but the whole is pervaded with hallucinatory readability: "The picture is completely designed as *trompe l'oeil*, as a still life of allegorical objects, in which the duration seems to be suspended, and the represented persons, symbols of secular and ecclesiastical power are posited as objects."[29] However, a strange object between the two ambassadors does not complete this apotheosis. Then, viewed obliquely from a determined point of view, there emerges the anamorphosis of a skull. Its *ghostly projection* in the painting has been achieved according to the same rules of perspective, the same science, and the same techniques of art. Thus, Holbein created a dramatic performance. Looking awry, the worthy and solemn characters vanish, while the skull appears in their place as the sign of the End and Vanitas. The anamorphosis becomes an allegory of fragility and a ghostlike reality of the visible.

The ghostly character of anamorphosis is evident in Baltrušaitis's analysis of the philosophical and religious contents of anamorphosis. According to Baltrušaitis, the Minorite Order (that is, the Franciscans), established in Paris in 1609, became an important center of scientific research, where questions of optics, geometry, philosophy, and theology were discussed. Erudite monks like Marin Mersenne, Emmanuel Maignan, and others closely collaborated with the Minorites and strove to describe the distortions of perspective. Descartes visited the Order as well and presented his method of philosophical doubt. It is during this period when the first automated machine for producing anamorphoses was created. Fascinated by mechanical instruments and the rational mystery of the automaton, in his *Discours de méthode* (1637) and *Dioptrique* (1637) Descartes analyzed the problem of illusion, using the Albertian *costruzione legittima* to show the deceptiveness of the senses. According to Baltrušaitis, these texts reveal not merely an analyst, but a poet conceiving the world as a "theatre that reveals the secrets of nature through man-made toys."[30]

Such considerations about what might be called "unrealistic reality" – that is, about the unreliability of sense data and the contingent nature of optical facts – were reflected in huge compositions in the Convent of the Minorites, depicting the figures of saints which appear and disappear depending on the point of view. This served as a reminder about the uncertainty of images, which in religious thinking interacted with the idea of vanitas of human life and the world's unpredictability.[31]

Whereas Minorite monks methodically explored anamorphoses in the strict framework of science, the German Jesuits, notably Athanasius Kircher and Gaspar Schott, placed anamorphosis in the sphere of natural philosophy and simultane-

29 Jurgis Baltrušaitis, "Holbein: cherchez l'ovni!," *Le Musée égoïste*, 30/1, 1985, pp. 94–95. "Ovni" is French for UFO.

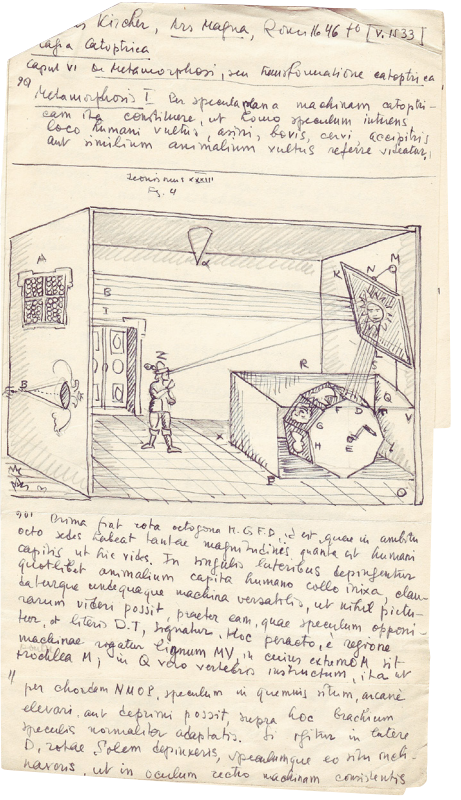
30 Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Anamorphoses*, p. 95.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

ISSN 2351-4728

ously of the visionary. Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680) was a polymath whose works embraced real and supernatural systems, positive sciences and occult philosophy, "universal rules and anecdotes."[32] His books are distinguished by spectacular engravings and amazing iconography that Baltrušaitis found fascinating. Kircher studied optics, catoptrics, and the medieval tradition of natural magic, as well as cosmography and ancient astrological doctrines. He was also interested in perspective instruments that recreate and distort forms, and he suggested extending anamorphic devices to a real world – city architecture and garden arrangements. The Museum Kircherianum installed in the Roman College had the most illustrious collection of apparatuses, a description of which can be found in *Ars Magna* (fig. 7).[33]

Gaspar Schott (1608–1666) noted that the perspective machine (perspectograph), regarded as a magical instrument, could be used to elongate and compress form (*De portula Diureri in deformatione imaginem*). The optical deformations, for all their otherworldliness, are obtained mechanically: what makes them peculiar is their subjective effects. Anamorphoses, discovered in the optical sciences, occupy a space between the rational mind and apparent insanity.[34] These paradoxes of distorted



7. Jurgis Baltrušaitis, drawing after A. Kircher's *Ars Magna* (1646). Machine changing men into animals (metamorphoses).

perspective, developed by cold, systematic minds, by inventors of technical equipment and logicians, are closely associated with the inquiring spirit, not devoid of religion or superstition, of the 16th and 17th centuries. Though adopted by Romanticists for its spectrality, this metaphysical side of anamorphosis was gradually choked by a playful interest in form alone.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, anamorphoses lost their philosophical content and became objects of instruction and entertainment. They were reduced to an "optical skill, curiosity or game, appearing in the

32 Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *La quête d'Isis. Essai sur la légende d'un mythe*, Paris: Flammarion, 1985, p. 79.

33 Athanasius Kircher, *Ars Magna*, 2nd ed. Amsterdam: Johann Jansson, 1671. A detailed catalogue of the Museum Kircherianum edited by Georgius de Sepibus: Romani collegii Societatis Jesu musaeum celeberrimum. Amsterdam: dex officina Janssonio-Waesbergianae Sepibus, 1678..

34 Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Anamorphoses*, p. 159.

8. Jurgis Baltrušaitis, drawing of an allegorical head of *Carnival* engraved by G. A. Brambilla, second half of the 16th century.

Wunderkammer of the 18th century with the purpose of entertaining the spectator."[35] The amateur artist used various methods and machines that transform a common drawing into an anamorphosis. Anamorphosis, like drawing in general, turned into an ingenious game or parlor trick. Catoptrical anamorphoses, which required the use of a cylindrical mirror for the image to be rectified, intrigued spectators by the gap between particularly unintelligible form and correct figures. Galileo's "extravagant and indecent chimeras," with all their metaphysical anxiety, came to entertain the senses they were once meant to instruct.

The Renewal of Anamorphosis

One of the key features of anamorphosis is the opportunity to hide one image in another.[36] Giuseppe Arcimboldo was one of the first constructors to invent these multiple compositions, which became a visual metaphor of the heteroclite (fig. 8). Caricature as an art of portrait distortion kept drawing inspiration from Arcimboldo's anamorphic portraits. Artists who worked with the satirical journals *La Caricature* and *Le Charivari* (Charles Philipon, J. J. Grandville, Honoré Daumier, Charles Joseph Traviès) (fig. 9) created ambivalent, playful, and attractive images, which Baltrušaitis was also interested in, as his notes and archival material show.

Anamorphic images were important for the surrealists as "natural" paradigms of the alienation sought by advanced art. Salvador Dali used anamorphosis extensively in his paintings, and produced an entire edition of mirror anamorphoses – a set of erotic anamorphic paintings whose multiplicity of form again recalls Arcimboldo. For instance, in his *Anamorphose, Nu feminin* (1972), from the one side we see a naked woman, corpulent and misshapen, from the

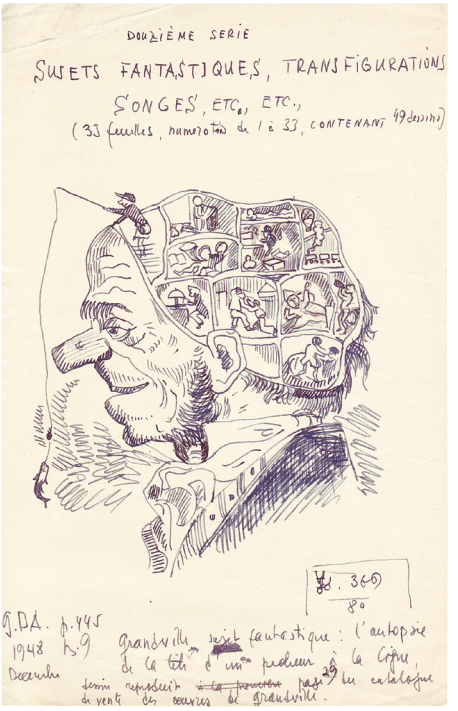
35 Dieter Mersch, "Representation and Distortion", *op. cit.*, p. 31.

36 We can mention the exhibition "One Image May Hide Another: Arcimboldo, Dalí, Raetz" (Jean-Hubert Martin with Dario Gamboni, Thierry Dufrêne, Michel Weemans, Jeanette Zwingenberger, Paris: Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, April 8–July 6, 2009) dedicated to double images with references to Baltrušaitis's research.

ISSN 2351-4728

other – the monstrous face of a man. When viewed through a cylindrical mirror, in the reflection we see a beautiful smiling brunette. Marcel Duchamp was also interested in anamorphosis: some of his installations (especially *Étant donnés*, which resembles Dutch "peep shows") are paraphrases of anamorphoses. André Kertész and Bill Brandt used anamorphic lenses to make images of objects and bodies that cannot be reconstituted, as in classical painterly anamorphosis. Andrei Tarkovsky's films generate an effect of temporal anamorphosis, while American non-narrative filmmaker Stan Brakhage used anamorphosis to transform the conventional space of representation, prohibiting an objective reality to be captured on film.[37] Even in architecture, as Baltrušaitis noted, the glass towers of modernism constitute giant mirrors giving rise to a kind of urban anamorphosis.[38]

Anamorphosis gradually spread as a trope in literature, music, criticism. Roland Barthes defined New Criticism (the French *nouvelle critique*) as an anamorphic projection that is a strictly determined deformation of the artwork.[39] Psychoanalysts saw in anamorphosis a way by which the field of desire is incorporated into the range of sight.[40] Anamorphic images also attracted the interest of contemporary artists. Jan Dibbets and Istvan Orosz used anamorphosis to challenge



9. Jurgis Baltrušaitis, drawing after a satirical illustration by J. J. Grandville.

our customary notions of limits, frontiers, and dimensions.[41] Their work may support Gilles Deleuze's contention that contemporary art seeks to grasp invisible forms and deformations, to depict hardly visible forces.[42]

But it is more than an appropriation of the unseen: as Alain Mons observes, systematic deformations of the visible in contemporary culture express a profound crisis of reality. Violating visual objectivity through its own procedures, anamorphosis

37 R. Bruce Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and Charles Olsen.* New York: Wilfrid Laurier, 1999, p. 136.

38 Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Anamorphoses*, p. 203.

39 *Roland Barthes par lui-même.* Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1975, p. 48.

40 Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*. Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1973, pp. 75–84.

41 Istvan Orosz, "The Angle of Our Vision: About and *a propos* Anamorphosis," http://kepes.society.bme.hu/art-science/Istvan_Orosz_-_The_Angle_of_Our_Vision.pdf

42 Gilles Deleuze, *Logique de la sensation. Francis Bacon.* Paris: La Difference, 1982.

demands an interpretation of the visible, and invites spectators to observe the visible forms that have become autonomous, prolific, and solitary.[43] Focillon's life of form, perhaps stripped of its soothing Bergsonian vitalism, seems to have made a ghostly comeback in a world of animated but strangely isolated images. And so anamorphic effects in contemporary visual culture continue to express a spectral reality. The fantastic strangeness of anamorphosis continues to worry and seduce our view.

Conclusion

Baltrušaitis's book remains a significant source for the study of anamorphoses and, like his other works, has philosophical overtones that delve into the realms of the ontology of the visual image, revealing its ambiguity and the shadowy spaces where reality and illusions correlate. Anamorphosis, as an orderly deformation, reveals that visual distortions and visionary worlds can also appear in geometrical structures and rational systems of representation. As a case of rational procedures producing visionary results, anamorphosis offers us a skewed but penetrating glimpse into the entire system of perspective imaging, and at the same time, into the visually compelling nature of the deformed.

The book has not only sparked new research into the representation of perspective, art exhibitions, and works of contemporary art,[44] but has also been reflected in the writings of philosophers, evoking thoughts about the imaginary planes opened up by visual media. Baltrušaitis was not mistaken in saying that anamorphoses belong to the future. "Illusions created by perfect technologies are also the magic of anamorphoses,"[45] he said.

Baltrušaitis never ceased to be interested in deformations and the intertwining of rationality and irrationality in visual imaginaries. His book on anamorphosis began a series of books on deviant perspectives (*les perspectives dépravées*), aberrations, and legends – the *poetic mechanism* hidden within *forms*, spanning the history of art, culture, and science. In his last book, *Le Miroir*, Baltrušaitis returned to the analysis of optical devices and mirror reflections. He was interested in the mirror not as a reflection of truth and reality, but as a magical object of deception, distortion, illusion, and as a simulacrum, revealing the metaphysical intuitions of humanity.

43 Alain Mons, *La traversée du visible. Images et lieux du contemporain*. Paris: Passion, 2002, p. 190.

44 On the expression of anamorphoses in contemporary art, see: April Cheetham, *A Veiling of Identity: Anamorphosis as Double Vision in Contemporary Art Practice* (doctoral dissertation), Liverpool John Moores University, 2012.

45 Documentary film *Les Métamorphoses de Jurgis Baltrušaitis*. Interview with Sandra Joxe and Jean-Claude Carrière. Musée du Louvre, 1989.

ISSN 2351-4728

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