

*La Boda* (Figure 1) is a masterful and original – even revolutionary – example of the use of perspective to comment symbolically on pictorial content. Tomlinson (1984) describes the picture well:

The Wedding... portrays a rustic pageant of uncommon nobility, seemingly inappropriate for a genre scene of village life in late eighteenth century Spain. An unsophisticated assembly parades beneath a mock triumphal arch; in the center stands the bridal couple, preceded by a piper, and followed by the village priest who we suppose has just united them in matrimony. (p. 23)



Figure 1: Goya. *La Boda*. One of seven cartoons Goya prepared for tapestries commissioned by Charles IV.

<sup>1</sup> This is an expanded version of an addendum written for the Spanish translation of my book (Kubovy, 1986). My work is supported by NEI grant No. R01 EY 12926-06. Correspondence: Department of Psychology, PO Box 400400, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4400 (e-mail: kubovy@virginia.edu).

The source for *The Wedding* is the bridge of life, a common popular image of man's vanity and transience [sic]. Showing a stepped masonry arch which supports ten figures, male or female, or ten couples... Perhaps in an attempt to camouflage the source, he deviates from the [traditional] strict symmetry, replacing the righthand staircase with a heavy masonry wall. (p. 24)

A Royal decree sanctioned arranged marriages in 1776. By the 1790s this practice was resolutely criticized by supporters of the enlightenment in Spain (called *ilustrados*), with whom Goya sympathized. One of them, Leandro Fernandez de Moratín, wrote a play which opened in Madrid in 1790. Titled *El Viejo y la Niña* («The Old Man and the Girl»), this play criticized such marriages. Goya's depiction in 1791-21 of a marriage between a young woman and an old, odd-looking man continues the theme. I interpret Goya's subversion of the rules of perspective in *La Boda* as a symbolic condemnation of this custom.

### 1. The Subversion and its Symbolism

To analyze the subversion, we will go through three steps (see Figure 2).

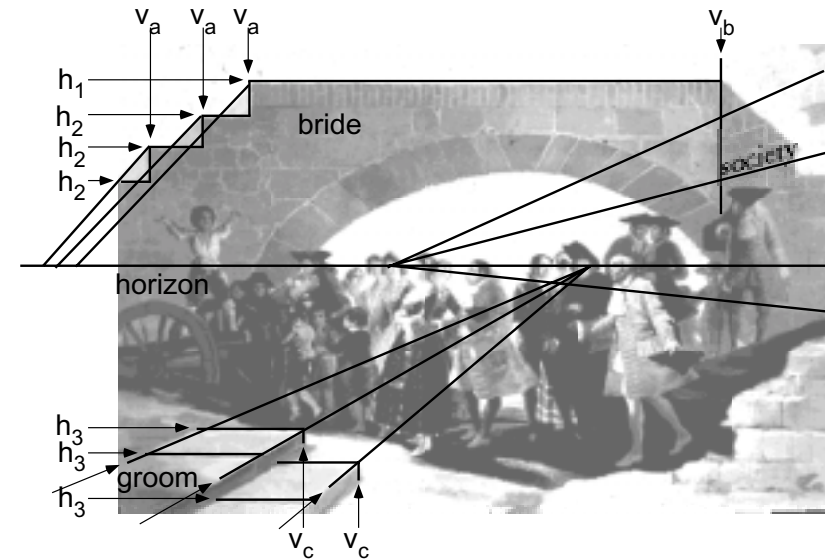


Figure 2: Identifying the orthogonals, the horizon and labels for my symbolic interpretation.

1. Determine which surfaces in the depicted scene are parallel to the picture plane.
  - (a) The face of the bridge is (approximately) parallel to the picture plane because:
    - i. Edges of type  $h_1$  (the top of the bridge in Figure 2) and  $h_2$  (the treads of the stairs), which are (close to) horizontal and parallel to each other in the

scene, have parallel images in the picture. Therefore these edges are parallel to the picture plane.

- ii. Edges of type  $v_a$  (the risers of the stairs) and  $v_b$  (the intersection of the bridge and the wall), which are vertical and parallel to each other in the scene, have parallel images in the picture. Therefore these edges are all parallel to the picture plane.
  - iii. More than two edges of the face of the bridge are parallel to the picture plane, therefore the face of the bridge is parallel to the picture plane.
- (b) The front and back faces of the four slabs in the foreground are parallel to the picture plane because:
- i. Edges of type  $h_3$  (front and back edges of the large surface of each slab), which are horizontal and parallel to each other in the scene, have parallel images in the picture. Therefore these edges are parallel to the picture plane.
  - ii. Edges of type  $v_c$  (the short edges of the sides of slabs), which are vertical and parallel to each other in the scene, have parallel images in the picture. Therefore these edges are all parallel to the picture plane.
  - iii. More than two edges of the front or back faces of the slabs are parallel to the picture plane, therefore these faces of the slabs are parallel to the picture plane.
2. Determine which edges in the depicted scene are perpendicular to the picture plane: all the edges of objects (in the scene) that are at right angles to surfaces which are parallel to the picture plane, must be perpendicular to the picture plane. The lines in the picture that depict these edges are called orthogonals (Figure 2).
- (a) The edges of the treads of the stairs (labeled  $\beta$ , for *bride*).
  - (b) The right and left sides of the slabs (labeled  $\gamma$ , for *groom*).
  - (c) The top and bottom surfaces of the stones that form the masonry of the wall to which the bridge is attached (labeled  $\sigma$ , for *society*).

3. Show how the orthogonals do not converge on a single vanishing point, as required by the laws of perspective.
- (a) The orthogonals which represent the edges of the treads of the stairs on the left of the bridge are almost parallel to each other. If they converged, they could only converge on a point on the left side of the picture.
  - (b) The orthogonals which represent the edges of the stones that compose the wall on the right of the picture converge on one point roughly in the center of the picture; they seem to pass through the left side of the archway.
  - (c) The orthogonals which represent the side faces of the slabs in the foreground converge on one point somewhat to the right of the center of the picture; they seem to pass through the right side of the archway.

I have shown that Goya breaks the rules of perspective in *La Boda*. The picture's content gives us reason to believe that we are witnessing a marriage of an incompatible couple. I interpret the three disparate vanishing points as representing three protagonists of this drama: the bride, the groom, and the society that joins them (Figure 2).

It does not take a Freudian to conjecture that a structure with an opening represents the bride. This is a truncated bridge of life; in the direction of the procession her life can only descend. The lowly slabs in the foreground represent the groom: his orthogonals ( $\gamma$ ) run through the passage under the bride's bridge of life. The masonry wall, whose vanishing point falls between the two represent the society that encourages the coupling of such incompatible mates.

## 2. Illusory Subversion?

In *La Boda*, Goya transgresses by allowing the images of edges that are (in the scene) mutually parallel to intersect at more than one vanishing point. I claim that Goya subverted the laws of perspective to convey his view that arranged marriages violate the laws of decency. One might argue that Goya had simply tired of the constraints of perspective. Or, one might argue that the diversion from the norms of perspective served the esthetics of the composition.

Around the time Goya painted *La Boda*, he realized that the practice of perspective had ossified. By 1792 he was adamant that students of the academy should not be taught perspective<sup>2</sup>. Could this painting embody his rebellion against this Procrustean system? If Goya were trying to spurn perspective (anticipating Braque), we would expect the painting to reject the conventions of perspective wholesale. It does not.

First, each object or collection of objects in *La Boda* is represented in roughly correct perspective. The orthogonals of the masonry converge onto one vanishing point; the orthogonals of the slabs onto another; the orthogonals of the bridge do not quite converge, but suggest a vanishing point on the left, disparate from the other two. This is not the kind of sweeping indifference to the perspectival consistency of individual objects that one sees in pre-Renaissance painting (Figure 3).



Figure 3: After Arnheim's (1974, Figure 195a) sketch of a detail from a fourteenth century altarpiece.

<sup>2</sup> Tomlinson (1989, pp. 227-8) summarizes Goya's response to a request by the viceprotector of the Royal Academy to suggest reforms for the Academy. This book and her article (Tomlinson, 1984) are the source for all the historical observations in this analysis.

Second, according to the geometry of perspective, when some horizontal edges in a scene are neither parallel nor perpendicular to the picture plane there may be two or more vanishing points (see Figure 4) that lie on the horizon. From this rule it follows that whenever the images of horizontal edges converge onto several vanishing points, the line that joins these vanishing points must be horizontal. In harmony with this rule, the two of the three vanishing points in *La Boda* lie on the horizon, and the third is indefinite (Figure 2).

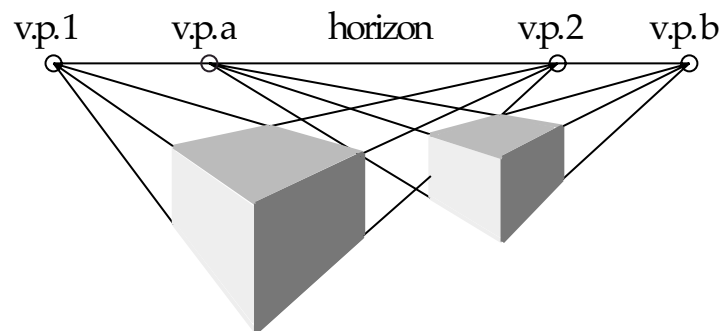


Figure 4: The image of each box has two vanishing points. Because the two boxes are in different orientations their pairs of vanishing points are distinct.

Third, it is a property of all pictures drawn in perspective that the eye-height of the artist is the same as the height of the horizon (regardless of whether the artist is sitting, standing, or perched on a chair). If the artist depicts human figures so that the horizon line coincides with their eye-height, then the eye-height of the artist is the same as the eye-height of the depicted figures and the picture implies that the artist was standing with his/her feet on the ground. This is the case in *La Boda* (Figure 2). In Figure 5 I illustrate this principle.

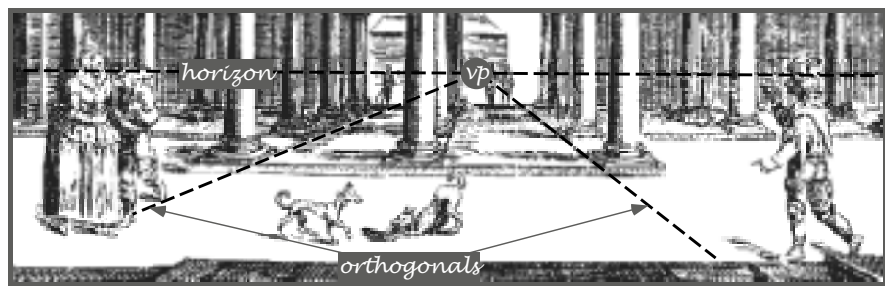


Figure 5: A sketch of a detail of a scene from plate 13 of Part Two of *Perspective* by Jan Vredeman de Vries (Vries, 1604-5/1968).

Having undermined the argument that the three vanishing points are a symptom of a thoroughgoing rebellion against perspective, might the composition have called for this departure? Let the reader be the judge. To «correct» the painting, all we need to do is (i) remove the three orthogonals (labeled  $\beta$  in Figure 2) showing the tops of treads of the stairs on the left of the bridge and (ii) increase the convergence of the orthogonals (labeled  $\sigma$  in Figure 2) that represent the masonry of the wall on the right, so that its vanishing point coincides with that of the slabs in the foreground. It seems to me that the composition is unaffected by either of these minor changes.

### 3. Why esoteric?

To the best of my knowledge, Goya's symbolic misuse of perspective in *La Boda* is without precedent. Three centuries earlier artists used perspective to incorporate symbols in the scenes they depicted. Warman Welliver (1973, p. 8) describes how Domenico Veneziano's *Madonna and Child with Four Saints* (Figure 1-8) alludes to the Trinity: «The most obvious factor in Domenico's scheme of dimensions and proportions... is three. The elements of shape from which the pattern of the floor tiles is derived is the equilateral triangle; the viewing distance [i.e., the distance of the artist's eye from the canvas], or invisible floor, is three times the visible floor...» (quoted in Kubovy, 1986, Chapter 1).

Around the same time, Mantegna and Leonardo da Vinci used perspective to achieve perceptual effects to enhance the power of their work. Mantegna used a conflict between two lines of sight (the one implied by the perspective and the one implied by the depicted scene's center of interest) in *St. James Led to Execution* to intensify the tension and foreboding conveyed by the picture. Leonardo used a high center of projection in his *Last Supper* to bring about a feeling of physical elevation, which intensifies the feeling of exaltation induced by the moving subject matter and its superb depiction. In these cases the perspective can affect the spectator, but does not symbolize the content (see Kubovy, 1986).

I have found no reference in the art-historical literature to Goya's willful inconsistency. Nor have I found other examples in his oeuvre. If there's an inconsistency in a painting, and it takes more than two centuries for someone to notice it, is it there? Did Goya know? I have taken pains to show that he must have. Did he hide his criticism because the tapestry was commissioned by Charles IV? It would have been foolhardy not to. But most important: does an esoteric inconsistency have an effect on the viewer? My analysis of Mantegna and Leonardo suggests that tension and elevation can be produced by subtle use of perspective. Here, however, it is likely that the message comes through, but muted: «something is wrong here; ah yes, the girl is a pretty blossom, the man – an ugly gaffer.» We must however, postpone the exploration of what may be the most interesting question: how important is the tacitness of the message to its effect? How important is the failure of phenomenology to the success of such works of art?

#### 4. Conclusion

At the end of his essay «Perspective as Symbolic Form» (1924-5/1991) Panofsky (whom I discuss at some length in my book) writes: «It is thus no accident if this perspectival view of space has already succeeded twice in the course of the evolution of art: the first time as the sign of an ending, when antique theocracy crumbled [in late Hellenistic and Roman times]; the second time as the sign of a beginning, when modern 'anthropocracy' first reared itself [in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries].» Nor is it an accident that Goya violated laws of perspective to criticize society's trampling of individual rights at a time of another beginning, when modern democracy first emerged.

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