

Truth and Perspective

Gadamer on Renaissance Painting

by

DAVID LIAKOS (Houston Community College)

Gadamer is not usually thought of as a philosopher of painting.¹ Like many thinkers in the German tradition, his philosophy of art seems oriented more toward poetry, as indicated by the title of the first volume of his collected works dedicated to aesthetics, *Kunst als Aussage (Art as Statement)*. But Gadamer did devote attention to the visual arts, including in an important chapter from *Truth and Method* called “The Ontological Valence of the Picture [*Bild*].”² This chapter contains a reference to Leon Battista Alberti, the influential theorist of painting from the Italian Renaissance who develops a mathematical account of perspective in his 1435 treatise *Della Pittura (On Painting)*. At the beginning of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer grounds his defense of the meaningfulness and intellectual significance of the arts and humanities in “The Guiding Concepts of Humanism,” including *Bildung*, *sensus communis*, judgment, and taste.³ The subsequent reference to Alberti is notable because he is one of the few thinkers from the Renaissance humanist tradition whom Gadamer explicitly mentions. Yet Gadamer’s brief discussion of Alberti is ambivalent at best, and certainly not a positive appropriation. The question arises why Gadamer’s appeal to humanism does not extend to one of that tradition’s most prominent exemplars.

¹ Martin Jay’s claim is representative here: “Hermeneutic thinkers from Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey to Gadamer have trusted more in the word than the image” (MARTIN JAY, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley 1994, p. 265).

² HANS-GEORG GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, second revised edition, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, New York 2004, p. 130; HANS-GEORG GADAMER, *Hermeneutik I. Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, sixth edition, *Gesammelte Werke* (hereinafter: GW) Volume 1, Tübingen 1990, p. 139.

³ GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 8; GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*, GW 1, p. 15.

My immediate task here is to explain Gadamer's reference to Alberti in the context of Gadamer's account of the picture and Gadamer's relationship to humanism. This investigation will also, however, bring into relief broader themes in Gadamerian hermeneutics. Contemporary discussions have paid increased attention to what Theodore George calls "the belief that hermeneutical experience is substantive, that it refers us to something outside of ourselves, something that our attempts to understand and interpret can make accessible, but that nevertheless remains exterior to all such attempts."⁴ Recent research has opened the door for a *hermeneutical realism* that emphasizes, as Günter Figal puts it, the "objective" character of our hermeneutical engagement with texts and artworks.⁵ These objects are substantive in that we do not only constitute or determine their meaning through our acts of understanding. Rather, such objects stand over and against and confront us, and make a claim to truth to which we interpretatively respond. Our discussion of Gadamer and Renaissance painting will connect with this theme from contemporary "realistic" hermeneutics by showing how Gadamer's account of painting's claim to truth is distinguished from modern subjectivism.

My argument will proceed as follows. First, I will reconstruct Gadamer's critique of Alberti's theory of perspective and contrast his discussion of Alberti with Gadamer's theory of the picture. Next, I will indicate where I think Gadamer unfairly ignores the humanistic elements of Alberti's theory of painting. I will then argue that what is ultimately at stake in Gadamer's critical confrontation with Alberti is Gadamer's opposition to relativism and subjectivism and his downgrading of the importance of the artistic medium in evaluating the truth-claim of an artwork. These are fundamental commitments for Gadamer's philosophy of art.

1. Gadamer's critique of Alberti and perspective

In the *Truth and Method* chapter on the picture, Gadamer announces his intention to challenge a distinctively modern understanding of the picture: "The concept of the picture prevalent in recent centuries cannot automatically be taken as a starting point. Our present investigation seeks to

⁴ THEODORE GEORGE, *The Responsibility to Understand: Hermeneutical Contours of Ethical Life*, Edinburgh 2020, p. 20.

⁵ GÜNTER FIGAL, *Objectivity: The Hermeneutical and Philosophy*, Albany 2010, p. 1–4.

rid itself of that assumption.”⁶ In a discussion indebted to Heidegger’s “The Age of the World Picture,” Gadamer identifies the problematic and modern conception of the picture with the framed painting in an art gallery: “Thus we make every work of art, as it were, into a picture. By detaching all art from its connections with life and the particular conditions of our approach to it, we frame it like a picture and hang it up.”⁷ On this understanding, a picture is *framed* in a double sense. First, a literal, physical scaffolding, which may have been added or updated by art restoration teams, confines the picture as it hangs on the wall. There may also be a glass case and specially designed lighting and atmospheric conditions to preserve the artwork.

Further, the modern picture is meaningfully cut off from the rest of its life and context as an artwork: “Such a picture, we know very well, has lost its place in life [*Sitz im Leben*] in a church or palace or wherever it was once at home.”⁸ In modernity, a picture housed in a museum becomes independent of and separated from the culture and way of life that produced that picture and which it might exemplify. A museumgoer or visitor to a gallery may encounter, for example, an early Renaissance painting of the Madonna by Giotto. More than likely, Giotto’s picture will be housed in a sterile environment, tagged with the proper title, date, biographical information about the artist, and a historically sensitive description written by a professional curator that will contextualize and clarify the artwork’s significance. In this sense, Giotto’s painting will be “framed” by the institution that houses it to convey a particular meaning. The museumgoer may be led to interpret Giotto’s painting as an exemplary instance of a particular style or school of painting, or as a successor or predecessor of some other artwork. This encounter will be markedly different from the experience of the same painting by a churchgoing contemporary of Giotto’s who saw the artwork as an altarpiece in a church, where the painting would crystallize and express culturally shared ideas of piety and religious ecstasy.

Gadamer suggests that today’s doubly framed picture is fit only to be hung on the wall for a detached and cultivated observer to examine and

⁶ GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 132; GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*, GW 1, p. 141.

⁷ GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 131; GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*, GW 1, p. 140.

⁸ HANS-GEORG GADAMER, *The Artwork in Word and Image: ‘So True, So Full of Being!’*, in: *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. and translated by Richard E. Palmer, Evanston 2007, pp. 192–224, here p. 200, translation modified; HANS-GEORG GADAMER, *Ästhetik und Poetik I. Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8, Tübingen 1993, p. 378. For this argument, see also DONATELLA DI CESARE, *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, translated by Niall Keane, Bloomington 2013, [here](#) p. 54.

aesthetically appreciate. In the context of this discussion, Gadamer refers to Alberti:

There is certainly no historical truth in this use of the concept of the picture. Contemporary research into the history of art gives us ample evidence that what we call a "picture" has a varied history. The full "sovereignty of a picture" [*Bildhoheit*] (Theodor Hertz) was not reached until the stage of Western painting that we call the high Renaissance. Here for the first time we have pictures that stand entirely by themselves and, even without a frame and a setting, are in themselves unified and closed structures [*einheitliches und geschlossenes Gebilde*]. For example, in the *concinntas* that L.B. Alberti requires of a "picture," we can see a good theoretical expression of the new artistic ideal that governs Renaissance painting.⁹

Gadamer identifies Alberti as the first articulation of the problematic modern understanding of the "sovereign" picture. By sovereignty, Gadamer refers to the picture's loss of its ability to exemplify or even motivate a culture's shared sense of meaning and significance. Instead, the framed, sovereign picture lives in a vacuum, isolated from any wider context of meaning.

To clarify why Gadamer attributes this questionable conception of the picture to Alberti, I turn to Alberti's treatise *On Painting*. There, Alberti claims that the mythological figure Narcissus is the founder of painting: "I used to tell my friends that the inventor of painting ... was Narcissus, who was turned into a flower; for, as painting is the flower of all the arts, so the tale of Narcissus fits our purpose perfectly. What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool?"¹⁰ With this mythological allusion, Alberti emphasizes the inextricable connection between painting and surfaces.¹¹ He says of painters that "their sole object is the representation on this one surface of many different forms of surfaces, just as though this surface which they color were [...] transparent and like glass."¹² In other words, for Alberti, painting aims to accurately represent nature, as if the painting were a transparent piece of glass. The surface that painting embraces acts like a mirror. Painting serves a basically representational function.

⁹ GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 131; GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*, GW 1, p. 140.

¹⁰ LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI, *On Painting*, translated by Cecil Grayson, London 1991 p. 61.

¹¹ This point has been emphasized by Hubert Damisch in his study of Alberti's invocation of Narcissus (HUBERT DAMISCH, *The Inventor of Painting*, translated by Kent Minturn and Eric Trudel, in: *Oxford Art Journal* 33/3 (2010), pp. 301–336, here pp. 306–307). For another psychoanalytically informed reading of Alberti on Narcissus, which also contextualizes Alberti's self-enclosed pictures in the history of aesthetics, see KARSTEN HARRIES, *Narcissus and Pygmalion: Lessons of Two Tales*, in: Daniel Dahlstrom (ed.), *Philosophy and Art*, Washington 1991, pp. 53–72, here pp. 55–59.

¹² ALBERTI, *On Painting*, p. 48.

Gadamer suggests that pictures in Alberti's mode "stand entirely by themselves." By this claim, Gadamer means that Alberti conceives of paintings as accurate and autonomous representations, that is, scenes or images that are internally coherent and serve the purpose of accurately representing nature. Here, Alberti makes a revolutionary contribution to art history, as Gadamer rightly implies. Alberti construes "accuracy" and "coherence" as perspectival concepts. A painting is accurate and coherent only from the human point of view: "The function of the painter is to draw with lines and paint in colors on a surface any given bodies in such a way that, at a fixed distance and with a certain, determined position of the centric ray, what you see represented appears to be in relief and just like those bodies."¹³ The mathematical theory of perspective developed by Alberti undergirds an artistic practice of crafting representations that appear realistic from the point of view of the human eye. Painting is like a glass mirror, but one that represents and reconstructs objects not as they are apart from human observers but precisely as they appear to an embodied human subject.¹⁴

For this reason, Gadamer calls Alberti's pictures "unified and closed structures." In other words, they follow a logic of representation such that they appear fully coherent and consistent from the human subject's point of view, which makes them complete images that stand on their own when humanly perceived. Perspective constructs a unitary viewpoint on a scene that means to appear as an image would to the human eye. This goal may be what Gadamer means to refer to by his reference to Alberti's concept of *concinnitas*, a mode of internal harmony that Alberti develops in his theory of architecture.¹⁵ Alberti sets the stage for the problematic form of sovereignty that Gadamer imputes to modern pictures in general. If a picture is a perspectivally accurate representation made for human perception, then the logical conclusion of such a conception is the gallery painting hanging on the wall. A picture that is framed or "sovereign" in this modern sense requires no connection to the wider and meaningful worlds of culture, history, or nature other than the detached human observer who appreciates it. The art museum familiar in contemporary life is, in this sense, the descendant of Alberti's theory of painting.

¹³ ALBERTI, *On Painting*, p. 87.

¹⁴ See also KARSTEN HARRIES, *Infinity and Perspective*, Cambridge (MA) 2001, p. 66.

¹⁵ Gadamer's reference to *concinnitas* in a discussion of Alberti on the picture is puzzling. The passage from *Truth and Method* about Alberti uncharacteristically contains no scholarly reference. *Concinnitas* is, in fact, not a concept employed in *On Painting* (which Gadamer seems to have in mind, given the context of his discussion of the picture) but is developed in his 1485 treatise on architecture, *De Re aedificatoria*. See ROBERT TAVERNOR, *On Alberti and the Art of Building*, New Haven 1998, p. 43.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer makes one further comment about Alberti:

What the theoretician of the “picture” presents here are the classical definitions of the beautiful. That the beautiful is such that nothing can be taken from it and nothing added without destroying it was familiar to Aristotle, for whom there was certainly no such thing as a picture in Alberti’s sense. This shows that the concept of the “picture” still has a general sense and that it cannot be limited simply to a particular phase of the history of painting.¹⁶

Here, Gadamer emphasizes that Alberti’s theory is not solely modern. That is, Gadamer acknowledges the continuity between Alberti’s idea of a self-standing artistic representation and the classical ideal of beauty. This fact is not surprising given, as Gadamer knew well, Renaissance humanism’s connections with Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle. More particularly, Gadamer underscores the fact that Alberti represents merely one, in some ways problematic, stage in the history of painting. There are other ways to understand pictures, and Gadamer announces here that he will formulate his own hermeneutical theory of the picture.¹⁷

But there is another crucial feature of Gadamer’s discussion of Alberti that we must examine first before turning to Gadamer’s positive conception of the picture. For Alberti, the device by which a painting becomes a humanly accurate representation is perspective, the mathematized theory and philosophical rationale for which Alberti innovates and which is often taken (including by Gadamer) as the distinctive contribution of Renaissance painting. In several passages, Gadamer criticizes perspective in painting. These criticisms are worth exploring and may be motivating Gadamer’s attitude toward Alberti in particular.

Gadamer claims that perspective “certainly is not the final consummation of pictorial art as such.”¹⁸ According to Gadamer, perspective is not an unambiguous triumph for painting because, as I will now explain, it over-emphasizes the subject’s position in relation to the artwork. Gadamer asks us to imagine trying to find the right angle at which to look at a painting or sculpture. In a phenomenologically evocative example, he appeals to the experience of circling around an artwork at a museum or gallery to find the optimal vantage point for viewing:

¹⁶ GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 131; GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*, GW 1, pp. 140–141.

¹⁷ James Risser emphasizes the connection between Gadamer’s discussion of the picture and beauty, with an eye to the Greek background of Gadamer’s thinking (JAMES RISSER, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-reading Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Albany 1997, pp. 146–151).

¹⁸ GADAMER, *The Artwork in Word and Image*, p. 198; GADAMER, *Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8, p. 375. See also HANS-GEORG GADAMER, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi, translated by Nicholas Walker, Cambridge 1986, pp. 7–8; GADAMER, *Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8, pp. 98–99.

Who dictates the right distance [*Abstand*]? Does one have to choose one's own standpoint and firmly hold to it? No, one must seek out the point from which "it" best comes forth. This point is not one's own standpoint [...] If an artwork exercises its fascination, everything that has to do with one's own meaning and one's own opining seems to disappear.¹⁹

For the theory of perspective, the "right distance" at which to view the painting is dictated by the limitations and needs of the human eye. As Alberti puts it, "with change of position, the properties inherent in a surface appear to be altered. These matters are related to the power of vision."²⁰ For Alberti, the best vantage point from which to view an artwork is the one optimally suited to the human body. Perspective constructs a picture according to the limitations of the eye, and quantitatively predicts how the painting will be viewed from certain distances.

In other words, perspective fulfills the needs of an embodied subject standing at a fixed vantage point. Perspective, in this respect, is an objectifying and mathematized method for painting reminiscent of methodological approaches to the natural sciences that Gadamerian hermeneutics opposes in the arts and humanities, which are characterized by their irreducible historicity. Renaissance perspective is an early example of modern scientific methods that mathematically model objects. For this reason, Gadamer calls the Renaissance "a time of a vigorous upsurge of enthusiasm for scientific and mathematical construction."²¹ Perspective anticipates modern subjectivism by exclusively serving the needs and limitations of the human subject who stands at an ontological remove from a domain of objects.

On Gadamer's understanding, however, the artwork possesses its own truth that it seeks to communicate to the viewer. Such a truth is not beholden to the contingencies of human physiology or the goal of accurate representation. In his own hermeneutical discussion of the picture, Figal well expresses the point I am drawing from Gadamer: "To take orientation from measurability is misleading if, in doing so, one disregards the everyday contexts in which it [the picture] stands."²² The point at which the artwork should be viewed is not whatever happens to be quantitatively suited to the human subject but is rather the point from which the artwork can

¹⁹ GADAMER, *The Artwork in Word and Image*, p. 214; GADAMER, *Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8, p. 390.

²⁰ ALBERTI, *On Painting*, p. 39.

²¹ GADAMER, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, pp. 7–8; GADAMER, *Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8, p. 99. This thesis is consistent with the characterization of the Renaissance in the 1972 Italian TV miniseries *The Age of the Medici*, directed by Roberto Rossellini, which features Alberti as one of the main characters. Rossellini draws a provocative parallel between Alberti's mathematized approach to painting and the contemporaneous innovation of finance capitalism by the Medici banking family.

²² FIGAL, *Objectivity*, p. 139.

dialogically communicate its truth to the viewer. The painting stands over and against us and demands our response. Rightness in viewing should not be decided by the needs of the subject alone, but rather by how the artwork communicates its truth.

Perspective formulates an objective and quantified measurement, grounded in human physiology, of the ideal distance at which a painting should be viewed. What matters most for how a picture should be viewed is, however, for Gadamer and Figal, rather the whole context or relation of meaning between the viewer and picture. According to Gadamer, the painting's significance fuses in an ongoing dialogue with the horizon of intelligibility belonging to the viewer. Only out of this dynamic and mutually challenging encounter, which he calls the "fusion of horizons," does the picture's meaning become more fully apparent and in turn transformed.²³ Rather than according priority to a purely subjectivistic standpoint that requires a particular point in space, Gadamer emphasizes the hermeneutical dimension of the dialogical interaction between viewer and artwork. The conception of viewing belonging to perspective, which traces its historical origins to Alberti's theory of painting, is too static and objectifying in its quantified measurement of a distance that is proper for a subjectively situated observer.

2. Gadamer's hermeneutical theory of the picture

For Gadamer, the fusion of horizons describes, as is well known, any genuine act of human understanding. We should now explain in further detail how Gadamer understands pictures specifically. In the passage quoted earlier, Gadamer says, of viewing a picture, that "one must seek out the point from which 'it' best comes forth." We should explain what Gadamer means in this seemingly puzzling passage. First of all, Gadamer here repudiates the modern idea, which he elsewhere imputes to Alberti, that a picture is a representational copy of reality: "We are dealing here with something quite different from the relationship of copy and original."²⁴ Pictures are not merely representational, for Gadamer. They serve a deeper

²³ GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, pp. 305–306; GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*, GW 1, pp. 311–312. I have elsewhere discussed the connections between the fusion of horizons and the modern emphasis on perspective. See DAVID LIAKOS, *Hermeneutics and the Conservatism of Listening*, in: *Cosmos and History* 16/2 (2020), pp. 495–519, here pp. 508–509.

²⁴ GADAMER, *The Artwork in Word and Image*, p. 207, translation modified; GADAMER, *Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8, p. 383. For a challenging account of the historical background

function. Here, Gadamer's departure from the theory of perspective will become especially apparent.

Gadamer indicates that something other than an accurate copy comes forth in a picture: "The picture is an occurrence of being [*Seinsvorgang*] – in it being appears, meaningfully and visibly. The quality of being an original is thus not limited to the 'copying' function of the picture."²⁵ An illuminating example that Gadamer provides, which would be recognizable to Alberti, is a portrait, a picture that would seem to aim at representational accuracy if any does. But Gadamer insists: "Even when one is dealing with a portrait, and the person portrayed knows and finds the picture to be a likeness, it is still as if one had never seen the person before in quite this way. So much *is* the person it [*So sehr ist er es*]. One has, so to speak, been seen into [*hineingesehen*], and the more one looks, the more 'it' comes forth [*herausgekommen*]."²⁶ What comes forth in any picture is some mode of rightness, Gadamer suggests, a fundamental truth about what is portrayed that is viewable for the first time only in light of the picture. A genuinely revealing portrait, in this sense paradigmatic of the picture in general, presents its subject in a genuinely new way that reveals something deeply true and right.

A genuinely skillful portrait, such as one by John Singer Sargent, reveals something startlingly accurate about the character, personality, or profile of its subject. Sargent's depiction of the angle of a subject's smile, the comportment of their body, the glint in their eye, their mode of dress and self-presentation, and so on, reveals something about who the person portrayed really is. In other words, a Sargent portrait reveals *the being of the person*. Such ontologically significant features would not have been necessarily noticeable by close empirical observation alone. Rather, these aspects have the character of an original insight into who is portrayed, such as one might arrive at through a particularly deep or intense conversation concerning a friend or family member. While true to and accurate of that subject, the revelation from the painting would not have been previously apparent in quite the way it is now in light of the viewer's encounter with this portrait. Anyone who views the portrait grasps a real truth about the subject of the picture that they could have only learned through this viewing. In this respect, Gadamer's account of the viewing of a portrait accords with his general view of the dialogical encounter between a person who is trying to

of this artistic ambition, see HANS BLUMENBERG, 'Imitation of Nature': Toward a Prehistory of the Creative Being, translated by Anna Wertz, in: *Qui Parle* 12/1 (2000), pp. 17–54.

²⁵ GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 138, translation modified; GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*, GW 1, p. 149.

²⁶ GADAMER, *The Artwork in Word and Image*, p. 216; GADAMER, *Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8, p. 392.

understand and the object of their understanding, out of which emerges a claim to truth. Once this veridical feature of the portrait's subject is unconcealed by means of the painting's portrayal, this aspect can be recognized as genuinely revelatory of the being of its subject. The truth contained in the painting confronts the viewer, who now has their outlook transformed and altered by this encounter.

This revelation is what Gadamer means when he calls a picture an "occurrence of being." Something true comes forth in our viewing: "Works of art possess an elevated rank in being [*erhöhten Seinsrang*], and this is seen in the fact that in encountering a work of art we have the experience of something emerging [*Es kommt heraus*] – and this one can call truth."²⁷ Such a mode of presentation, or revealing in a new way of what is true, means more than creating an accurate representation, the way a straightforwardly accurate photograph faithfully copies a scene. Rather, this ontological revelation requires bringing something forth that could not be seen in any other way. The true being of the thing or person, something true about their mode of significance that we recognize but had never quite seen that way before, appears in the picture.

By contrast, a representational copy in Alberti's sense is one that appears appropriate and true to our human mode of vision. On Gadamer's analysis, pictures actually reveal things the human eye on its own cannot see for itself under ordinary circumstances:

A picture is not a copy of a copied being, but is in ontological communion with what is copied ... art, as a whole and in a universal sense, increases the picturability [*Bildhaftigkeit*] of being. Word and picture are not mere imitative illustrations, but allow what they present to be for the first time fully what it is.²⁸

The being of the thing portrayed gets increased by its portrayal. A picture is not just true to the objective reality it represents, but actually heightens our ability to perceive or discern the plenitude of meanings contained in both the picture itself and in what it portrays. Returning to Gadamer's example of the portrait, I will see the subject of a portrait in an improved and enriched light thanks to what the painting has shown me. By viewing the painting, I perceive the subject in the fullness of their being. The meaning or being of the picture and its subject matter unfold for me in a new and deepened way. The picture's subject will appear, for me, more fully as it is. The significance of what is pictured gets expanded and deepened by its portrayal. In turn,

²⁷ GADAMER, *The Artwork in Word and Image*, p. 207; GADAMER, *Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8, pp. 383–384.

²⁸ GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 137, translation modified; GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*, GW 1, pp. 147–148.

the painting's meaningfulness will be gradually enriched by the sequence of encounters with and reception of the painting by its viewers, who bring their own contexts of intelligibility to every viewing. Thinking of pictures as representational copies, as Alberti does, underestimates their ontological capacities. Pictures bring a truth to light that is not available via human vision alone. Rather, pictures allow what they depict to fully articulate or present themselves by enabling us explicit access to the wealth of previously implicit meanings contained in the picture.²⁹

Gadamer's hermeneutical understanding of the picture conflicts with Alberti's view of painting. Gadamer argues that Alberti's theory of perspective makes paintings into self-enclosed structures that accurately represent nature according to the limitations of the human body. For Alberti, pictures appropriately present a scene as it would be viewed by the human eye. Gadamer called this conception a problematic form of "sovereignty" that cuts the picture off from its meaningful context. Such a picture provides an image optimally fit for human perception.

But Gadamer, rather confusingly, also credits pictures with a form of sovereignty: "The picture has its own sovereignty [*Hoheit*]. One says this even about a wonderful still life or a landscape, because in the picture everything is just right [*alles so stimmt*]. This causes one to leave behind every relation to what is copied. This is the sovereignty of a picture [*Bildhoheit*]."³⁰ We can call this the *hermeneutical form of sovereignty*, as opposed to Alberti's modern and problematic sovereignty that Gadamer criticizes. Gadamer endorses this hermeneutical sovereignty, which means more than just representational accuracy, as the proper vocation of the picture. Pictures are "sovereign" in this distinctively hermeneutical sense insofar as they communicate their own truth. The truth in painting strives for more than representational accuracy but is rather, as we have seen, a presentation of the true being of the thing, which cannot be reduced to the limitations and needs of human vision.

This valence of Gadamer's positive notion of sovereignty emphasizes how the picture demands to be seen in a certain way because it contains a claim to truth that is communicated to the viewer, whose horizon of intelligibility is expanded and deepened by this encounter. On Alberti's view, the best way to view a picture is the optimal vantage point for the human eye. Gadamer's sovereignty accords preeminence to the truth of the picture and whatever way of viewing it suggests in an ongoing dialogue with the viewer. This holistic relation of meaning is more originary than the subject/object di-

²⁹ On Gadamer and the picture's increase in being, I follow GEORGE, *The Responsibility to Understand* p. 178.

³⁰ GADAMER, *The Artwork in Word and Image*, p. 216, translation modified; GADAMER, *Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8, p. 392.

chotomy and its perpetuation of the competing traditional positions of “realism” and “antirealism.” The truth at issue here emerges neither from a subjective imposition onto the object nor from the object statically containing a fixed meaning. Rather, for Gadamer, the truth in painting depends on the whole dynamic context of meaningfulness formed through the interaction between viewer and picture.

3. Alberti and Vico on humanism

In light of Gadamer’s theory of the picture, we clarified Gadamer’s critique of Alberti’s theory of perspective. I want now to underline the limitations of Gadamer’s discussion of Alberti by emphasizing aspects of Alberti’s theory of painting that actually resonate with Gadamer’s understanding of the picture. Showing these limitations will in turn reveal the deeper stakes of Gadamer’s reference to Alberti. Alberti’s treatise *On Painting* does not just articulate a mathematized theory of perspective but is also a text firmly within the Renaissance humanist tradition.³¹ This fact is significant because, as mentioned earlier, Gadamer takes humanism as his starting point in *Truth and Method* for opposing the methodological reductionism of modernity.

Gadamer picks out for special attention a 1709 text by Giambattista Vico called *On the Study Methods of Our Time*: “It is important to remember the humanistic tradition, and to ask what is to be learned from it with respect to the humanities’ mode of knowledge. Vico’s *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* makes a good starting point.”³² Gadamer finds within Vico’s humanist thinking an opposition, from the heart of the modern age, to modernity’s reduction of meaning and significance to the intelligibility of the natural sciences. In the text that Gadamer singles out for praise, Vico synthesizes themes from the Italian Renaissance humanist tradition in order to mar-

³¹ On situating Alberti within Renaissance humanism, see CHARLES H. CARMAN, *Meanings of Perspective in the Renaissance: Tensions and Resolution*, in: John Shannon Hendrix/Charles H. Carman (eds.), *Renaissance Theories of Vision*, Surrey 2010, pp. 31–44; and CARROLL W. WESTFALL, *Painting and the Liberal Arts: Alberti’s View*, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 30/4 (1969), pp. 487–506.

³² GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 17, translation modified; GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*, GW 1, pp. 24–25. For an illuminating discussion of Gadamer’s appropriation of Vico, see DONALD PHILLIP VERENE, *Gadamer and Vico on Sensus Communis and the Tradition of Humane Knowledge*, in: Lewis E. Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Chicago 1997, pp. 137–153. On Gadamer and the Renaissance, Kathy Eden has insightfully highlighted a number of connections between Gadamer and what she calls the “hermeneutics of intimacy” in Erasmus and Montaigne (KATHY EDEN, *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Intimacy*, Chicago 2012, pp. 4–10, 86–89).

shal their insights against the growing influence of Cartesian method into all spheres of knowledge and scholarly inquiry. Vico's arguments will help clarify Alberti's view.

Vico argues that Cartesian method, with its emphasis on mathematical truth graspable by the intellect, is incompatible with the traditional humanistic training of the faculties of common sense, practical judgment, eloquence, imagination, and memory. Cartesian method does not encourage cultivation of these other faculties because it only traffics in abstract deduction, whereas the humanistic faculties require sensuous imagery to thrive.³³ The faculty of eloquence, or artfully presenting a line of argument in words, is of special interest to Vico:

The rational part in us may be taken captive by a net woven of purely intellectual reasonings, but the passional side of our nature can never be swayed and overcome unless this is done by more sensuous and materialistic means ... the soul must be enticed by corporeal images and impelled to love; for once it loves, it is easily taught to believe; once it believes and loves, the fire of passion must be infused into it so as to break its inertia and force it to *will*.³⁴

Images will move the non-rational part of our nature, which is governed by sensuous passions, to believe and ultimately to act. For Vico, who was Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Naples, this fact contains great significance for education. Cartesian method overlooks images in favor of quantified equations and deductive chains of reasoning. Genuine training in eloquence and the other sensuous faculties, by contrast, requires rich imagery to communicate effectively.

Vico underscores the centrality of sensuous imagery to the Renaissance humanist tradition. Gadamer also echoes this feature of humanism in his claim that "the divine becomes picturable only through the word and picture."³⁵ Like Vico, Gadamer argues that certain forms of edification and learning are best enabled by imagery. Gadamer overlooks, however, how Alberti's theory of painting also resonates with this humanistic theme:

Painting possesses a truly divine power in that not only does it make the absent present (as they say of friendship), but it also represents the dead to the living many centuries later [...] We should also consider it a very great gift to men that painting has represented the gods they worship, for painting has contributed considerably to the piety which binds us to the gods, and to filling our minds with sound religious beliefs.³⁶

³³ GIAMBATTISTA VICO, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, translated by Elio Gianturco, Ithaca (NY) 1990, p. 13.

³⁴ VICO, *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, p. 38.

³⁵ GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, p. 137, translation modified; GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*, GW 1, p. 147.

³⁶ ALBERTI, *On Painting*, p. 60. See also DAMISCH, *The Inventor of Painting*, p. 304.

For Alberti, painting is not just the representation of nature, though it certainly is that as well. Painting also “makes the absent present,” including representing the dead and rendering the gods visible. Things that appear unreal to us, such as the dead and the gods, are brought to life by painting. Painting brings the divine to sensuousness.³⁷

On this crucial point, Alberti and Gadamer agree. Gadamer also claims that the power of the picture to bring forth the being of a thing includes the divine: “One also says this about a picture of a god [*Götterbild*] or about a picture of what is holy [*Heiligenbild*].”³⁸ Gadamer’s assessment of Alberti’s theory of perspective as inaugurating the problematic modern sovereignty of the picture is, at best, one-sided. Alberti’s humanistic emphasis on the divine power of painting actually makes his theory, in at least this respect, quite close to Gadamer’s account of the picture’s power to make being visible. Alberti’s theory is more encompassing than providing an example of modern representationalism and subjectivism.

4. The real stakes of Gadamer’s confrontation with Alberti

Gadamer misses, or at least fails to emphasize, any continuity between his thought and Alberti’s. Unlike Heidegger, Gadamer is not fundamentally antagonistic toward Renaissance humanism in general.³⁹ In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer draws upon humanist touchstones like Gracián, Shaftesbury, the Scottish Enlightenment, Weimar Classicism, and, as we have seen, Vico. Gadamer’s surprisingly positive engagement with figures and motifs from modernity is a good starting point for complicating and con-

³⁷ On this ambition in Alberti, see CARMAN, *Meanings of Perspective*, p. 40. For the effective history of this ideal from the Renaissance to contemporary Continental philosophy, see STEPHEN H. WATSON, *Hermeneutics and the Retrieval of the Sacred: Hegel’s Giotto (With an Eye Toward Mark Rothko’s)*, in: *The Review of Metaphysics* 72/4 (2019), pp. 741–765.

³⁸ GADAMER, *The Artwork in Word and Image*, p. 216, translation modified; GADAMER, *Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8, p. 392.

³⁹ For a critical discussion Heidegger’s treatment of the Renaissance, see ERNESTO GRASSI, *Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism: Four Studies*, Binghamton 1983. For Grassi, Heidegger failed to engage in a detailed or systematic way with the texts and figures of humanism. Jean Grondin suggests that Gadamer self-consciously fashioned his defense of humanism in response to Heidegger’s “Letter on ‘Humanism’” (JEAN GRONDIN, *Gadamer on Humanism*, in: Lewis E. Hahn [ed.], *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Chicago 1997, pp. 157–170, here p. 161). George has recently argued that Gadamer’s humanism “concretizes” Heidegger’s undeveloped reference to the possibility of a rehabilitated humanism (GEORGE, *The Responsibility to Understand*, pp. 30–38).

testing the dominant reading of Gadamer as primarily a critic of modernity. At least, I have argued for this conclusion elsewhere in my research on Gadamer's rehabilitation of the modern age.⁴⁰ No hostility toward modern humanism can account for Gadamer's apparent blind spot with regard to, and critical stance toward, Alberti. This discrepancy demands further explanation. Gadamer's critical discussion of Alberti and perspective is notable, I will now argue, because it crystallizes two important commitments of his hermeneutical philosophy of art to which Alberti is opposed.

The first issue concerns, once again, perspective. For Alberti, the function of a painting is to provide a vivid and realistic representation for a human subject. This fact has the consequence that painting does not represent the features of things as they really are apart from human observers, as Alberti concedes: "Large, small, long, short, high, low, wide, narrow, light, dark, bright, gloomy, and everything of the kind – which philosophers termed accidents, because they may or may not be present in things – all these are such as to be known only by comparison."⁴¹ Only from the perspective of an embodied human perceiver will an object in a perspective painting appear "large," "wide," "dark," and so on. A convincing painted representation has to accurately depict these qualities only as they appear to us. Alberti readily recognizes that this fact means that perspective entails relativism. In a notable passage, he invokes Protagoras: "As man is the best known of all things to man, perhaps Protagoras, in saying that man is the measure of all things, meant that accidents are duly compared to and known by the accidents in man."⁴² Perspective is the artistic recognition that the human being is the measure of all things. The truth that perspective affords will be one relative to the human subject.

One of Heidegger's fundamental objections to humanism is that it remains "stifled in metaphysical subjectivism."⁴³ Although Gadamer evinces a more

⁴⁰ See DAVID LIAKOS, *Another Beginning? Heidegger, Gadamer, and Postmodernity*, in: *Epoché* 24/1 (2019), pp. 221–238.

⁴¹ ALBERTI, *On Painting*, p. 53. As HARRIS (*Infinity and Perspective*, p. 76) remarks, "The perspectival art of Alberti subjects what is present to a human measure that has itself been subjected to the demand for ease of representation".

⁴² ALBERTI, *On Painting*, p. 53. In a discussion of the many allusions to Protagoras by Renaissance humanists, Charles Trinkaus concludes that Alberti invokes Protagoras because of "the anthropocentric character of Alberti's conception of the artistic act" (CHARLES TRINKAUS, *Protagoras in the Renaissance: An Exploration*, in: Edward P. Mahoney [ed.], *Philosophy and Humanism: Renaissance Essays in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, New York 1976, pp. 190–213, here p. 198).

⁴³ MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Pathmarks*, ed. by William McNeill, Cambridge 1998, p. 263; MARTIN HEIDEGGER *Gesamtausgabe Volume 9: Wegmarken*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrman, Frankfurt am Main 1976, p. 346.

appreciative (and nuanced) understanding of humanism than Heidegger does, Gadamer shares this Heideggerian aversion to subjectivism. But this distinction between Heidegger and Gadamer on the one hand and perspective on the other may not be as obvious as it seems, as Karsten Harries underscores: "The theory of perspective teaches us about the logic of appearance, of phenomena. In this sense, the theory of perspective is phenomenology."⁴⁴ Is the proximity of perspective to phenomenology another area of convergence between Gadamer and Alberti? I think not, because Gadamer, unlike Alberti, is crucially opposed to relativism. Recall Gadamer's critique of perspective. The way we view an artwork should not be dictated by the contingent demands of human physiology, but rather by how the artwork conveys its truth to us: "The unconcealment of what comes forth is of something that is hidden in the work itself and not in whatever we may say about it."⁴⁵ This position represents a real difference from Alberti and the subjectivistic aspects of modernity that he anticipates, which make truth dependent on human consciousness. Gadamer encourages us to recognize the multiplicity of substantive meanings within an artwork that we disclose through ongoing acts of hermeneutical understanding.

Letting the truth of the work disclose itself to us in a dynamic dialogue departs from conceiving an artwork as fulfilling the demands of the human subject. In explicating our embeddedness within this primordial context of meaning, Gadamer emphasizes how human understanding is conditioned by history and language. In that respect, he readily accepts that there will never be a complete or total perspective on any matter. But for Gadamer, such perspectival factors are enabling conditions of understanding, since they aid us in receiving and disclosing the meanings of artworks when we remain open to their unconcealment. My horizon of meaning affords me a limited but disclosive perspective on a work of art, that is, a starting point for clarifying and engaging with its claims to truth. In turn, my horizon can fuse in a dialogical encounter with the constellation of intelligibility represented by the painting and its historically effected context of meaning.

The ontology of the fusion of horizons transcends the subject/object dichotomy on which the theory of perspective depends. The limitations of perspective in painting, meanwhile, reflect only the arbitrary demands of the human body and the inability of any individual human observer to perceive the whole truth of a scene or image. Gadamer claims that a scene

⁴⁴ HARRIES, *Infinity and Perspective*, p. 69.

⁴⁵ GADAMER, *The Artwork in Word and Image*, p. 214; GADAMER, *Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8, p. 390.

constructed with perspective represents nothing more than “the arbitrary [zufälligen] selection of reality presented to our view.”⁴⁶ The truth of a painting rendered with linear perspective is limited to a fixed spatial point and contingent on human physiology. For Gadamer, Alberti’s theory of perspective is relativistic, one-sidedly emphasizing fixed points of view without acknowledging the dynamic and mutable interplay between the artwork’s claim to truth and our active disclosure of these meanings.

Perspective is partial in the sense that it constructs a scene to be viewed by a single human viewer. The scene of a painting constructed with perspective is meant to unfold before the eyes of an individual, situated, embodied observer, which implies the existence of further possible and equally valid perspectives on the image. Based on this individualistic tendency, Gadamer explicitly links perspective with the subjectivism of modernity:

Here we truly stand at a beginning of the entire essence of modernity [*des ganzen neuzeitlichen Wesens*]. One needs only to think of perspective, the great discovery of the age, that worked to shape Western painting up until the threshold of our century. It is more than a discovery of fine art. It attests to a way of thinking. The thought of point of view, of finite, fluctuant, interchangeable point of view, gives an entirely new meaning to the thought of the individual-singular. The individual becomes the complementary concept to the universal.⁴⁷

Constructing a scene relative to the limited and arbitrary point of view of an individual human subject means that perspective is characteristic of modern subjectivism in general. Perspective embraces the contingent and partial point of view of the atomized subject, which can never fully capture the truth of any image. For this reason, perspective is a harbinger of our subjectivistic modern culture that valorizes atomized and individualized forms of consciousness as constitutive of what counts as meaningful. Gadamer is quick to emphasize how linear perspective, because of its consonance with modern subjectivism, represents just one episode in the history of painting, preceded and succeeded by compelling alternatives like medieval and modernist art.⁴⁸ The stakes of Gadamer’s confrontation with Alberti can be traced ultimately to Gadamer’s larger concerns with and objections to modernity in general and his commitment to a form of substantive artistic truth that cannot be determined by atomized human subjects alone. Here,

⁴⁶ GADAMER, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 88; GADAMER, *Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8, p. 319.

⁴⁷ HANS-GEORG GADAMER, *Nicolaus Cusanus and the Present*, translated by Theodore George, in: *Epoché 7/1* (2002), pp: 71–79, here p. 76; HANS-GEORG GADAMER, *Neuere Philosophie II. Probleme, Gestalten*, GW 4, Tübingen 1987, p. 302.

⁴⁸ GADAMER, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, pp. 7–8 and 88; GADAMER, *Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8, pp. 98–99 and 319–320.

Gadamer's account of painting's truth anticipates the emphasis on objective substantiveness characteristic of contemporary "realistic" hermeneutics.

The second point of contention between Gadamer and Alberti, which is less prominent in the scholarly literature on Gadamerian hermeneutics, concerns the status of painting relative to the other arts. Alberti claims that "painting is the mistress of all the arts," unambiguously asserting painting's supremacy.⁴⁹ Painting accurately represents nature from the human perspective, but also beautifies nature by presenting it in a harmonious and excellent way that the human being will judge aesthetically pleasing.⁵⁰ For this reason, Alberti claims that one of painting's chief virtues is that "Nature herself delights in painting."⁵¹ Further, painting synthesizes knowledge of all the liberal arts, including geometry and poetry, which enhance the painter's technical skills and improve their method for constructing a visual narrative.⁵² Alberti triumphantly celebrates painting as the greatest of all the arts, a claim echoed by his historical descendants. Leonardo da Vinci, for example, conceives of painting as a science (*scientia*) for representing nature: "Painting, which embraces only the works of God, is more worthy than poetry, which only embraces the lying fictions of the works of man."⁵³

This claim places Alberti and da Vinci within a rich and diverse tradition in aesthetics that emphasizes the importance of an artwork's distinctive medium. Gadamer is opposed to this tradition (whose most recent instantiation is artistic modernism), and this commitment also motivates Gadamer's antagonism toward Alberti. Gadamer wants to emphasize the capacity to claim truth that all artworks in any medium possess: "What keenly interested me ... was trying to work out what the art of making a picture and the art of making a poem have in common [*das Gemeinsame*], and to take this common element and place it within a more general classification that says art makes a statement of truth."⁵⁴ When Alberti emphasizes the preeminence of painting and the distinctive qualities of its medium, this attempt puts him at odds with Gadamer's view that any artwork can claim truth, irrespective of its medium. Gadamer emphasizes the continuity between all the arts: "In its appearing to you the artwork

⁴⁹ ALBERTI, *On Painting*, p. 61.

⁵⁰ ALBERTI, *On Painting*, pp. 90–91.

⁵¹ ALBERTI, *On Painting*, p. 63.

⁵² ALBERTI, *On Painting*, pp. 87–88.

⁵³ LEONARDO DA VINCI, *Leonardo on Painting*, ed. by Martin Kemp, translated by Martin Kemp and Margaret Walker, New Haven 2001, p. 33.

⁵⁴ GADAMER, *The Artwork in Word and Image*, p. 195, translation modified; GADAMER, *Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8, p. 373. Gadamer is referring here to Lessing, who in his 1766 *Laocoön* essay differentiates painting from poetry.

is ‘right there’ [*‘richtig da’*] – the picture, the poem, the song. ‘It’ has come forth.”⁵⁵ Against any chauvinistic claim for the superiority of one medium over another, Gadamer emphasizes how all artworks make claims to truth in which being is disclosed. The articulation and validation of these artistic claims to truth is at the heart of Gadamerian hermeneutics.

Emphasizing the specificities of an artwork’s medium could be consistent, however, with understanding an artwork as a statement of truth. For example, while one can certainly criticize the subjectivism of Alberti’s theory of perspective, his view has the virtue of highlighting the particular features that distinguish painting as a presentation of the human perception of nature. Perhaps the truth of an artwork depends in some way on, or varies with, the particularities of its medium. Gadamer does not acknowledge this possibility. In so doing, he obscures the substantive content that derives from an artwork’s particular medium. How painting conveys its truth may not be exactly the same as in the claims to truth of poetry. When the work stands over and against me, and confronts me with its meaningful statement, it does so through the particular form it embodies, which allows me to encounter it. Hermeneutical aesthetics should contain room for thinking about the topic of medium. Gadamer’s lack of attention to medium may be a limitation of his approach to art to which his confrontation with Alberti calls our attention.⁵⁶

Summary

This essay develops a critical interpretation of Gadamer’s account of Renaissance painting. My point of departure is a brief reference in *Truth and Method* to Leon Battista Alberti, the Italian Renaissance humanist who developed an influential mathematical theory of perspective in painting. Through an explication of Gadamer’s critique of Alberti and of perspective generally, I argue that what is ultimately at stake in Gadamer’s confrontation with Alberti is Gadamer’s opposition to relativism and subjectivism and his downgrading of the importance of the artistic medium for evaluating the truth-claim of an artwork. Against the theory of perspective, Gadamer contends that artworks make substantive claims to truth to which we interpretatively respond. By emphasizing this theme, our discussion resonates with contemporary “hermeneutical realism.”

⁵⁵ GADAMER, *The Artwork in Word and Image*, p. 217, translation modified; GADAMER, *Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8, p. 392.

⁵⁶ I presented versions of this paper at meetings of the North American Society for Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Southwest Seminar in Continental Philosophy. My thanks to Haley Burke, Ted George, Karsten Harries, and Robert Stolorow.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag wird eine kritische Interpretation von Gadammers Darstellung der Renaissance-Malerei entfaltet. Meinen Ausgangspunkt dabei bildet ein kurzer Verweis in *Wahrheit und Methode* auf Leon Battista Alberti, den italienischen Renaissance-Humanisten mit seiner einflussreichen mathematischen Theorie der Perspektive in der Malerei. Anhand einer Erläuterung von Gadammers Kritik an Alberti und an der Perspektive im Allgemeinen argumentiere ich, dass es in Gadammers Auseinandersetzung mit Alberti letztlich um seine Ablehnung von Relativismus und Subjektivismus sowie eine Abwertung der Bedeutung des künstlerischen Mediums für die Beurteilung des Wahrheitsanspruchs eines Kunstwerkes geht. Gegen die Theorie der Perspektive behauptet Gadamer, Kunstwerke erhöhen substantielle Wahrheitsansprüche, auf die wir interpretativ reagierten. So steht durch die Betonung dieses Themas unsere Diskussion in Einklang mit dem zeitgenössischen „hermeneutischen Realismus“.