

Seeing the Impossible

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I defend the view that it is not impossible to see the impossible. I provide two examples in which one sees the impossible and defend these examples from potential objections. The quest for impossible seeings¹ (or sights) matters, not the least for its potential consequences on the epistemology of modality. If we can see the impossible, then arguably we can also conceive of it. Any example of an impossible seeing would be a rather strong candidate for a counterexample to a straightforward reading of Hume's conceivability-possibility principle (Hume 1739-40). Examples of seeing the impossible could even cause trouble for more sophisticated accounts of conceivability that liken conceivability to a type of 'inner' seeing or to imagination (Yablo 1990, Chalmers 2002). At the very least, if such accounts are keen to secure the conceivability-possibility link, then they need to show that although impossibilities are visible, there is still a meaningful sense in which they are inconceivable. But there is another reason why we should care about the possibility of impossible seeings: if we can see the impossible *in* pictures, then depictions of the impossible are not themselves impossible. Theories of depiction should make room for impossible depictions.

1. Three Clarifications

A. In asking whether one can see the impossible, I am not asking whether one can see what is nomologically impossible. Nor am I asking whether one can see what sometimes is called 'metaphysically impossible,' where the label 'metaphysical impossibility' is taken to denote a class of impossibilities that is distinct from that of logical or conceptual impossibility. Science fiction movies, video games, comics, photographs altered in Photoshop, and even certain paintings have all given us *prima facie* examples of both types of impossibilities. Augmented or virtual reality devices can do the same. What I am interested

¹ The word 'seeings' is used here as a way of substantivizing the verb 'to see.'

in examining in this paper is whether there are instances in which one sees *logical* impossibilities and specifically contradictions. For the purposes of this paper, the question ‘Can we see the impossible?’ amounts to ‘Can we see contradictions?’

B. It is best, I believe, not to treat the question ‘Can we see a contradiction?’ as equivalent to the question ‘Can we be in a visual state whose content is logically contradictory?’² Operating the present discussion in terms of visual content inevitably implicates issues regarding the nature of admissible contents of vision. For instance, if visual states are contentful but their contents are restricted to ‘lower-level’ contents (i.e., visual experiences represent only shape, size, color, position, and perhaps motion) then a perceptual state with contradictory content can only be a state that represents the co-instantiation of contradictory low-level properties. On the contrary, if perceptual states are allowed to have ‘higher-order’ contents (i.e., visual experiences, in addition to representing ‘lower-level’ properties, they also represent properties such as *being of a certain natural kind*, *being absent*, or *being caused by*) then examples of visual states with contradictory contents might be more readily available. If we treat ‘see a contradiction’ as equivalent to ‘be in a visual state with logically contradictory content’ we will not be able to tell whether certain purported examples of seeing a contradiction are genuine cases of seeing a contradiction until we settle the question of the admissible contents of perception.

Furthermore, suppose that one holds that the admissible contents of vision are low-level properties and as such, neither negations nor absences can be represented by vision. Such a view regarding the contents of perception, coupled with the identification of ‘see a contradiction’ with ‘be in a visual state with logically contradictory content,’ is only one short stop away from denying the possibility of impossible seeings. If no visual state can represent negations or absences, then no such state can have content of the form $P \ \& \ \sim P$. Therefore, there can be no cases of seeing the impossible. Such a purported disproof of impossible seeings is unduly quick. I will not rehearse arguments for or against a low-level view of the admissible contents of perception. Suffice it to say the following. First, the debate regarding the admissible contents of perception is far from settled. One cannot simply assume that negations or absences cannot be represented and use this as a premise for an argument

² I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to address how issues pertaining to the admissible contents of visual experiences relate to the possibility or impossibility of seeing the impossible.

against the claim that we cannot see contradictions or impossibilities. Second, one can reject the contention that the visual system does not represent negations or absences.³ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the question of whether one can see the impossible (or the contradictory) seems to go beyond the issue of what properties are represented in contentful experiences. Those who hold that visual experiences can only have ‘low-level’ contents do not deny that we see tables, rocks, or even absences, even though they might qualify the sense in which we ‘see’ such properties. There is more to what we see than what our visual system represents. After all, qua visual perceivers, we are more than our visual systems. Consequently, the fact (assuming that it is one) that my visual experiences do not represent contradictions – insofar as they do not have contradictory contents – does not entail that I do not see contradictions. In the same way that I can see a table (or at least, I can see *that* a table is in front of me or see this object *as* a table) without necessarily having a perceptual experience the content of which involves a table (or the property *being a table*), I can also see a contradiction (or at least, see *that* something is a contradiction or see something *as* a contradiction) without necessarily being in a visual state with a contradictory content. At the very least, we should be willing to allow the possibility of seeing a property *X* (in some meaningful and acceptable sense of ‘seeing’) even if our visual system does not represent *X*.

C. I take the locution ‘seeing a contradiction’ to refer to a type of propositional and epistemic seeing. It is propositional insofar as examples of seeing a contradiction are examples in which one sees *that S* is contradictory, where ‘S’ denotes a state of affairs (i.e., ways things are or could be). For example, one sees that a situation is contradictory if one sees that the situation involves the co-instantiation of two contradictory properties. Typically, ‘seeing that’ is understood to be factive. If one sees that it is raining, then it is raining. I am willing to grant that ‘seeing that *S* is contradictory’ is factive only if that is understood to entail that *S* is contradictory and not also that *S* obtains. In other words, seeing that a situation is contradictory would entail that the situation is contradictory; it

³ For arguments in support of the position that one (non-epistemically) perceives absences, see Sorensen (2008) and Farennikova (2012). To my mind, the most compelling case of perceiving an absence is that of hearing silence (Sorensen 2008, O’Callaghan 2011). For an example, consider the pause that occurs at 2:06 – 2:08 in the song “Hard to Explain” by *The Strokes*. When one listens to the song, one continues to hear something even during the pause: i.e., one hears silence without hearing a sound.

would not however entail that the situation is actual.⁴ Such a treatment of ‘seeing that S is contradictory’ will permit me to say that one can see that something is contradictory when one sees a contradictory state of affairs represented in a medium.

Seeing a contradiction, in the sense delineated above, is also an epistemic seeing (Dretske 1969). It is epistemic insofar as if one sees *that* S is a contradiction one comes to believe, on the basis of vision, that what one sees is a contradiction (*ibid.*, 88f.). The qualification ‘on the basis of vision’ is crucial: vision must make an *essential* contribution to the formation of one’s belief that what one sees is something contradictory.⁵ Such a requirement is needed in order to discount figurative uses of ‘seeing.’ Moreover, the requirement safeguards us from being too lenient when it comes to purported examples of impossible seeings. For instance, a sketch of a milliagon that purportedly depicts a proper milliagon that nonetheless has one side that is infinitesimally larger than the rest does not count as an example of a drawing in which one sees a contradiction. One cannot visually see the purported difference in length. Thus, one cannot see *that* it is a contradictory figure on the basis of vision. Watching Schwarzenegger in *Last Action Hero* playing a character that is both actual and fictional also does not count. It is not on the basis of vision that one comes to see something that is both P (actual) and $\sim P$ (fictional) at the same time. Finally, to borrow and alter an example from Sorensen (2002), seeing figure 1 does not qualify as an example of seeing a contradiction. One does not see an impossible triangle: one does not see that CB is both equal and not equal to AB . Instead, what one sees is an equilateral triangle that has its angles mislabeled.

⁴ If one wishes to use the term ‘factive’ differently, I will not object. I can substitute ‘seeing that S is contradictory’ for ‘visually experiencing that S is contradictory.’ Unlike ‘seeing that,’ ‘visually experiencing that’ is not factive.

⁵ Of course, one need not be *conscious* of the fact that vision makes an epistemic contribution. I can see that there is a computer in front of me without thinking about the contributions of my visual system.

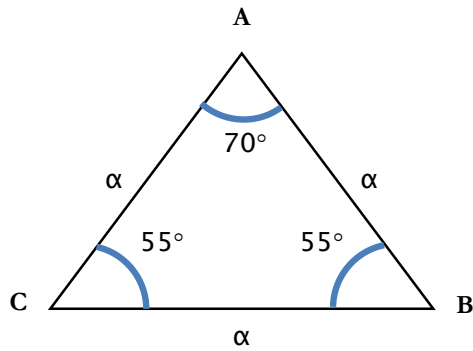


Figure 1: Impossible triangle

2. Seeing the Impossible in the Possible

Let us agree that an impossible state of affairs is one that by definition cannot be realized. If so, how could one ever see that which cannot exist? One could see the impossible not by perceiving face-to-face an existing yet inconsistent object, say, a three-dimensional version of Penrose's impossible triangle. Rather, one could perceive an impossible state of affairs through perceiving an actually existing (and therefore, possible) object. In other words, we could see an impossibility *in* a possible object. This type of seeing, i.e., seeing something *in* or *through* something else, is a commonplace phenomenon. I look at a piece of paper with markings on it and I see in it a face; museumgoers see Henry VIII and haystacks in paint; and people claim to have seen the face of God in clouds, toast, or basement walls. The fact that we can see something in something else is not, I believe, up for dispute. Hence, in asking whether one can see a contradiction, I am asking whether one can see a contradiction in something else. And in asking whether one can see a contradiction in something else, I am asking, in line with my previous analysis of 'seeing a contradiction,' whether one can see *that* a state of affairs -- as this is represented (or depicted) in something else -- is contradictory.

But even if the fact that we can see something in something else is uncontroversial, the precise analysis of this type of seeing is not. There is a great controversy as to how to properly understand both this type of seeing (usually called 'seeing-in') and the nature of depiction. Arguably, our choice of a theory of seeing-in and depiction will have ramifications for the possibility of seeing *that* a certain depiction or representation is impossible. Given the

many and differing accounts of seeing-in and depiction, how should one proceed in evaluating the possibility of seeing the impossible *in* a picture or depiction?

The guiding methodology of this paper is bottom-up. I advance and examine specific examples of impossible seeings and attempt to draw certain conclusions on the basis of those examples. I do not start from general theoretical principles – either regarding the nature of perception or that of depiction – and consider the examples in light of those principles. Perhaps there are general principles that speak against the possibility of impossible seeings.^{6,7} I am not denying that such principles exist. The point I wish to make, however, is that we should let the examples speak for themselves. If after everything is said and done, the present examples still suggest that one can see the impossible – see it *in* a picture, or see *that* a picture is a picture of impossible states of affairs, or even see *that* a state of affairs is impossible or contradictory – then a revision of our general theoretical principles might be warranted.

But enough stage setting. Can one see the impossible *in* the possible? That is to say, are there any examples of depictions in which an impossibility is seen? Priest (1999) presents Penrose’s staircase (figure 2) as such an example. The drawing, which is itself a possible object, depicts an impossible object or state of affairs, for it depicts a contradiction. Priest explains:

⁶ Sobel (1976, 122-4) holds that there can be no pictorial contradiction. Sobel’s conclusion is based on his account of the type of logical structures that one can find in pictures (121f). There are reasons not to be particularly perturbed by Sobel’s view. First, even if the logical structure of a picture is such that precludes representations of the form $P \ \& \ \sim P$, one could still have a pictorial representation of $P \ \& \ Q$, where the *perceiver* sees that Q is logically contradictory with P . Such an example suffices, I shall argue, to show that it is possible to see the impossible in a picture. Second, Sobel’s account is neither without its problems (see Howell 1976), nor is it ‘the only game in town.’ For an alternative account of the logical relations between and in pictures -- one that does not preclude contradictory pictures --, see Westerhoff (2005).

⁷ One might think that a perceptual/recognition account of depiction makes impossible seeings hard to come by. According to this account, we see an apple in a picture if the picture is such that activates certain perceptual or recognition mechanisms that allow us to recognize an apple in what we see (Lopes 1996, Schier 1986). If we apply this account to pictures of the impossible, then we can see an impossibility in a picture, if the picture is such that permits us to recognize an impossible state of affairs. However, if the perceptual/recognition account requires that whenever we see an apple in a picture the same perceptual mechanisms must be involved as those involved when we see the apple in the flesh, then isn’t it impossible to see an impossible state of affairs in a picture? After all, it is impossible to see an impossibility in the flesh. Lopes’ notion of “transference” (i.e., “the ability to identify an unfamiliar object through a picture of it” (Lopes 1996, 149)) could provide, I believe, a solution to this problem. According to this idea, a purported example of a depiction of the impossible could work in an analogous manner to a picture that allows us to recognize an unfamiliar object: the depiction of the impossible may contain enough information so that it allows us to see in it something unfamiliar (i.e., an impossibility) and recognize it as such.

If one takes a corner, say the nearer one, one can see that, travelling continuously counterclockwise, one can ascend to arrive back at the same place. The point, then is higher than itself (but obviously, it is not higher than itself, as well). Moreover, one can take the whole figure in, visually parse it, all in one go. That *is* a case where we can see a contradictory situation (440-1).

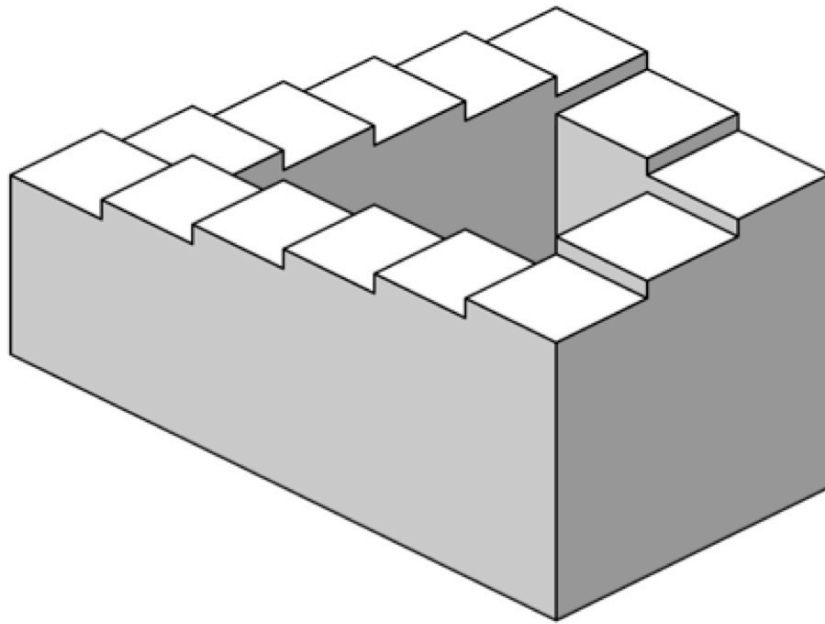


Figure 2: Penrose's staircase

The very notion of *ascension* requires that the end point of an ascending journey must be higher than the point of departure. In figure 2, each step appears to be higher than the preceding one (if one moves counterclockwise) but the end point is not higher than the starting point. In Penrose's staircase we have both ascended and not ascended. And we can see this in the figure itself.⁸

Some remain unconvinced that figure 2 depicts an impossibility. In the remaining of this section, I consider objections to this view and offer rebuttals.

⁸ For reasons different than the ones provided here, Mortensen et al. 2013 also hold that figure 2 is an example of an impossible figure.

Objection 1. Sorensen (2002) notes that one could construct a three-dimensional physical model of Penrose’s staircase such that when a photograph of it is taken from the right angle, the photograph will look like figure 2. But the photograph of the three-dimensional model, Sorensen adds, is not a photograph *of* an impossible state of affairs, even though the photograph is “perceptually equivalent” to figure 2 (363). He concludes:

Moral: the perceptual equivalent of a depiction of an impossible object need not itself be a depiction of an impossible object. This undermines attempts to define impossible depictions as those that stimulate inconsistent perceptions (ibid.).

Reply. I find Sorensen’s reasoning, as an argument against the contention that figure 2 depicts the impossible, a bit puzzling and some reconstructing of his position is needed. I agree that one could cleverly construct a three-dimensional model of figure 2 such that, if photographed from a particular angle, the experience of looking at the photograph of the model would be, to use Sorensen’s locution, “perceptually equivalent” to seeing figure 2. Still, I see no reason to conclude that just because the photograph of the model of Penrose’s staircase looks like figure 2 (or like a hyperrealist depiction of Penrose’s staircase) the two could not depict different states of affairs – the former a possible one, the latter an impossible one. The fact that the photograph *resembles* the drawing (or picture) tells us very little about the nature of the object to which the latter refers. Resemblance is not necessary for reference. Nor is it sufficient. Two drawings of stick figures can resemble each other in all relevant respects and yet refer to different individuals. Or think of photographs or drawings of identical twins. The drawing *of* Sally depicts Sally and not June, even if the drawing of June is indistinguishable from that of Sally. So, the fact that the photograph of the three-dimensional model of the staircase and the drawing of Penrose’s impossible staircase yield similar or even equivalent perceptual experiences is ultimately beside the point. If there is a reason why figure 2 is not a depiction of an impossible object, it cannot be the fact that we can take a picture of an actually existing (thus possible) object that looks like the object depicted in figure 2. Of course we can, but so what? Despite what Sorensen states in the last line of the quoted passage, we are not seeking for a *definition* of an impossible depiction, but simply for an example.

Objection 2. Perhaps Sorensen can be read as expressing a slightly different worry here. Sorensen might be concerned that since the experience of looking at the photograph and the experience of looking at the drawing are perceptually equivalent, the drawing fails to depict how the world could be *inconsistent* - that is, it fails to represent or depict an impossible state of affairs. The photograph after all is a photograph of a consistent (actual) object. This objection can be developed in at least two ways.

Objection 2.1.⁹ One could point out that even though all depictions depict their subjects as looking some way or other (cf. Hopkins 2003, 150), there is no way a contradiction looks. Consequently, there are no depictions of impossible situations. What provides support for the claim that there is no way a contradiction looks is the fact that figure 2 gives rise to an experience that is perceptually equivalent to that of looking at a three-dimensional model of Penrose's staircase: a purported picture of an impossibility looks just like a picture of a possible state of affairs. If all pictures of contradictions look like pictures of real or possible objects, then there is no reason to think that pictures of contradictions exist.

Reply. Stated this way the objection has an air of circularity. The purported lesson from the comparison between the photograph and the drawing is that the drawing fails to show an impossible state of affairs. But why could not one draw an entirely different lesson? That is to say, one could maintain that what the comparison shows is not that the drawing is insufficient in depicting an impossibility. Rather, what the comparison shows is that the drawing succeeds in showing how the world could be both inconsistent and consistent. That is, the drawing depicts, at the same time, both an impossible and a possible state of affairs. Some figures are said to be ambiguous. W.E. Hill's *My Wife and My Mother-in-Law* is neither a drawing depicting a young woman nor a drawing depicting an old woman. It is both. A drawing of Penrose's staircase could be thought to be ambiguous as well. It is a depiction of an impossible state of affairs and, at the same time, also a depiction of a possible object seen from a particular angle. (For a different response to this objection see Priest 1999, n.5.)

⁹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to address this concern.

Objection 2.2. A related objection lies in the offing. The reason why figure 2 is not a picture of the impossible is because a picture of the impossible has to make contradictory commitments. But figure 2 does not make such commitments.

A representation P is committed with respect to C , if P represents something either as *being* C or *being* $\sim C$. A representation P is non-committal with respect to C , if P fails to represent something as *being* C or *being* $\sim C$ (Kulvicki 2006, 140; Lopes 1996). For instance, Flannery O'Connor's self-portrait makes a commitment that she is wearing a hat and that there is something that looks like a fowl next to her. The self-portrait, however, is non-committal with respect to what is behind her. It is also non-committal with respect to whether the fowl is alive or taxidermied. Some representations, e.g., descriptions, can easily make conflicting commitments, and they can do so in either an explicit or an implicit (inexplicit) manner. The statement 'an object is both identical and not identical to itself' makes conflicting commitments explicitly – it wears them, so to speak, on its (syntactic) sleeves. The statement 'in a circle, the perpendicular bisector of a chord does not pass through the center of the circle' makes conflicting commitment but only in an implicit manner. Figure 2 fails to make conflicting commitments – in either an explicit or an implicit manner. As such, it fails to be an example of an impossible depiction.

Reply. I grant that figure 2 fails to make any explicit conflicting commitments. It does not represent the co-instantiation of a property and its negation in an obvious or explicit manner. Still, figure 2 *does* make conflicting commitments implicitly. It represents the staircase both as one that ascends and as one that brings us back to the point of departure. Whether commitments conflict depends on how the world can be (Kulvicki 2006, 140, n. 1). But we know that a staircase cannot both ascend and not ascend (i.e., bring us back to where we started) at the same time. Therefore, we should conclude that figure 2 makes conflicting commitments, albeit implicitly.

There is an obvious retort here available to those who wish to resist the case for impossible seeings. If figure 2 looks like a picture of a three-dimensional model of the staircase, then there is a way of interpreting figure 2 such that it makes no conflicting commitments: what figure 2 depicts is not an impossible state of affairs but a clever construction seen from an unlikely angle. Figure 2 admits of a consistent interpretation and

the fact that such an interpretation is available suffices to show that figure 2 does not make any conflicting commitments (Sorensen 2002, 356; Kulvicki 2006, 151-2).

I see no reason why the availability of a consistent (i.e., free of conflicting commitments) interpretation of figure 2 vitiates the possibility of interpreting figure 2 in a different manner, namely, as making conflicting commitments. Consider a painting that allegedly depicts purple gold. If this is really a painting of purple gold, then the picture implicitly makes conflicting commitments: the atomic structure of gold is such that it cannot appear to be purple. Given certain essentialist assumptions, it is impossible---metaphysically so!---to have purple gold. Of course, there are interpretations of this picture that take away the conflict. One, for instance, could hold that what is depicted is not really gold, but something else that only looks like gold. Alternatively, one could maintain that although the object represented is indeed gold, it is not shown in normal viewing conditions. Such interpretations of the picture do take away conflicting commitments. Yet, they do not settle the issue. Despite the availability of consistent interpretations, the picture could *still* be depicting purple gold. To deny that the depicted object is purple gold, we need to have specific knowledge about it, e.g., knowledge of its underlying constitution. But this type of knowledge is not something that we can mine from a typical picture of purple gold. On the basis of a picture alone, determining whether something is really purple gold or not, is a hopeless endeavor.¹⁰ Similar points apply to some of Magritte's creations. Consider, for instance, *Collective Invention* and *Zeno's Arrow*. Both pictures can be taken to depict (metaphysically) impossible situations. Consequently, they can be understood as making conflicting commitments, even if there are other interpretations of these pictures that render them consistent and even if we cannot decide between those interpretations.

Therefore, on the basis of figure 2 alone, one cannot resolutely determine whether figure 2 is a depiction of an impossible state of affairs or one of a possible object. But such indeterminateness does not demonstrate that figure 2 is not a depiction of an impossible state of affairs. In fact, why could not one allow the possibility of a picture that depicts *two* different states of affairs at the same time? Ambiguous pictures seem to do precisely that:

¹⁰ Even the addition of the following caption accompanying the picture of purple gold wouldn't help: 'Real gold (i.e., Au 79) seen by regular observers in regular conditions as purple.' By adding a caption, we have not really settled the issue; we have changed the subject. Perhaps the presence of an impossibility can be *inferred* by both looking at the painting and by reading the caption. The issue, however, is not whether we can infer an impossibility. We already know that we can do that.

they depict two subjects, not just one. Or consider a different---albeit *recherché*---example: an artist is asked to sketch someone who has an identical twin. The artist does not know that her subject has a twin nor does she realize that during the making of the sketch the twins take turns in posing for the artist. Is the sketch a portrait of one of the twins or of both? It seems to me that we should be willing to entertain the possibility that the portrait is a portrait of both twins. A picture could be a double depiction. If opponents of impossible seeings think otherwise, then they need to offer us reasons that demonstrate that figure 2 cannot be a double depiction.

As a final resort, opponents of impossible seeings might grant that pictures can depict more than one subject but maintain that a picture of an impossibility simply cannot have a consistent reading. In other words, a picture of an impossibility has to make conflicting commitments *under any interpretation*. Such a demand, however, strikes me as too strong. Even round squares are possible geometrical objects if one adopts the right kind of geometry (Krause 1975; the reference to Krause is taken from Sorensen 2002). But that does not stop us from saying that round squares are contradictory or impossible constructions.

Objection 3. Figure 2 is not a depiction of an impossibility, for it does not contain enough detail. Specifically, we are missing *salient* detail about the depicted object. And we know that salient detail is missing because figure 2 looks like a depiction of a possible object seen from an unlikely angle. Presumably if enough of the impossible staircase was shown to us we would not be tempted to think that figure 2 depicts an impossible object.

Reply. There are at least two available responses to the aforesaid objection. They can be provided jointly or separately.

First, one can hold that to demand additional, disambiguating detail is illegitimate. To demand that figure 2 depicts the impossible only if figure 2 is not (perceptually) ambiguous (between a depiction of a possible object and one of an impossible object) is to ask for too much. The addition of detail that would render the drawing unambiguous is such that it would also render the drawing one that is not of an impossible state of affairs. For instance, if by additional detail one is asking to see how one could construct such a staircase, or if one is asking how the back wall of the staircase can be contiguous with the wall to the right, one is asking for what an impossible figure can never provide. An impossible figure, after all, is a

figure of something that cannot be constructed. The demand for additional, disambiguating detail renders depictions of the impossible themselves impossible. Thus, such a demand must be resisted.

Second, one can reply not by insisting that the demand for additional detail is illegitimate but by maintaining that such a demand is unnecessary: the depiction is detailed *enough* as it is. It contains sufficient detail because it allows one to see the contradiction. In figure 2, one sees that Penrose's staircase both ascends and does not ascend at the same time. Granted, figure 2 is perceptually ambiguous: one can see it both as a depiction of an impossible object and as a depiction of a clever construction that only looks impossible. But why does this perceptual ambiguity take away from the fact that there is *at least one way of looking* at the figure that renders it a depiction of an impossible object? If there is a way of looking at figure 2 such that in figure 2 one sees a contradiction, then we have every reason to think that figure 2 is an example of a picture that depicts the impossible.

Objection 4. A drawing or a picture only succeeds in depicting some object or situation if that object or situation can be seen in it. But what cannot be seen in the flesh cannot be seen in a depiction either. So, there cannot be a depiction of an impossible state of affairs.

Reply. Objection 4 makes the conditional claim that if x cannot be seen in the flesh, x cannot be depicted. But the conditional claim, in the present context, comes very close to begging the question. If, by definition, impossible states of affairs are states of affairs that cannot be realized then, of course, we cannot see them. So, the conditional along with the definition of impossible states of affairs, guarantees that there can be no impossible depictions. For that reason, one cannot just simply assert the truth of this conditional claim. Reasons in support of the conditional have to accompany it.

But not only is the conditional in need of support, there are reasons to think that it is false. Take any picture of someone who is no longer alive, be it a person or a member of an extinct species. We cannot see them in the flesh. In fact, it is *impossible* to see them: they do not exist. Yet, we can see them *in* pictures. So, the conditional cannot be understood as saying that it is impossible to depict what cannot be seen either now or in the future. It must be making a much stronger claim. It must hold that it is impossible to depict that which it was *never* possible to be seen in the flesh. But even if this is how the conditional should be

understood, it still does not seem right. Why couldn't one depict an impossible state of affairs or situation that is composed of entirely possible components (or sub-situations)? In Penrose's staircase, every part of the staircase is something that can be seen in the flesh. What is stopping then one from drawing up a depiction that includes all such objects, yet organized in a way that gives rise to an impossible construction?

Objection 5. Finally, one could object that one does not see a contradiction when looking at figure 2. Instead, one infers a contradiction.

Reply. Such an objection is ultimately unsupported by the phenomenology of looking at the drawing of Penrose's staircase. One does *see* a contradiction. Look at figure 2 again. Start by looking at the edge that is closest to you, then 'follow' with your eyes the steps in a counter-clockwise manner until you reach back to your point of departure. By doing so, one sees that one has ascended back to the point of departure! One sees, in other words, that the beginning point is the same point as the ending point. But one also sees---in the same glance or visual 'act'---that this circular (non-ascending) journey was also an ascending journey. Seeing that one has ascended and not ascended at the same time is seeing a contradiction. Even if the contradiction is not visible immediately, one can surely come to see it after familiarizing oneself with the picture. Familiarizing oneself with a picture does not render one's experience of the picture non-visual. If anything, it makes the seeing effortless and more immediate. Perhaps what is motivating the worry that one does not see a contradiction in figure 2 is an overly theoretical conception of seeing *that*. Be that it as it may, seeing *that* is still a kind of seeing. One does not see that a table has four legs with her eyes closed.

3. Impossible Motion

Looking at a drawing of Penrose's staircase is not the only example of seeing the impossible. Certain optical or motion illusions can also offer similar effects (see Crane 1998 and Priest 1999). Consider, for instance, figure 3. Figure 3 is an example of what is known as 'peripheral drift illusion.' When looking at figure 3, the shapes in the six middle columns appear to be moving – more specifically, they appear to be drifting downwards. Yet, at the same time, we see them as not moving: their position relative to the leftmost and rightmost

columns remains constant. Looking at figure 3 we see something that appears to move and does not move at the same time. In figure 3, we see a contradiction, an impossible state of affairs.

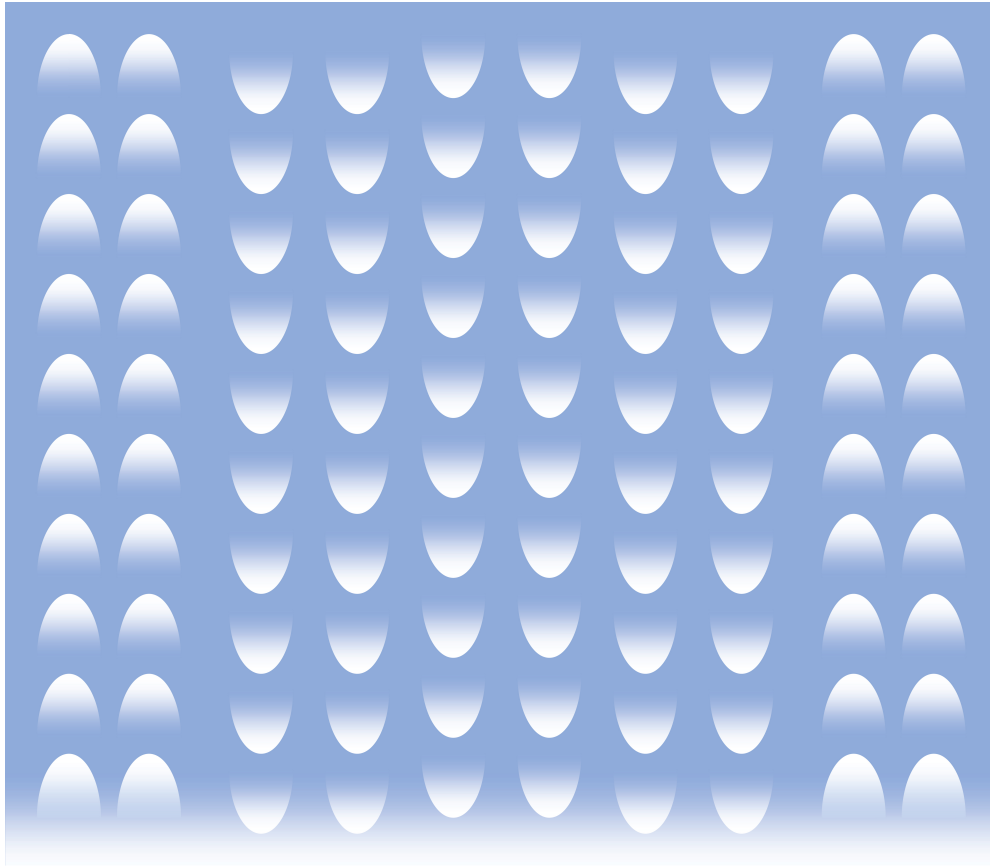


Figure 3: *Fall*, by Akiyoshi Kitaoka. Reproduced by courtesy of the artist.

As a purported example of seeing the impossible, figure 3 differs markedly from figure 2. First, the purported seeing of an impossibility is, in a sense, more direct. Just by looking at figure 3, the six middle columns appear to drift. Yet, they do not change position relative to the stationary columns. Perhaps figure 3 is even a case in which one can say that a child or infant sees non-epistemically a contradiction. On the contrary, figure 2 does not permit such a type of seeing. At the very least, seeing the contradiction in figure 2 requires the possession of certain concepts. Second, it seems inaccurate (or forced) to say that figure 3 *depicts* an impossibility. Rather, the pattern that is present in figure 3 makes it so such that when one looks at figure 3 one sees the appearance of something moving and not moving at the same time. Precisely because figure 3 is not a clear case of depiction, some of the worries

that arose in the context of figure 2 do not apply to this example. I take this fact to be an advantage that figure 3, as an example of an impossibility seeing, has over figure 2.

Having said that, figure 3 has an obvious disadvantage over figure 2: the former is a type of illusion. As such, one could argue that figure 3 does not count as an example of seeing the impossible. In the remainder of this section, I elaborate on this objection and offer a response.

Objection. The experience of seeing figure 3 involves a type of seeing that is different from ordinary or typical seeing, so much so that even if we see something that appears to be contradictory while looking at figure 3, we should not take it to be contradictory. In other words, figure 3, because it is an example of an illusion, involves a type of seeing (what I shall call ‘inconsistent seeing’) that precludes us from concluding that what we see is a contradiction. Cases in which one sees the impossible, assuming that such cases exist, are cases in which one *consistently* sees something inconsistent (i.e., contradictory state of affairs). Hence, figure 3 is not an example of impossible seeing. (See Sorensen 2002, 354, for a version of this objection.) In a premises-conclusion form the objection can be stated as follows:

- Premise 1: There is a distinction between consistently seeing something inconsistent and inconsistently seeing something consistent.
- Premise 2: Seeing figure 3 is a case of inconsistently seeing something consistent.
- Premise 3: All cases of seeing the impossible are cases in which one consistently sees something inconsistent.
- Conclusion: Seeing figure 3 is not a case of seeing the impossible.

Reply. I shall accept premise 1. There is a meaningful way, I shall grant, of distinguishing between consistent and inconsistent manners of seeing. The focus of my attention will be premises 2 and 3. I will argue that ultimately the argument does not succeed, for there is no reading of premise 2 that both renders it true and clearly supports premise 3.

An evaluation of premises 2 and 3 requires a clear understanding of the difference between consistent and inconsistent seeing. And such an understanding requires in turn an

explication of the term ‘inconsistent’ as a qualifier of seeing. So what could, in this particular context, ‘inconsistent’ mean?

i. ‘Inconsistent’ can mean neither subpar nor abnormal seeing. No one has tampered with our brain in any way. Our brain is assumed to be functioning normally when looking at figure 3. Furthermore, the illusion affects most people most of the time.

ii. ‘Inconsistent’ could mean atypical, infrequent, or rare insofar as we do not see illusory motion often. But this meaning of ‘inconsistent’ does nothing to support premise 3. Not only examples of seeing the impossible, if such examples exist, would arguably be rare or, at least, infrequent but also, and most importantly, the frequency with which such seeings occur has no bearing on whether they are genuine examples of seeing the impossible.

iii. ‘Inconsistent’ could mean illusory. Seeing figure 3 is a case of inconsistently seeing something because it is a case of an illusory seeing. But why would such a reading disqualify it from being a genuine example of the impossible? The idea here seems to be the following: figure 3 is not an example of an impossible seeing because the pattern depicted in figure 3 is not itself impossible. If what is depicted in the figure is possible, but seeing the figure results in seeing an impossibility, then it is the *seeing* of the figure that is responsible for the impossibility. Figure 3 is a case in which a possibility is rendered impossible through our visual system. The presence of a contradiction is consequently *illusory*. It is illusory insofar as there is not really an impossibility there, but only the appearance of one. Consequently, it is a mistake to think that what we see when we look at figure 3 is a contradiction. We see something that appears to be a contradiction. That is all.

Such a reading of ‘inconsistent’ is based on two assumptions that need to be brought to the fore: (a) because it is our visual system that gives rise to the contradiction, the contradiction is illusory: there is only an appearance of a contradiction; (b) because there is only an appearance of a contradiction, we do not *really* see a contradiction. (Compare: we do not *really* see a bent stick immersed in water but only something that looks bent. There is only the appearance of a bent stick.) But the first assumption can be accepted without necessarily granting the second. One can accept that figure 3 is a case in which a contradiction arises because of the contribution of our own visual system. And one can also

accept that owing it to the contribution of our own visual system, the contradiction is illusory: there is only the appearance of a contradiction. But even having accepted both the proposed etiology of the contradiction and its illusory nature, one can still deny that we do not see a contradiction. We might see a bent stick immersed in water (the stick appears to be bent) and then we might *really* see a bent stick immersed in water (the stick is in fact bent). In the case of seeing contradictions, however, we just see a contradiction. There is no room for really seeing a contradiction. The appearance of a contradiction is as good as it gets. And as long as we see the appearance of a contradiction, we see a contradiction. Let me explain.

It is meaningful to draw an appearance/reality distinction only in cases in which the two can be separated. Many have been resistive to the idea that there is an appearance/reality distinction in the case of sensory states. Instead, it is held that to be in a state of pain, for instance, is to be in a state that is painful, and vice versa. Alleged examples of painful states that are not really states of pain are readily dismissed. The same goes for alleged examples of non-painful states that are states of pains. The aforesaid alleged examples are dismissed not only because they are counter to commonsense but also because what they require or express is something that is deemed to be *impossible*. That is, guided by one's intuitions one is confident that there are no worlds (actual or possible) in which there is pain devoid of the sensation of pain and there are no worlds (actual or possible) in which there is the presence of the sensation of pain without the presence of pain. Cartesian intuitions of this sort have not only great purchase but also continuous influence.

In the case of seeing impossibilities a similar, although not perfectly analogous, thought applies: we cannot draw a distinction between seeing an apparent contradiction and seeing a real contradiction. There is no distinction between the two *not* because an apparent contradiction is the same thing as a real contradiction. Rather, there is no distinction because one of the elements of the distinction simply does not exist. There are no *real* impossibilities (or contradictions), if by 'real' we mean actually or possibly existing impossibilities (or contradictions). If there are no existing contradictions, then all cases of seeing of contradictions have to be cases of seeing *appearances* of contradictions. This does not mean of course that everything that (at first sight) appears to be a contradiction is an appearance of a contradiction. Some appearances might be more persistent than others and we can certainly be mistaken about what counts as an appearance of a contradiction in the same way that we can be mistaken about whether the immersed stick appears to be bent or not. But once we

agree upon the seeing of a contradiction, there is no sense in asking whether the seeing is that of a real contradiction or not. The very question is misplaced.

Accepting thus the widely held assumption that no contradictory state of affairs can be actualized, one can hold that the appearance of a contradiction is illusory only insofar as the appearance of the contradiction should not mislead us to think that the contradiction can be realized. But such a sense of 'illusory' is harmless: the seeing of a contradiction would have to be illusory insofar as we only see the appearance of a contradiction. The appearance of the contradiction, however, is not *itself* illusory: there is nothing more to seeing contradictions than their appearances. The appearance of a contradiction is all that we (visually) get and, indeed, all that we need in order to have an example of an impossible seeing. To ask for anything more is simply to change the subject.

4. Conclusion

The question of why we value pictures is central to pictorial aesthetics. One should not expect a simple answer to this question (Schier 1993); after all, different types of pictures make room for different values (Lopes 2013, 602ff.). Still, in the case of representational painting, pictures are deemed to be valuable partly because of their capacity to depict what we would otherwise fail to notice or see (Lopes 2005, 22). Pictures often depict distant or unfamiliar landscapes, past or future events, and fictional situations. Through their subjects, they may reveal social conventions and structures and even convey facts about human perception. They are often painted in ways that invite or elicit attitudes that are absent when perceiving their objects in the flesh. Moreover, the experience of seeing certain pictures can be 'inflected' by our awareness of the properties of their surfaces and consequently, seeing those pictures is phenomenologically distinct from seeing their objects face-to-face (Podro 1998, Lopes 2005, Hopkins 2010). To the aforesaid ways in which pictures can show us that which is not there, we should now add one more: namely, the unique way in which impossible pictures render visible that which is contradictory. If pictures are windows into worlds, impossible pictures are windows into worlds whose very existence instantiates a logical contradiction. If Egon Schiele's *Friendship* depicts intimacy and sexuality, Käthe Kollwitz's *Frau mit totem Kind* radiates sheer and intense sorrow, and Vasily Vereshchagin's *The Apotheosis of War* showcases the brute reality of war, then Penrose's Staircase - simplistic

and bare as it is - shows the impossible. Proponents of the value of representational paintings have found, I believe, an ally in impossible pictures.

In this paper, I offered two examples of seeing the impossible. I do not pretend that the examples are beyond dispute. Still, I am optimistic that the examples should help to relax certain philosophical inhibitions against the view that seeing the impossible is possible. I welcome reactions and objections to the views that have been expressed. The possibility of seeing the impossible is too important to be overlooked.¹¹

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