

ANDRZEJ WIDOTA
(PAŃSTWOWA WYŻSZA SZKOŁA ZAWODOWA W RACIBORZU)

ON THE ROLE OF REVERSE PERSPECTIVE IN *MARYLIN DIPTYCH* BY ANDY WARHOL. AN ATTEMPT AT A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

ABSTRACT

Marylin Diptych by Warhol consists of twenty-five brightly coloured pictures on the left and the twenty-five black and white ones on the right. Since Western cultures typically conceptualise space in terms of directional metaphors LEFT IS THE BEGINNING and RIGHT IS THE END, the common interpretation is that the colourful images represent Marylin's life with the greyish ones corresponding to her death. One way of clearing some doubts concerning this interpretation of the work is to assume that the painter used reverse perspective, which he most probably knew from the art of the Byzantine icon.

KEYWORDS: reverse perspective, pop art, Warhol, semiotics, icon

STRZESZCZENIE

Marylin Diptych autorstwa Andy'ego Warhola przedstawia pięćdziesiąt zdjęć Marylin Monroe – dwadzieścia pięć kolorowych umieszczonych po lewej stronie obrazu i dwadzieścia pięć czarno-białych, po prawej. Ponieważ kultury zachodnie konceptualizują przestrzeń za pomocą metafor kierunkowych LEWO JEST POCZĄTKIEM oraz PRAWO JEST KOŃCEM, powszechna interpretacja tego dzieła zakłada, że kolorowe obrazy przedstawiają życie Marylin, natomiast czarno-białe, symbolizują jej śmierć i popadnięcie w niepamięć. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu wyjaśnienie szeregu wątpliwości dotyczących takiej interpretacji dzieła, przyjmując założenie, że Warhol zastosował odwróconą perspektywę, znaną mu najprawdopodobniej ze sztuki ikony bizantyjskiej, z którą miewał do czynienia za młodu.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: odwrócona perspektywa, pop art, Warhol, semiotyka, ikona bizantyjska

The main aim of this paper is to analyse the way in which applying reverse perspective may affect, or even radically change, the meaning usually ascribed to *Marylin Diptych* by Andy Warhol. The diptych is made up of fifty images of the actress. The twenty-five pictures on the left side of the painting are brightly coloured with the twenty-five on the right in black and white. It is commonly assumed that the colourful images on the left side of the painting depict Marylin Monroe's glamorous life as a film star while the black and white ones, placed on the right side, symbolise her death and demise:

Marilyn Monroe died in August 1962, having overdosed on barbiturates. In the following four months, Warhol made more than twenty silkscreen paintings of her, all based on the same publicity photograph from the 1953 film *Niagara*. Warhol found in Monroe a fusion of two of his consistent themes: death and the cult of celebrity. By repeating the image, he evokes her ubiquitous presence in the media. The contrast of vivid colour with black and white, and the effect of fading in the right panel are suggestive of the star's mortality (Tate Gallery 2016).

Studying the life and philosophy of Andy Warhol as well as the biography of Marilyn Monroe, and realising that it was only after she died that she became really famous, one is tempted to wonder if the traditional reading of the painting should not be revised. Besides her posthumous rise in popularity, there are some facts from her lifetime which should be remembered. First of all, Marilyn Monroe's life was not at all as glamorous as it might seem at first sight and she spent most of her acting career trying to get out of the shadow of more famous Hollywood stars, like Elizabeth Taylor and prove she was a real actress. She was a troubled person who apparently attempted suicide on more than one occasion and her most famous act was not even a film role but rather performing *Happy Birthday* to President Kennedy and even that came as late as 1962, the year of her death. The cult of celebrity was yet to come.

An important source of inspiration for the hypotheses included in the current article was the work of Russian semioticians of the Moscow-Tartu school, especially Pavel Florensky's book *Iconostasis* and his article entitled "Reverse Perspective". The analysis of the "reversed" meaning of *Marilyn Diptych* has been inspired by Zygmunt Bauman's writings on postmodernity with special focus on his classic (and also slightly controversial) book *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, which discusses different ways in which humanity has gambled at immortality in pre-modern, modern and postmodern times. Another aim of this article is to pay a small contribution to the project of reattaching Warhol to his Slavic roots and how they influenced his work, an inspiring research in this field being Raymond Herbenick's book *Andy Warhol's Religious and Ethnic Roots. The Carpatho-Rusyn Influence on his Art* (1997). Even though Warhol is known to have come from a Slavic background, the influence of Slavic culture on his own work is yet to be discovered by the general public.

ON THE CONCEPT OF ARTISTIC SIGN

As the title of the article uses the term *semiotic*, I would like to begin with a short discussion of the theoretical assumptions behind this analysis. First of all I would like to refer to Jan Mukařovský's semiotic theory and his article "The Essence of the Visual Arts" (1976). In his discussion of semiotic aspects of works

of art Mukřovský (1976, 234) notes that the viewer's attitude towards them is not left to his or her "whim" but that "the work of art itself in its organisation directly induces the viewer to focus his attention on itself, on the set of its properties and on the internal organisation of this set, and not to look beyond the work for some external aim which it could serve" (234). Mukařovský argues against Kant's idea of 'disinterested interest' provided by works of art (cf. Kant 2007) claiming that even though the existence of aesthetic pleasure cannot be denied (no matter how often it is replaced by displeasure), the main desire of an artist is to "establish understanding between other people and himself". A work of art is a sign which mediates some suprapersonal meaning. Yet, there is one extremely important difference between the word and the artistic sign. The word in its "normal, nonpoetic" usage serves communication. It has an "external aim" which is to "depict some event, to describe some thing, to express some emotion" or to "stimulate some behaviour on the listener". All of these are located somewhere outside the linguistic expression (Mukařovský 1976, 236). Even though a work of art can communicate in a similar way, in Mukařovský's view a work of art is not oriented towards anything that is outside of itself:

The understanding that the artistic sign establishes among people does not pertain to things, even if they are represented in the work, but to a certain attitude toward things, a certain attitude on the part of man toward the entire reality that surrounds him, not only that reality which is directly represented in the given case. The work does not, however, communicate this attitude [...] but evokes it directly in the perceiver. (Mukařovský 1976, 237)

It is this attitude that constitutes the "meaning" of the work. This peculiar kind of meaning can be rendered from the work objectively by its organisation. If we look at a painting it could be just a plane delimited by a frame with a number of lines and patches. The organisation of those seemingly simple elements may lead to a complex interplay of meanings. "Each of these elements in itself and its connection with the others is in several respects a vehicle of meaning and a meaning-creating factor regardless of what is represented by it and the others." For instance a colour patch can be a vehicle of meaning. A colour patch in the middle of the pictorial plane could represent calmness, balance but also fixation and immobility. Obviously, the interplay of various components of a painting could be much more complicated than that.

Rooted in Russian formalist tradition, Mukarovsky's ideas obviously do not take into account the post-modern return to figurative art. An analysis of pop-art's interplay of meaningful components would hardly be complete without taking into account its relation to the reality it depicts. However, by relying too much on the way a work of art relates to reality one risks overlooking the significance of some formal choices made by the artist.

THE ROLE OF REVERSE PERSPECTIVE IN ORTHODOX ICON ART

Reverse perspective is a key element of the pictorial space in Orthodox icon art. Clemena Antonova (2009, 29) claims that it is a *defining feature* of the icon. Antonova (2009, 30) observes that although the term “reverse” implies that it has reversed the rules observed by linear perspective, it is misleading on both historical and philosophical grounds. She notes that it is common to define the “reversal” with respect to Renaissance linear perspective whereas “reverse perspective” had been in existence “long before what it is supposedly reversing” as Byzantine icon painters working before the fifteenth century knew nothing of strict, mathematical pictorial space. Another question Antonova asks is whether it is possible to determine whether the pictorial space of the icon can be adequately grasped as reverse perspective, i.e. if the major characteristics of linear perspective “can be legitimately opposed to those of iconic space and vice versa or whether we are dealing with two radically different pictorial phenomena, requiring different frames of optical and conceptual reference.” (Antonova 2009, 31)

In order to explain the basic assumptions of reverse perspective, we shall refer to two classic studies of reverse perspective in the Byzantine icon: one by Pavel Florensky (1993) and one by Zhegin (1970). The former is a representative of what Grigorieva refers to as “semiotics of the transcendence” (Grigorieva 2005, 220). Like the Formalists before him and Mukařovsky several years after him, Florensky argued that the discovery of the internal ‘language’ of a work of art enables ‘reading’ it. As opposed to Mukarovsky, though, he was mainly interested in the analysis of the internal language of the Byzantine Icon. In his article “Reversed Perspective” (1919), which was first published in Tartu he claims that “the perspective truth, if it only exists is true not because of the exterior similarity but because of the deviation from it, i.e. due to its inner sense – it is true because it is symbolic” (Florensky 1993, 239, also cited in Grigorieva 2003, 221).

Florensky (1993, 240) notes that “when people first come across deviations from the rules of perspective, they regard this absence of perspectival unity as a chance slip-up on the artist’s part”. He adds that in fact a similar transgression can be found in almost every work and the absence of perspective should be “valued as physiology rather than pathology”. Florensky (1993, 242) further argues that the use of reverse perspective helps the artist to better serve the purpose of art, which is to „convey a kind of spatial wholeness, a specific, self-contained world that is not mechanical, but is contained within the confines of the frame by internal forces.”

According to Antonova (Antonova 2009, 41) it is Zhegin’s study (1970) that offers the most comprehensive scheme of the way reverse perspective functions in optical and geometric forms. His main concern is to dispel the illusion that perspectival deformations are the result of the artist’s inability to master mathematical perspective. What Zhegin does is group the “deviations” according to their character and according

to the position of the vanishing point/points in relation to the horizon. While with linear perspective the vanishing point can be found on the level of the horizon, Zhegin enumerates two other positions defining two variations of reverse perspective. When the vanishing points are above the horizon level or below the basis of the objects, the so-called “obvious forms of reverse perspective” occur. Whether above or below the horizon level, a single picture will have more than one vanishing points. It has to be stressed that the multiplicity of vanishing points is a typical feature of the images constructed in reverse perspective. With the “obvious” forms of reverse perspective the multiplicity of vanishing points can be explained by the tendency of providing each object with its own vanishing point. As a result, we get as many vanishing points as there are objects. The multiplicity of vanishing points requires multiple viewpoints and that gives rise to a dynamic view on part of the beholder. The dynamic view suggests a change of position and the simultaneous co-existence of different aspects of the same image as a result, in a manner similar as the one claimed for Analytical Cubism. Thus the image treated by reverse perspective does not represent one single aspect of the figure (as with linear perspective) but a synthesis of several aspects. The very obvious and frequently observed perspective deformations are the result of this process. Several views that cannot be seen at the same moment overlap in a single representation. To achieve such a view would have required movement in time of the beholder, the image or both.

The complicated and dynamic viewing position most often leads to seeing the object from both above and the sides. If the object is in the air an aspect from below is often given. The image unfolds and different aspects added up together. As Zhegin puts it, “the dynamics of our position is transferred onto the object, the form becomes dynamic - it becomes concave”. (Zhegin 1970, 42, cited in Antonova 2009, 43). Antonova further argues (in the fifth chapter of her book, which is entitled “Seeing the world with the eyes of God: an alternative explanation of reverse perspective”) that this aspect of reverse perspective makes it the visual means by which God’s eternity is conveyed as divine perception is simultaneous rather than successive (Antonova 2009, 105).

Reverse perspective, by playing with traditional temporal and spacial relations, was used to show ‘the other world’. The world of God and the Saints. In this world the viewer does not watch the divine, but it is God and the saints who watch us.

ANDY WARHOL’S ETHNIC ROOTS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON HIS ART

This concise section aims at confirming the validity of the claim that Warhol’s art was influenced by the sacred art of the icon, which may have included his use of reverse perspective. Herbenick (1997, 6) notes that after Andy Warhol died in

1987, and after he was buried in Pittsburgh, there was a memorial service held in New York. During the ceremony, art critic John Richardson shocked those gathered by revealing the hidden spiritual dimension of Andy's life and works underlying his human frailties, claiming that "the ancient but classic style of Christian art in the Byzantine East undoubtedly influenced Warhol's flat painted idealisation of secular images". Andy had access to icons as well as a prayer book at home as his family practiced Byzantine Rite Catholicism. He must have been familiar with the iconostasis as during the first fifteen years of his live he regularly attended his local Byzantine Ruthenian Rite Catholic church. Herbenick (1997, 5) also quotes historian Paul Robert Magocsi who refers to Warhol's works as "timeless icons of popular saints captured in their most beautiful and idealised moments" and also notes Andy's icon painting wherein the artist is regarded as "a passive agent ('I want to be a machine.'). an accidental tool or instrumentality through which the divine becomes expressed in a sacred art work."

Warhol was also familiar with the art of Easter Egg painting of the Carpatho-Rusyns. Herbenick (1997, 9) quotes Yaroslava Surmach's analysis in which she claims that wax protects the current colour of a dyed egg but allows the non-waxed areas to undergo a colour change similar to the silkscreening techniques of Warhol with polymer paint on canvas. Herbenick also claims that "the very motifs and ornamental bands waxed onto the *pysanky* show up in some of Andy's works (1997, 9; also see Surmach 1957, 3–21).

MARILYN DIPTYCH: INTRODUCTION

Marilyn Diptych constituted a very important step in Warhol's career as it was one of his first silkscreens (and it was silkscreens that were soon to become his trademark). Paradoxically, the work, completed just after Marylin Monroe's took her own life in August 1962, marked the beginning of real superstardom for the actress, superstardom which was constantly updated by subsequent appearances in Warhol's works. The diptych, made up of fifty images of the actress, utilises the same publicity photo taken by the American photographer Frank Powolny. The twenty-five pictures on the left side of the painting are brightly coloured with the twenty-five on the right in black and white. Most of the back and white pictures are blurred and the last three rows of images fade out to the left, which according to Hooper (2013, 221) can evoke in one's mind the passage of time:

If the gradual reduction of printed ink is read as the fading of a static close-up, then there is a imaginative function to this material reference to film, for one must imagine the distinct images on the canvas flipping past in order to perceive the passage of time in one's mind.

Hooper (2013, 219) presents an overview of the most important interpretations of *Marilyn Diptych*: in Jennifer Doyle's view Marilyn Monroe is a flamboyant drag queen (cf. Doyle 1996); Bradford Collins (1998) analyses the dichotomy between Warhol's insecure self-image and Marilyn's fictitious, ideal beauty; Thomas Crow (1987) argues that the pictures represent a lengthy act of mourning, much of the motivation for which lies beyond our understanding; Jean Baudrillard (2001) believes it is but an empty fetish; and Hal Foster (1997) explains the obsessive repetition of Marilyn's face as a way for Warhol to come to terms with the trauma of her death. All of these authors, analysing in some depth the social function of the painting as well as Warhol's psychology and identity, accept the traditional left-to-right orientation of the painting.

THE PROBLEM OF DIRECTIONALITY IN ART

Logico-temporal course in Western cultures is conceived as going from left to right (cf. Calibris 2008, 42), which is most likely related to the left-to-right directionality of the Latin alphabet. In other words we use directional metaphor LEFT IS THE BEGINNING, RIGHT IS THE ENDING. It is then natural for most viewers to understand that the colourful images on the left of the diptych as representing Marilyn's life and her Hollywood career while the greyish ones as representing her mortality and her slowly sinking into oblivion. However, as has already been remarked, Marilyn's career was not as successful and colourful as the images are believed to imply. One has to bear in mind that it was only in 1962, the year of her death, that she made one of her most famous public appearances, i.e. singing *Happy Birthday* for President John F. Kennedy. While remembering his 1962 pool session with Marilyn in a TV interview, photographer Lawrence Schiller (2012), remarked that working for the same studio Elisabeth Taylor earned ten times more money than Monroe. He says Taylor earned a million dollars while Marilyn only got a hundred thousand. He also claims that during the filming of *Something's Got To Give*, Monroe's final, unfinished film, she seemed a real troubled person who couldn't sleep at night and was always late on filmset.

It's equally hard to agree with the image of Marilyn as a fallen star – one who has suddenly fallen out of public grace after death. This would neither fit in with Andy Warhol's philosophy of popular culture nor his approach to death, which was magical rather than rational – e.g. after his mother died, when somebody asked him how she was, Warhol would always answer: "Oh, she's fine!" (cf. Hackett 1989, xi). He also claimed he didn't believe in death, because you're not around to know that it's happened and so he couldn't say anything about it because he was not prepared for it. (cf. Warhol 2007, 123). Also, isn't Marilyn Monroe the only actress of her generation still recognised today as an icon of popular culture? One way to resolve

these doubts is to assume that Warhol decided to apply reverse perspective, most probably known to him from the art of Byzantine icon painters, the most important consequence of which would be the reversal of the directionality of the painting.

The problem of directionality of a painting has been analysed by both neuropsychologists and aestheticians. According to Gross and Bornstein (1978, 33), aestheticians have frequently asserted left and right in a picture are absolutes and that the act of mirror-reversing an artwork may drastically alter its meaning (cf. Wolfflin 1941 and Gaffron 1950). However, Gross and Bornstein further note (1978, 34) that some artists, e.g. Raphael, Rembrandt and Munch remained indifferent to the reversal of their originals in the process of being reproduced as prints or tapestries. An important contribution to the study of directionality of a work of art is offered by M. Schapiro in his article *On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art* (1970). In his article he examines the characteristics of the field of an image-sign, namely the prepared surface, the boundaries, the positions and directions, which he all considers expressive factors for the format of the image sign:

Pertinent to semiotic is the fact that left and right are already distinguished sharply in the signified objects themselves. Everyone is aware of the vital importance of left and right in ritual and magic, which has influenced the meaning of these two words, their metaphorical extension is in everyday speech as terms for good and evil, correct and awkward proper and deviant. The significance of the deity's or ruler's right side in pictures and ceremony as the commonly, though not universally, more favoured side, determines, however, a representation in which, from the observer's viewpoint, the left part of the picture surface is the carrier of the preferred values. This reversal in the field which is also that of the self-image in the mirror, is a good example of the conflict that may arise between the qualitative structure of the field, whether inherent or acquired, and that often represented objects. In the Middle Ages one debated the significance of the variable positions of Peter and Paul at the left and right of Christ in old mosaics in Rome (Peter Damian). Where there is no dominant central figure to which left and right must be referred, the viewer's left and right determine by direct translation, rather than by reflection, the left and right of the field, just as in actual life. In both cases the parts of the field are potential signs; but the field is open to reversal in submitting to an order of values in the context of the represented objects or in the carrier of the image. (Schapiro 1970, 13)

If reverse perspective is applied, we do not watch Marilyn anymore but she watches us, the way the Orthodox Church saints do. She looks at us from another world so the directional metaphor should be reversed. The dynamism of fading images is reversed and they can now be seen as fading in rather than out. Marylin is emerging to the earthly greyness of her existence as a person and actress struggling for recognition.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY

The application of reverse perspective and the new spacial organisation of the diptych we get, opens up new interpretational possibilities. One of them is interpreting the two juxtaposed sets of images as representing transition conflict between modernity and postmodernity.

According to Bauman (1992, 162) modern time was an arrow with a pointer and what made it into such arrow was the modern *projects*, the term being synonymous with Lyotard's *metanarratives* (cf. Lyotard 1979). As opposed to pre-modern narratives (or fables), the *projects* did not seek legitimation in the original founding act but in a future still to arrive, that is in an Idea still to be realised. Construed by such *metanarratives* time is not being arrested. It gathers speed instead. The vision of the finishing line has replaced the myth of the origins. Bauman further notes that the modern projects were many, but they were all projects and so time stretched from 'now' to 'later', devaluing the 'now'. They deconstructed the ultimate bliss which one is unlikely to savour soon into little gains one can hope to enjoy tomorrow (but not today). As long as the project remains the only source of meaning, the present is meaningless unless it abandons itself completely to the service of the future.

Bauman's (1992, 170) main concern, that is the problem of being made immortal or "making history" in pre-modern, modern and postmodern times is of special interest for the current analysis. In the pre-modern world "making history" was exclusive for the kings, the warlords and the popes, with history being but a chronicle of dynasties. The dawn of modernity marked the end of the history making monopoly. The broadened contents of history now included elected leaders, assemblies of legislators, classes and mass movements, in other words, collective actors of history. Bauman further notes (1992, 171) that democratisation of history-making meant relaxing the limitations once constraining the chances to individual immortality. It also meant that the modern world became 'the land of unlimited opportunity' for the immortality seekers. Bauman (1992, 171) also points out that the lavish distribution of the opportunities led to the "destruction of the very stakes in the name of which the access to opportunity had been sought".

The black and white images, slowly fading in, represent Monroe struggling with her *project* of *becoming* a serious actress. There is in fact some connection between the photo Warhol used and the beginning of the project she pursued during her life. When the picture was taken, Monroe had just managed to escape the pin-up calendars and postcards for which she had posed while working in the armament industry (cf. Honnif 2006, 84). Then hard work of trying to become a serious actress came. She sure was becoming more and more popular but was often laughed at for her ambition to be taken seriously as a person and actress, with only few exceptions. Her desire to play dramatic roles after successfully

taking courses at the prestigious Actor's Studio in NY was looked upon as an infringement of the rules by the industry. The industry exploited her attractive figure and comic talent but she was offered only two roles that gave her a chance to prove her dramatic ability. They were *Bus Stop* (1956) and *The Misfits* (1960). All her life she had to make do with little gains and small satisfactions, instead of the bliss the colourful pictures might suggest. She was a recognised star but she was not yet a symbol of her era, a Franchise. Far from being satisfied with her career, by 1962 when she died, she had attempted suicide twice. It was only after her death that her true fame began; in fact, death seems to have been a condition for it (cf. Honnif 2006, 84).

In reverse perspective the borderline between the black and white images marks the end of her earthly existence but at the same time it opens up new perspectives. Death is such a popular topic that with all the media interest generated by it the star is lifted to the orbit of popularity and once in orbit you can never fall. According to Baudrillard:

what has disappeared has every chance of reappearing. For what dies is annihilated in linear time, but what disappears passes in the state of constellation. It becomes an event in a cycle which may bring it back many times (Baudrillard 1990, 92)

CONCLUSIONS

The *project* of Marilyn Monroe's life, with its promise of a better tomorrow, proved outdated in the world of postmodern popular culture. Paradoxically, but not exceptionally, her greatest success came only after she died. It was now that Marilyn was to begin an eternal life as a brand name, the symbol of her time, never fading out. This is the same way images of Elvis Presley, James Dean, and later Kurt Cobain and Michael Jackson, were eternalised and an important medium for updating her status as a saint of popular culture was provided by Warhol himself in the form of mass-produced prints and paintings of the actress. Even though this existence is artificial – it is COLOURED the way one colours Easter Eggs, rather than COLOURFUL (the pictures, just like most of Monroe's films were originally black and white) this is how you are granted immortality. The fact that the coloured images are identical also corresponds to Warhol's idea of democracy through consumer goods – from now on Marilyn would be identical for everybody, no matter how rich and powerful they are. This is how death in one dimension means eternal life in another – that of the consumer world.

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