

# **“ANTE LITTERAM” HYPER-DRAWINGS**

## MARGINAL NOTES ON THE APPLICATION OF PROLEPTIC ABSTRACTION IN THE HISTORY OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE

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## ESSAY 02/01

PROLEPSIS  
REPRESENTATION  
COMMUNICATION  
HYPER-DRAWINGS

Although proleptic abstraction is a distinctive characteristic of literary art (and of rhetorical art in particular), it also had profound effects on the history of the figurative arts. This is especially relevant with regard to the classical and medieval ages when it rises to the rank of a consolidated representative technique. The term *prolepsis* (from the Greek *prólepsis*, derived from *prolambánō*: "I take first"), signifies a specific instrument of descriptive manipulation which, by subverting the actual space-time distances, permits the anticipation of what in reality, according to an orthodox logical/syntactical scheme, should follow or which, in any case, could not be reasonably perceived

because it is otherwise located. It is no coincidence that the artists of the past seem to have employed prolepsis on the occasions when they intended to subordinate the naturalistic exigencies to the content and/or didactic objectives. That is, whenever they sought a more dynamic and open expressive means, having perceived the limits that are implicit in a two-dimensional representation.

Proleptic representations summarise both qualities, because they are in fact true and proper "ante litteram" hyper-drawings which, not by chance, have been recovered and reinvented by contemporary architects most suited to communicative experimentation.

At least until the end of the fifteenth century, the history of art was marked by the use of proleptic abstraction. This use occasionally bordered on the limits of abuse. The term *prolepsis* ("from the Greek *prólepsis*, derived from *prolambánō*: "I take first") (*Dizionario di Retorica e Stilistica*, 1995, p. 297), signifies a specific instrument of descriptive manipulation which, by subverting the actual space-time distances, permits the anticipation of what in reality, according to an orthodox logical/syntactical scheme, should follow or which, in any case, could not be reasonably perceived because it is otherwise located (Giordani, 1973-1974, p. 225). "When halfway through a speech one remembers the end, and recounts it; like in the beginning of *The Iliad*, Book XXIV, which speaks about the destruction of Troy and the death of Hector which have not yet taken place" (Ferri, 1948, p. 61). Or as seen in verses 91-92 of *Le Ricordanze* (*Memories*) by Giacomo Leopardi (*Death is the one / that advances towards me with great hopes today*), "where anticipation puts 'hope' in a position of strong contrast with 'death', demonstrating the collapse of the poet's illusions, to which nothing remains but to hope for death to put an end to his suffering" (*Dizionario di Retorica e Stilistica*, 1995, pp. 297-298). As well as the existence of three proleptic incipits used to great narrative effect, firstly in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Lev Tolstoj, which opens with the epilogue of the protagonist's history, namely with his death, in *The Baron in the Trees* by Italo Calvino, which reveals Cosimo's decision to spend his life in the trees without ever descending to ground level, and in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Márquez, who anticipates Colonel Aureliano's fatal destiny.



**Fig. 1** Roman imperial coin of the age of Maxentius, verso (307-312 A.D.).

Moreover, although proleptic abstraction is a distinctive characteristic of literary art (and of rhetorical art in particular), it also had profound effects on the history of the figurative arts. This is especially relevant with regard to the classical and medieval ages when it rises to the rank of a consolidated representative technique (Ferri, 1948, pp. 61-80; Robert, 1975). It is no coincidence that Silvio Ferri, when referring to the "primitive" desire to amplify narrative clar-

ity beyond the limits imposed by spatial-temporal truthfulness, notes that, for many centuries, this desire was actually resolved in the representation of “distant, hidden, or future objects [...], pregnant women depicted with a visible foetus in the womb, fish with a small fish already formed in the belly, or even where the fishbones can be seen, people carrying out the housework inside houses who are visible, because it was as if the walls had disappeared, shoes that let you see the outline of the shod feet, riders with both legs visible – even those beyond the horse’s flank – elephants with traps already depicted on their bodies in which it was hoped that someday they would fall, as if by magic, bisons and felines with entire arrows drawn on their bodies, wagons seen from above with each ox viewed from the side”. These images “not only depict the consecutive stages of an action but even those which, if not through an interposed diaphragm, would be humanly possible to see” (Ferri, 1948, pp. 61-62).

Upon closer examination, proleptic abstraction distinguishes much of the history of classical art: from the Haterii



**Fig. 2** Giotto da Bondone,  
*Natività di Maria*, 1303-1305  
(Padova, Cappella degli Scrovegni).

sepulchral monument (in which the ajar position of the *Porta Inferi* (*Gateway to the Underworld*) indicates that the scene represented actually takes place inside the monument) to the side of an imperial coin from the age of Maxentius (in which the neat rhythm of the temple's columns is spread out to glorify the personification of Rome). Furthermore, proleptic abstraction continually articulated milestones in the history of medieval and Proto-Renaissance art. There are numerous and varied examples.

In the mosaic of the Cathedral of Santa Maria Annunziata in Otranto (1163-1165), the final configuration of the Tower of Babel is anticipated in the lower part, where a number of master masons are still busy constructing the entrance arch and preparing the necessary blocks for the mighty wall sub-structures.

In the *Natività di Maria* (*Nativity of Mary*) by Giotto (1303-1305), a woman is depicted on the doorstep, giving the mid-wife cloths that are necessary for childbirth. Meanwhile, in the scene represented in the inside section, Saint Anne can be seen extending her arms towards the newborn wrapped in the same cloths.

In the *Ultima cena* (*Last Supper*) by Pietro Lorenzetti (1310-1320), viewers can glimpse the servants feeding left-over food to the domestic animals in the kitchen by virtue of the contrived transparent wall.



**Fig. 3** Maso di Banco, *Miracolo di San Silvestro*, c.1340 (Firenze, Chiesa di Santa Croce, Cappella Bardi di Vernio).

In the *Miracolo del bambino caduto dalla culla* (*Miracle of the Child Who Fell Out of His Crib*) by Simone Martini (c. 1330), the three phases of the story are summarised in a single picture: the death of the child who fell from his crib, the miraculous intervention of the Blessed Agostino Novello and, finally, the procession of thankfulness by the faithful.

In the *Miracolo di San Silvestro* (*Miracle of Saint Sylvester*) by Maso di Banco (c. 1340), the magicians appear twice, firstly deceased and then, clearly subsequently, resuscitated.

In the *Danza di Salome* (*Dance of Salome*) by Benozzo Gozzoli (1461-1462), the three phases of the story, namely the dance of Salome in the presence of Herod, the consequent beheading of John the Baptist and the delivery of the macabre trophy to Herodias, are composed, both spatially as well as temporally, in a single image.

In the *Polittico di Sant'Emidio* (*Saint Emidio Polyptych*) by Carlo Crivelli (1473), the figure of the Madonna enthroned with the Divine Child is dominated by the image of the Pietà, which casts a tragic shadow over Mary's motherhood.

In the *Madonna con Bambino* (*Madonna and Child*) by Francesco Bonsignori (1483), the depiction of the sleeping Jesus as an infant, lying on a red-veined stone bed, conceptually unites birth and entombment.

In the *Sposalizio della Vergine* (*Marriage of the Virgin*) by Pietro Vannucci (1501-1504), the ceremony actually takes place

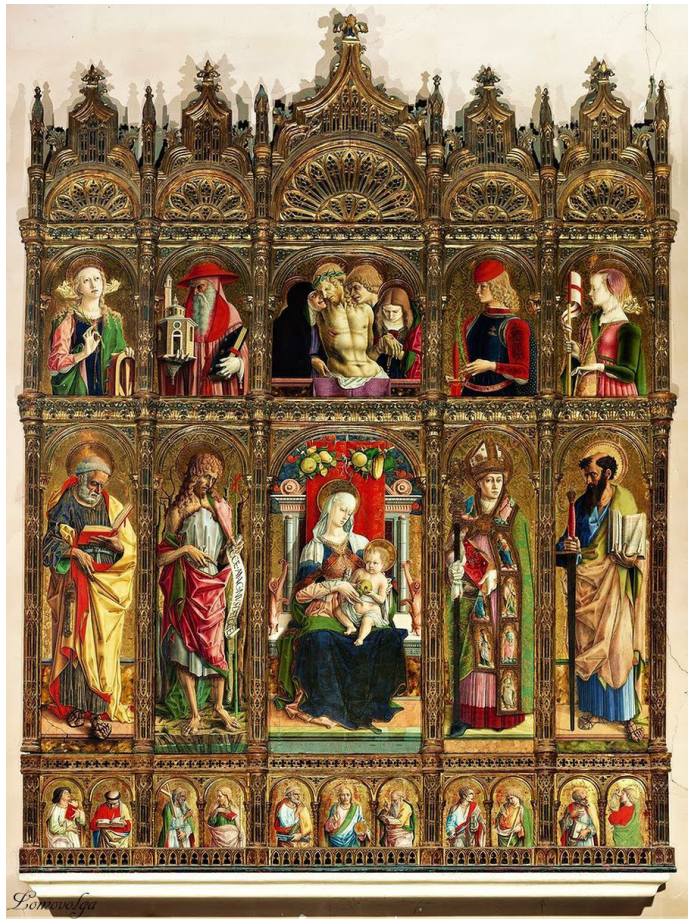


**Fig. 4** Benozzo Gozzoli, *Danza di Salome*, 1461-1462 (Washington, National Gallery of Art).



inside the temple represented *mise en abyme*, from which it is transposed to the exterior to render it visible.

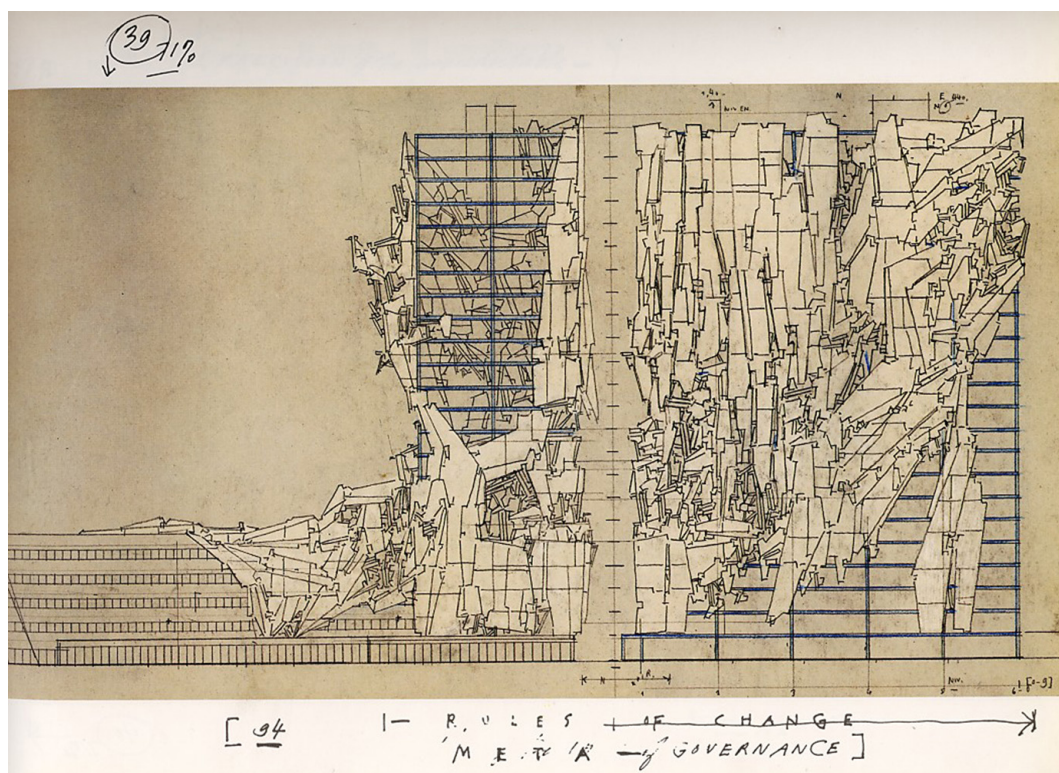
The analysis of these examples (the list of which is long but not exhaustive) calls for a series of reflections. First of all, it is evident that proleptic abstraction was always pursued by means of precise representative stylistic elements which, although never codified, are consolidated by the recurrence of use: *semae* or *argumentum* that have proven efficacy, introduced with rituality in the different compositions in order to suggest the correct interpretation of the images to the viewer. These stylistic elements generally consist of curious architectural deconstructions, figures portrayed through windows



**Fig. 5** Carlo Crivelli, *Polittico di Sant'Emidio*, 1473 (Ascoli Piceno, Cattedrale di Sant'Emidio).

or intent on crossing the doorway of a building and, above all, through parted curtains. Two works by Piero della Francesca are exemplary in this regard, including the *Sogno di Costantino* (*Dream of Constantine*) and the *Madonna del Parto* (*Madonna of Parturition*). These works feature curtains which serve to indicate that the two otherwise non-essential images hold meaning according to future events (respectively, Constantine's victorious battle against Maxentius and the birth of Christ the Saviour). The stylistic feature of the raised curtains, which in itself refers to the primitive theatrical system of the moveable drapes, which had certainly "accustomed the spectators' eyes and minds to a proleptic interpretation" (Ferri, 1948, p. 74) of the events represented. In relation to the architectural elements, within which the narrated events take place, the way in which figures are juxtaposed oscillates substantially between two typical solutions: the transposi-

**Fig. 6** Lebbeus Woods,  
*War and Architecture*, 1993.





tion of the figures to the outside, depicting the buildings that contain them in the background, and the preservation of the interior setting, making the outer walls transparent.

Nevertheless, the artists of the past seem to have employed prolepsis on the occasions when they intended to subordinate the naturalistic exigencies to the content and/or didactic objectives. That is, whenever they sought a more dynamic and open expressive means, having perceived the limits that are implicit in a two-dimensional representation. Proleptic representations summarise both qualities, because they are in fact true and proper "ante litteram" hyper-drawings. It is not surprising to find very few examples of proleptic representations after the fifteenth century (perhaps the caprices by Canaletto, probably the prisons painted by Giovanni Battista Piranesi and, at most, the aeropaintings by Gerardo Dottori). It is necessary to go as far as the contemporary and, in particular, up to the sophisticated sketching virtuosités permitted by the advent of computer graphics in order to trace an equal space-time licentiousness. A long list of graphic works that, from the "catastrophic pre-visions" of Lebbeus Woods to the "conceptual space" of Peter Eisenman up to the "simultaneous visions" of Zaha Hadid, tend to overflow from the margins of traditional antinomies (before/after, above/below, front/back, inside/outside), flaunting a narrative anachronism that betrays a veritable narrative impatience (Eco, 1994) and that disputes in itself the representative certainties inherited from almost four hundred years of latent classicism (Eisenman, 1992).

## NOTES

**1** “In classical rhetoric, prolepsis consists in preventing, refuting, the possible objections of the speaker or, in any case, in making an event contemporary with an action that, in reality, is the product of the action itself; while, in the literature in general, prolepsis means the placement of one or more words before the order required by the ordinary construct”. Instead, the linguistic prolepsis consists in the “anticipation, under expressive or affective stimulus, of a part of the preposition or of the period that according to the normal (pseudological) type of discourse should be placed in the posterior position” (*Grande Dizionario Enciclopedico*, 1960, p. 508). In this regard, see also Genette, 1972.

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