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*Editor*

Enrico Cicalò  
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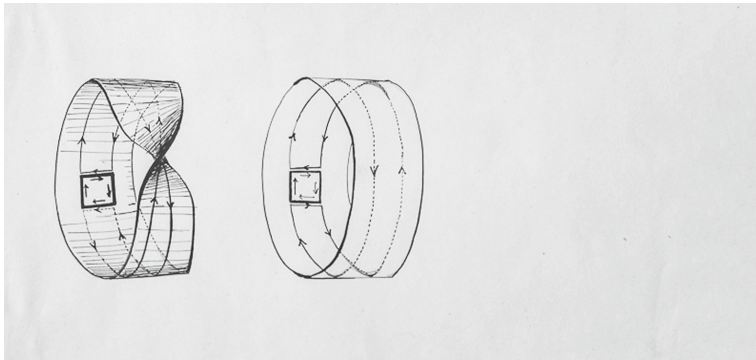
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# Topography and Topology of the Interior: Lissitzky vs. Florenskij

Fabrizio Gay<sup>(✉)</sup> and Irene Cazzaro

Department of Architecture and Arts, Images Theory Lab (LABIM), Università  
IUAV di Venezia, Dorsoduro 2196, 30123 Venice, Italy  
{fabrizio, icazzaro}@iuav.it

**Abstract.** The representation of the interiors in exhibitions – as “exemplary interiors” – and in the graphic, photographic, cinematographic images, is studied here according to the theme of the “anti-perspective” that characterises the two opposite tendencies – the abstractionist and the realist one – in the teaching of graphic arts at VChUTEMAS in Moscow. On the one hand, the best example of Proun, intended both as a graphic representation and a spatial installation, is the *Kabinett der Abstrakten* by El Lissitzky. On the other hand, Pavel Florenskij’s teaching opposes to the naive abstractionism a realist semiotics of the work of art and an anti-Kantian geometry that we exemplify by showing its analogy with the conception of “internal space” expressed by Andrej Tarkovskij in *Solaris*.



**Keywords:** Museographic · Cinematographic · Topographic · Iconographic · Biographic · Interiographic

## 1 Showing the Drawing of the Interior

It is difficult to say “what we want from the interiors we live in” since we would like from them almost the same and contradictory things that we hope from our cities: physical and historical shelter in an environmental niche that counts both as mother’s womb, stable witness of memory related to identity, place of *ōtia*, and, on the contrary, as a place of *negōtia*, physical and negotiated opening on the world and on a new

destiny rid of the past. The interior, from this point of view, is a techno-aesthetic object that cannot be grasped except through an adequate (aesthetic) theory, therefore it is useful to surprise it in the moments in which it has been put (i) “on display” and (ii) “on a map”.

- (i) The display - the exhibition, the fair, the museum, ... - is the place where, from a historical point of view, even the “internal space” has been specified as a particular “techno-aesthetic” object, at least in the terms in which the notion of “internal” is nowadays presupposed to the practices of interior design. The reason seems obvious; it is the exhibition itself that has been historically proposed as an “exemplary interior”, which could be experimental or didactically exemplified. And not only when the exhibition has explicitly exposed “ideal interiors” or “prototypes”: it often has the task of witnessing, evoking or promising other “interiors”, through images, samples, models, representations, allusions, tastes of atmospheres. In other words: the “internal space” is always substantial part of the “expression” of an exhibition, even though it is not always part of its “explicit content”. However, the exhibition is very often an “interior” that theatrically and in various media – from drawing to cinema, from graphic representation to virtually augmented reality – re-mediate other “interiors”, promising them in a public or private elsewhere, in memory or in prophecy.
- (ii) Since the exhibition is always an intensively representative (emblematic) occasion and a multi-medial crossroads, even the (graphic and photo-cinematographic) representation techniques used in the technical design of an exhibition have often assumed a decisive role in the history of the techno-aesthetic notion of “interior”. In some moments of change in the history of interiors – for example, a century ago, in the formation of the modernist-utopian canon of the European constructivism – the spatial representation technique was precisely what allowed to technically define the “stakes” (values) in interior design.

## 2 Promises of Interiors: The Kabinett der Abstrakten

In its most mature moment, the modernist canon of the interior as an exhibition space can be witnessed by the well-known drawing (Fig. 1) made on cardboard using mixed media – tempera, collage, metal enamels, black and red ink – measuring about 53 × 40 cm and representing a hall – the *Kabinett der Abstrakten* – designed by El Lissitzky in 1925–27 for the Landes Museum in Hanover. This “board” by Lissitzky is what we would now call an “icon”, at least in the sense that it currently has countless reproductions in print and on the web, images that, while giving very altered versions of the tonal and chromatic scale of the original, make it the emblem of the avant-garde exhibition space<sup>1</sup> due to (1) the represented object, (2) the geometric representation method adopted and (3) the “utopian” extent of the stakes.

<sup>1</sup> The statement of the prototypic and emblematic role of the exhibition space in Hanover, in the genealogy of the 20th century art, begins with the famous MoMA director Alfred Barr (cf. Cauman 1958, pp. 105–108).

1 - As we have said, the object shown in that drawing by Lissitzky is the setting-up of a corner room on the second floor of the Art Gallery of the former Provinzial-Museum (now Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum) in Hanover: a prismatic room of about 6 by 4.40 m, 3.40 m high, accessible through two doors and illuminated by a window screened by means of an opalescent apparatus of diffraction of natural light. Accompanied by other technical drawings and a report by the author, that drawing is part of the project for the 45th and last room – called “Abstract Cabinet” [*Kabinett der Abstrakten*] – that the pioneering director of the gallery, Alexander Dorner, conceived from 1925 with El Lissitzky – the inventor of the *Proun* and the ambassador in Europe of the Soviet constructivist avant-garde of the 1920s – summoned there also as a curator who practiced the setting-up as a translation between different media. There, Alexander Dorner, the proponent of a total reinvention of the museum in terms of modernisation and avant-garde, turning to Lissitzky – also author (with Jean Arp) of the anthological volume *The isms of art [Die Kunstismen: 1924–1914]* which enshrined the first list of European avant-gardes – offered him a double experimental opportunity: (i) to further develop the research on the work of art as an “integral internal space” – at least in the terms in which it had been imposed since 1920–21 with the Berlin exhibition by Puni and with the sequence of the *Proun*<sup>2</sup> – and (ii) to use the idea of *Proun* in the first museographic translation of the abstractionist avant-garde.

Therefore, the *Kabinett der Abstrakten* was conceived neither as a traditional “museum hall”, nor as a neutral display case (white box or black box), but, on the contrary, as a real “*Proun*” – an environment stimulating a depurated, intense, levitating and anti-perspectivist perception – in which to host exhibition cycles of graphic, pictorial and sculptural works by artists, designers and architects – Moholy-Nagy, Mondrian, Picasso, Léger, Mies van der Rohe, ... – gathered together in an elementary and abstractionist tendency. Conceived as “*Proun*”, that interior space was in its entirety a sort of “transition station from painting to architecture” (Arp and Lissitzky 1925, p. XI), configured in order to multiply the possibility of immersive perception of the abstract and plastic show of every work (painting, graphics and sculpture) exposed there. Thus the setting-up did not offer a neutral and uniform background: it was instead divided into sliding wall panels, movable partitions and display cases that the visitor could rotate (Löschke 2012). The background wall consisted of panels covered with flat steel bars<sup>3</sup> placed edgewise and vertically, black on one side, white on the other, so as to produce – as “anaglyphs” or according to the Renaissance principle of the “scaled tabula” – the effect of deep, vibrant and changing textures, sometimes reflective, that appear different from each angle of view. Thus, moving around the room, the viewer perceived these background panels – precursor to the technique of “lenticular print” – as a flicker in continuous tonal transition from white to black, sometimes with effects similar to the contemporary dynamic compositions by interference of typo-photographic halftone screens typical of the Moholy-Nagy montages

<sup>2</sup> The two museum arrangements by Lissitzky – the Raum für konstruktive Kunst at the Internationale Kunstausstellung in Dresden in 1926 (Fig. 4) and the Kabinett der Abstrakten in Hanover in 1927 – come from the famous *Proun* room made by himself in Berlin in 1923 (cf. Brodsky 1980).

<sup>3</sup> For a more accurate description cf. Samuel Cauman (1958, p. 104).



and the first abstract cinema<sup>4</sup>. Even the natural lighting – accumulated, refracted and diffused by means of an opalescent box along the entire wall of the window<sup>5</sup> – was adjustable up to obtain the maximum (abstracting) effect of full, multidirectional irradiation, without centres, so that the light seemed emitted from the surfaces of the exhibited works themselves, almost as if they were illuminated from within, thus coloured with their own light.

The ideal of an abstract spatiality (almost “Byzantine” from a figural point of view), in full light, without shadows and gravity, goes hand in hand with the second aspect of the luck of the *Kabinett* drawing: the choice of an “anti-perspectivist” method of representation.

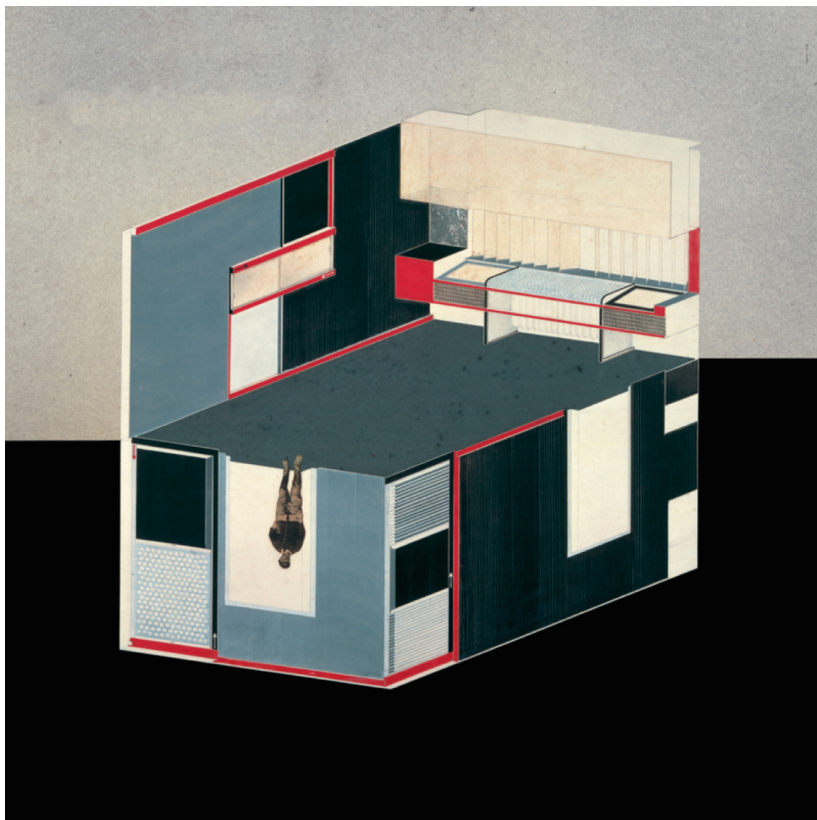
2 - In the captions of some publications, the drawing (Fig. 1) of the *Kabinett* is (erroneously?) entitled “*Proun*”, although not a painting, but a technical project that represents the real room of the Hanover Art Gallery “to scale”, with anthropometric *collage* reference: the photographic image of a visitor crossing the threshold of the room. The room is represented with its four walls unfolded around the floor – only the ceiling is missing – seen from above, but in two contiguous axonometries, captured from two opposing points of view, symmetrical to the picture and close to the directions of the two coplanar diagonals of the room.

Therefore in that image the representation of the real verse “top/bottom” is reversed on opposite sides of the floor, almost as if it were a mirror. This involves the fact that, in order to orientate in the image with the direction of gravity, it is necessary to rotate the drawing. Like a map, the drawing requires trajectories and movements similar to the actual movements that must be made in the optical analysis of the *Kabinett* built in Hanover. By considering that those movements and rotations of the drawing are analogous to the ones performed by the draftsman-designer of the *Kabinett*, we can also understand the technical advantages offered by the particular spatial representation method adopted in the preparation of the drawing. It offers the designer the advantage of being able to coordinate and map out almost all the indoor spatial fields into a single – although diplopic – axonometric view.

The space of the graphic representation in the project is almost always structured to increase the figurative evidence in dealing with the specific aspects of “value” of the prefigured objects. Starting from this principle – that of the complicity between the figurative spatiality of drawing and that of its object – a wide literature (e.g. Reichlin 1979; Bois 1981; Scolari 1984; Bois 1988; Pérez Gómez and Pelletier 2000; Scolari 2005) has dealt with various aspects of the importance of the “parallel perspective” (axonometry) in the development of ancient and modern design cultures. Within this multiform genealogy that – following the acute title by Scolari (2005) – should be called “a history of anti-perspective”, the “unfolded” axonometries of Lissitzky’s interiors constitute a technical evolution and an actual codification of that method of representation of the internal space.

<sup>4</sup> According to Schuldt (1965, p. 29) we especially refer to the two Viking Eggeling’s films.

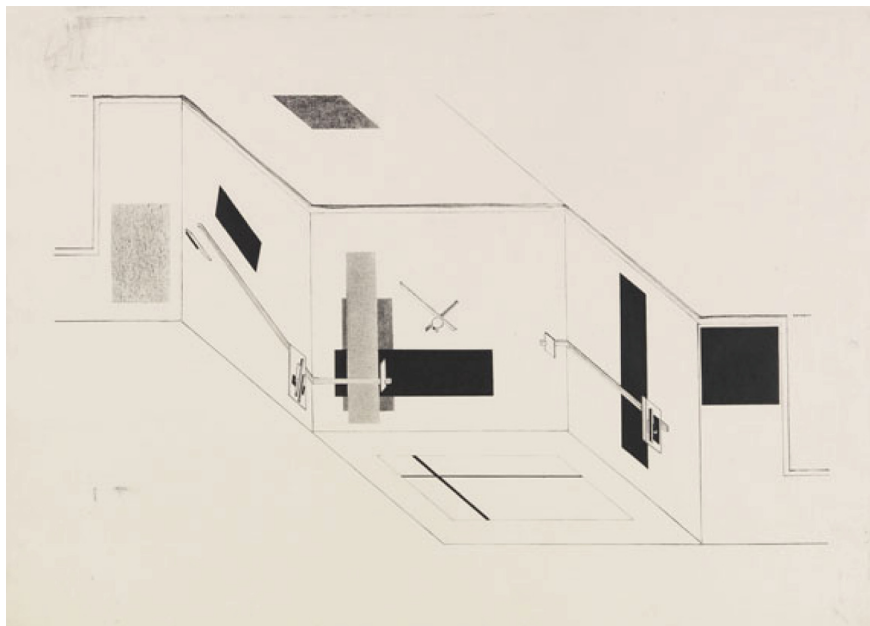
<sup>5</sup> As Kostelanetz specifies (1974, p.160), the wall was divided into three horizontal stripes: the highest is an opalescent box made of glass and muslin, the central one is an adjustable curtain, the lowest one is composed by a piece of furniture with interchangeable showcases for watercolours and sculptures.



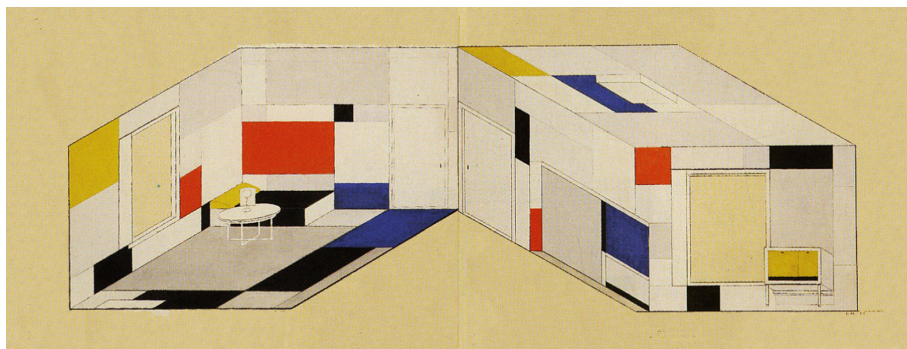
**Fig. 1.** El Lissitzky, project for the *Kabinett der Abstrakten* at the Provinzialmuseum in Hanover, oblique unfolded axonometry, 1927; gouache, inks, enamels and collage on cardboard, 39,9 × 52,3 cm, Sprengel Museum Hanover.

At least since the project of the Berlin *Proun*, Lissitzky had perfected the use of the “unfolded” axonometry of interiors, passing from an “unfolded cavalier axonometry” (Fig. 2) in 1923 – analogous to the one used by Mondrian (Fig. 3) in 1926 – to a “military” axonometry with the prospects overturned in their true shape on the representation plane (Fig. 4). However, these oblique axonometries had the disadvantage of treating the faces of the interior too differently: two of them are shown frontally in their “true shape”, whereas the others are turned into a very oblique affine image. Therefore, Lissitzky ended up preferring the strange monometric oblique axonometry that simulates an orthogonal axonometry<sup>6</sup>, so as to show all the faces of the interior almost under the same obliquation angle (Fig. 5), for a better simultaneous evaluation (unfolded on a plane) of the spatial

<sup>6</sup> It is recalled that orthogonal axonometries – i.e. those that have as a projection centre the direction orthogonal to the representation plane – are closer to the effect of the (phenomenic) direct vision, deleting the effects of marginal aberration typical of oblique axonometries.



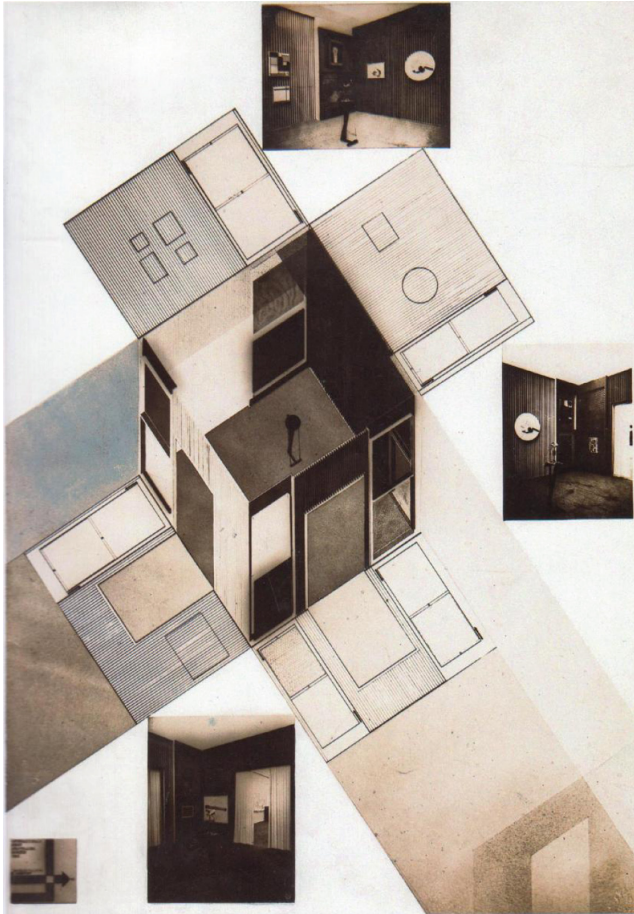
**Fig. 2.** El Lissitzky, project for the *Prounenraum* at the Große Berliner Kunstausstellung, cavalier unfolded axonometry, 1923; lithography on parchment paper, 44 × 60 cm, 1<sup>st</sup> Kestner folder, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



**Fig. 3.** Piet Mondrian, project for Ida Bienert's study in Dresden, cavalier unfolded axonometry, 1926; gouache and pencil on paper, 37 × 97 cm, Staatliche Kunstsammlung Dresden.

appearances of the interior. This spatial mapping technique had actual affinities with the values that were expected to be fulfilled in the exhibition hall, so much so that the *Proun* themselves had to function as a sort of “interior in an interior”.

3 - But which were the values actually at stake? The strong aesthetic impact of the avant-garde exhibitions between 1919 and 1927 was often linked to their propagandistic



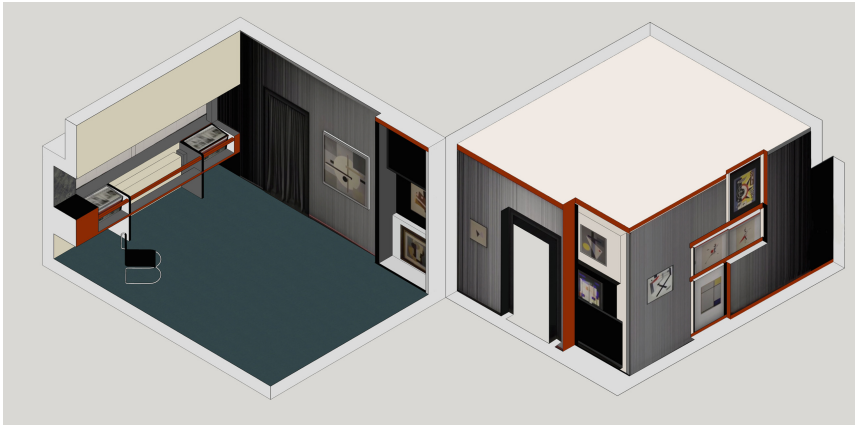
**Fig. 4.** El Lissitzky, scheme of the setting-up of the Constructivist Room at the Internationale Kunstausstellung in Dresden, military axonometry with the prospects overturned in their true shape, 1926, pencil and collage on paper, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

function that sometimes made them “prophecies of interiors”. In the Soviet sphere, they were meant to communicate the eschatological intent connected to the initial revolutionary messianism; they should have promised (or threatened) a utopian motivational background, indicating a very different everyday life.

“Utopian” was already the idea of an interior that, reinventing its traditional cultural figures – boudoir, atelier, *wunderkammer*, scientific cabinet, chapel, gallery, operating room, kitchen, etc. – could provide the promise of a new existential framework, the bet of being able to initialise the social destinies over again, thus overcoming, with a single jump, all the conflicts and miseries of the space as it is actually experienced.

Thus, these “interiors” have considered and still consider fundamental the question of their “semiotic efficacy”. This is precisely the question that opened the most compelling fractures in the Moscow debate on this subject in the 1920s, a debate that – as

Misler explains (1990 p. 25) – permanently split the initial revolutionary messianism in “... two utopias: the positive and rational one, related to the social reconstruction of the everyday life (the *byt*) and the palingenetic one, related to the spiritual re-foundation of man.”<sup>7</sup>



**Fig. 5.** Reconstruction of the Kabinett der Abstrakten at the Provinzialmuseum in Hanover, orthogonal unfolded axonometry, model and drawing by Irene Cazzaro.

### 3 *The Anti-perspectivist Figurative Space: Florenskij vs. Lissitzky*

It is well known that Lissitzky’s technical research on the “represented internal spatiality” accompanied his icastic theoretical formulations – to be read in parallel with the INChUK’s<sup>8</sup> research – and his teaching at the VChUTEMAS<sup>9</sup> regarding a discipline similar to the current “*interior design*”. It is in these environments that the theme of anti-perspective connects and divides at the same time the two above-mentioned “utopias” (constructivists vs. spiritualists), i.e. the two main factions of the techno-aesthetic debate – abstractionists vs. realists –, also related to the shapes and figures of the internal spaces, as well as to the media and the geometry of representation through visual images.

<sup>7</sup> On the relationships between projects and utopias in the contradictions of the constructivist avant-garde see above all Tafuri (1980).

<sup>8</sup> Institution incorporated in 1921 into the “Russian Academy of Art Sciences” (RACHN) in Moscow; overall, we refer to a research organism active between 1920 and 1924 devoted to the study on semiotic effectiveness of the visual artefacts through the analysis of the laws of perception of the work of art from the morphological point of view – according to an evolution of the formalist and purovisibilist approach – and from the experimental one, through the production and test of sample objects interpreted on the basis of the contemporary tools of psychophysiology.

<sup>9</sup> The state institute (Laboratory) active in Moscow between 1920 and 1930, which brought together the teaching of arts (without differences between fine and applied ones), of architecture and of what we would now define areas of design.

Against the positions of the abstractionists, Pavel Florenskij held at VChUTEMAS the teaching of “Theory and analysis of space”. He was an encyclopedic theologian, mathematician and technical physicist who, since 1919 had opened (also to the avant-garde), the figurative anti-perspectivist space<sup>10</sup> of the pre-Renaissance Russian icons. Far removed from the thought of left-wing avant-gardes, Florenskij did not attack abstract art as opposed to figurative art, since he recognised – especially regarding the figural foundation of ornamentation<sup>11</sup> – that “abstract” and “figurative” are not contradictory categories, but only opposite degrees (maximum and minimum) of the stylisation of iconic contents. Rather, Florenskij rejected abstractionist formulations because of their naivety, because they deny any semiosis of the image. As he showed in a lecture during the third year of his course –1923–24 – naive abstractionism only leads to the dissolution of art in pure technique. The denial of any form of representation – “... taking one thing as such and its action as such, but not their representation” – would lead, according to him, only to three possible consequences:

“First solution: creating natural things – organisms, landscapes, etc. It is clear not only that this would be impossible, but also that we do not really need it. Nature already exists and duplicating it would be a useless operation. (...)

The second solution is the creation of things that do not exist in nature: the machines. (...)

And finally, the third solution is the creation directed towards things that are not physical. A work of this type is a machine as well, but a machine of its kind, a magic machine, an instrument of magical influence on reality. These tools already exist: the political and propaganda posters, for example, are specifically designed to encourage people who look at them to act in a certain way and even to force people to look at them. In this case the action on the people and the change in their spiritual life must be achieved not through a meaning, but through an immediate presence of colours and lines. In other words, these posters are essentially machines for suggestion and suggestion is the lowest step of magic” (Florenskij 2007, pp. 96–97).

The “second solution” – the work of art as a pure technical object (a machine) – and “the first” – “the machine” becoming a “quasi-organism” – describe indeed the true regulatory ideal, which the theorist Lissitzky aimed at. Conversely, the “third solution” mercilessly described the propaganda status assigned to Lissitzky’s exhibition spaces: aesthetic machines designed for conditioning – without other semiosis – human behaviour.

According to Florenskij this “reduction” of the arts to design and mere plastic communication was the result of a “reductionist” conception of humanity, a sort of “artistic nihilism” that does not see the anthropological – individual and collective, present and past – reality of human “lineages”<sup>12</sup>. Therefore Florenskij’s lessons at the

<sup>10</sup> His lessons at Vchutemas in 1920–24 (Florenskij 2007) return to the subjects that had been covered since 1919 with the famous lecture on “reverse perspective” and on “The church ritual as a synthesis of the arts” (Florenskij 1990), as well as in his well-known treatise on the icon, written in 1921–22.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Florenskij (2007, pp. 99–103).

<sup>12</sup> He believed that this “artistic nihilism” could undermine the vital function of the arts in the dialogue between generations. Therefore, in his lessons, he chooses as the main subject not the individual, but the Lineage through time (Florenskij 2007 pp. 149–153).

VChUTEMAS – where the debate “construction vs. composition” was fervent – constituted a clear philosophical alternative to constructivist slogans. He essentially offered two kinds of knowledge: (i) what today we could call a “semiotics of the work of art” that dealt with the relationship between “expression plane” (the “compound”) and “content plane” (the “construct”) and (ii) a (physically and psychologically) realist and plural, anti-Kantian “geometry”. According to him, there are many “geometries”, which are all the models that we use to formulate the properties of space and time; he argues that these models must be adequate – according to a materialistic metaphysics – to the specific realities of space-time: both the cosmic and physical space – the one formulated by the theory of general relativity – and the different sensory spaces (directly or indirectly visual, acoustic, tactile, thermal, olfactory, kinesthetic) with which the different “figurative spatialities” are measured in the work of art.<sup>13</sup>

A conspicuous example of the comparison between the model of cosmic space and a graphic spatiality is provided in the 1922 treatise *On the imagery in geometry* (Florenskij 2016), a mathematical work stretched between two strange annotations. The first, in the appendix (Florenskij 1990, pp. 136–142), is a detailed (semiotic) explanation of Faworsky’s woodcut, which was the cover of the original edition of the treatise. The second one is the last paragraph of the treatise, dedicated to the demonstration of the complete analogy between the topology of the (Aristotelian and Ptolemaic) cosmos described in Dante’s *Comedy* and that of the finite and expanding space-time presupposed by the theory of general relativity: both are in the form of a “three-sphere” analogous to the Riemannian elliptic variety, with only one side, without interior and exterior.

## 4 Conclusions

On the basis of what has been recalled about the opposing teachings of Lissitzky and Florenskij at the VChUTEMAS, it appears, first of all, their incomparability. Unlike Lissitzky’s laboratory teaching, the didactic outcomes of the theoretical courses of Florenskij are not testified by drawings, models and projects, if not by a few didactic, autograph and non-design drawings of the author. Even their theoretical texts do not seem to be actually comparable; *Kunst und Pangeometrie* by Lissitzky is an avant-garde “manifesto”, not actually a mathematical and technical writing to be opposed to those of Florenskij. However, by answering our initial question, we can ask ourselves which idea of “interiors” and of their exhibition can be deduced from Florenskij’s holistic and anti-avant-garde point of view. It is certainly a laically religious conception of the interior and its representations.

To conclude with an example – a more analogical than philological one – of representation of the interior topology poetically inspired by Florenskij’s lesson, we must look at the cinema of one of his attentive readers – Andrej Tarkovskij – especially at *Solaris* (1972), the science-fiction film (from the homonymous novel by Stanisław

<sup>13</sup> On the plurality of figurative spaces see as an example the Third lesson at VChUTEMAS, (19-12-1923), (Florenskij 2007, pp. 265–280).

Lem written in 1961) which – like *The imaginary in geometry* – puts on a (topologically) closed path. The film begins and ends in an interior/exterior: in the paternal dacha and in the lush surrounding pond from where the protagonist – the psychologist Kris Kelvin – left and where he returned at the extremes of his journey on the planet Solaris, a planet that has the atrocious power to materialise into living presences the most real and intimate affections of the visitors. However, the place from which Kris started avanguardistically burning his memories is not exactly the one in which he returned imbued with the dismayed love for the real presences he relived as in a lucid dream around Solaris. The rain of which Kris had initially soaked by approaching the paternal house, in the final scene falls inside the house, from where the (drenched) father crosses the gaze of his son.

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