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LAWRENCE KIMMEL

REALITY AND ILLUSION IN THE WORK OF ART

Prefatory Remark

Two basic intuitions that frame the relation of art and illusion in this essay—a conviction that illusion is essential to art, but also that art is an essential resource of truth—present an apparent conflict that invites or requires resolution. Indeed, conflict and disagreement seem endemic to discussions of art. In philosophy, the question of the relation art and reality invariably begins with Plato's well-known critique of art as *mimesis*, as imitation, that makes the process of art a second order activity of copying, and thus an essential distraction from the more serious first order business of life and truth. It has always been a puzzle in philosophy what to do with Plato's disparaging remarks about art, not least of all because the whole of his work, as well as its elemental detail, is embedded in artistic techniques of dramatic dialogue, allegory, metaphor, and literary allusion. Is it merely ironic that a consummate artist such as Plato seems to undermine the credibility of his own work in this criticism, or is there something more to it—a paradox on which Plato exercises a larger point about life, truth, and art?

If we wish to account for the seriousness of the cultural activity of art in life, and abandon the limiting paradigm of *mimesis* to adopt the broader reach of art as experience and art as expression, a number of alternative approaches to the relation of art, truth, and reality suggest themselves. Plato aside, a crucial issue concerning art in relation to truth and reality—that is, that illusion is essential to art. It will be the recommendation of this essay to think of illusion as a particular strength of art, rather than a lack or shortcoming. It is a singular virtue of art to show truth in and through illusion by constructing a different modality for understanding the complex character of reality as it is disclosed in human experience. Philosophy since Aristotle has been

concerned to defend art against charges of irrationality and irresponsibility in relation to fixing a coherent truth and stable reality. One counter might be, of course, that reality is not stable, and the coherence of truth is always a work in progress and "fixable" only on pain of diminishing both life and world. But beyond this, if we aspire to the whole truth—whatever that may be—we require an open aesthetics of experience to draw on all the modalities of our creative energy in the arts no less than the sciences. This seems to suggest that at least some aspects of truth are accessible through illusion—that illusion and reality in the end may not be definitive of difference.

I

Magic, fantasy, wonder, mystery, romance are the variegated and insubstantial stuff of illusion of which both art and life are made. If the history of art is one of the progressive achievement of illusion we are presented with the question of how illusion is related to life, and life itself related to the illusions of reality. What really separates reality and illusion? Is there a disjunction between life and art with respect to this distinction? The art of inquiry—at least philosophical inquiry—consists in asking question in such a way that the inquiry itself becomes meaningful. In the present essay we will not get far beyond the asking of questions, but hopefully the questions will invite further inquiry into the relation of art, illusion, and reality.

In order to better understand the role of art in the relation of illusion and reality it will be useful to consider *kinds* of illusions common to ordinary perception and language. The following seem obvious:

Optical illusion—the straight stick appears bent in the water

Psychological illusion—the familiar rabbit/duck image in which the cognitive shift first

appears one thing, then the other. (The correlative physiological phenomenon is a shift from the left to the right side of the brain).

Visual illusion— (*trompe l'oeil*) the effect of perspective in paintings.

Graphic illusion—Escher's sketches of visual paradox.

Emotional illusion—being in love (transforming the beloved into perfection.) (or, a reaction to an object that has emotional attachments to some other experience—a wooden Cross that brings tears or joy)

Conceptual illusion—Cheshire Cat, disappearing so all that is left is a smile.

Grammatical illusion—the squared circle, or an infinite sequence

Metaphysical illusion—Plato's Allegory of the Cave, the actual as illusory.

Scientific illusion—the sun rising in the east; the perception of solid objects that are, in fact (in reality) primarily interstices of space. On the other side of illusion in science, consider the quantum puzzle of Schrodinger's cat.

The category of *kind* is in a sense arbitrary, and one might argue that some of these kinds of illusions ought to be catalogued together. But grant that there are distinctions to be made, and that the distinctions all seem to indicate something about the normalcy and importance of illusion. It may be appropriate as well to note the different *domains* of illusion; for example the illusion in nature itself, in which a mirage appears in the dry desert, in the domain of art the illusion of three dimensions, in magic the illusions of slight of hand, in philosophy, the musings of skepticism and nihilism. Leaving aside questions of religious illusion and superstition, the intellectual landscape is littered with illusion. In philosophy, Plato, Descartes, Berkeley, Hume are obvious examples. Plato's everyday world of perception becomes illusion, so that reality is accessible only through the intellect. Descartes' *Evil Daemon* so deceives the senses that the

world that appears real may be an illusion. Berkeley's basic thesis that '*esse est percipi*', in which perception constitutes being, still requires God to guarantee its reality. Hume's critique of reason that divides the claims of knowledge makes reality a by-product of social agreement.

In the case of literature there are again different kinds of illusion. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, for example, illusion is negative—life itself is full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, resulting in an expression of despairing nihilism. In *The Tempest*, illusion is romantic, not tragic, and the feeling is poignant but positive, that we are such stuff as dreams are made of, and our little lives are rounded with a sleep. The differences between these kinds of illusion—one leads to despair, the other to melancholy—are differences between tragic and romantic visions of human existence; however both illusions disclose something essential about human reality.

There are no clear limits to the extent of illusion in life and literature, whether the illusion is one of metaphor and symbol in language, or in the mind's eye of imagination. Differences of domain is obvious enough. In the case of nature—the bent stick in the water—one might (people do) think the stick is in fact bent, and need to be corrected. But in the case of landscape painting, no one thinks that leaves will fall from the trees, or that the fruit of the still life painting will nourish. The illusions are of a different order. In Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn", the moment pictured is frozen forever: the lovers will always be in pursuit, never fulfilled, but will also be forever young in their desire. The more general conceptual point to be argued here is that reality in the illusion of art consists in capturing the truth of that enduring moment and memory of youth and love.

It is the first snow of the season, and I think with Wordsworth: “My heart leaps up when I behold/ a snowflake in the sky!” Now it is the next day; snow lies thinly scattered on the high mountain meadow where it fell, the sun is high in a clear sky. The white is still beautiful; I feel the change of seasons, a sense of winter in the air. Still, the wonder is gone, the moment has past, and I think, with a certain sadness, of John Donne’s line that ‘all my pleasures are like yesterday.’

That I perceive magic in the moment of the first snowfall, and *how* I perceive that moment is a complex phenomenon of both life experience and artistic (in this case poetic) remembrance. The reality of the world of snowfall is replete with illusion, a world infused with the values of its experience and expression. But it is the *moment* that is precious, and when it has spent its magic, then not all thy charm nor wit can call it back, nor capture a flake of it. The moment of awakening springs from the heart and soul and perhaps remains buried there in the expectation of another moment in another time and place. One can live in such a way, hopefully, that there are more, rather than less such moments in life; and it is such moments, surely that make the world a human place, a dwelling in which memories are shared and recorded. The great appeal of art, and music, and literature is both the enhancement of that moment and the sustaining of its possibility.

A week before this first snow, I had marveled at the patterns the aspen leaves made as they released their grip from the tall branches and fell to the earth, as their graceful final flights spent the energy nature had granted in their first life in spring. Soft patterns spread out on the chilling earth, before the winds swept them into ridges to form the stuff of new soil that will feed another generation of growth. And I thought then of Tennyson’s turning of the seasons of life, as

leaves decay and fall/ and weep their burthen to the ground...” Hearing an echo of the waning autumn of the brief stay on earth, listening with Wordsworth to the still sad voice of humanity in the fading slant of sunlight on the leaves. I could remember back too, in the fragile shift of time, to the first quick sounds of spring—the mountain streams, the smell of new life before it gave way to the wages of summer and sun. Different moments spark the wonder of life simply in the passing of time. The reality, we want to say, is that creatures are born and die—Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath. But this latter coherence is still a product of illusion—perhaps truthful illusion that there is a meaningful pattern at the heart of existence. Without the coherence of illusion, the meaning of the cycle of natural life is lost.

There are explanations for such things as the passing of seasons, of the spiraling leaves, the soft tumbling of snowflakes through the still air with barely enough weight to fall to the earth. In poetic terms, there is on the surface of the thing a feeling of oneness of life, a kinship with the passing life of seasons on earth. The excitement of change, of newness, expectation of growth, the strength of maturation, the wisdom of experience, the promise of regeneration in the decay, the sense of closure in the completeness of the cycle: sea to cloud to snowflake to river to sea—and earth to earth.

We notice and inquire into reality in the essential illusions of time, of meaning, of life. At some indeterminate point they all mix and mingle, collapse into the experience of human sensibility and perception. The culture of art is a reminder of the illusion of reality in life, and of the other side of it—the reality of illusion in our lives. The two pillars of art in *aesthesis* and *poiesis* are different moments in the reality of illusion—in the *perception* of beauty, and of the *making* of it. The impulse of art is surely found in the first awakening of the soul to the beauty of the world. The fine edge of its *making* is just as surely a response in kind, in which the human

mind and hand seek to capture the moment of that awakening. The genius of art, whether of perception or construction is not discovered in the how or even why of the moment. The wonder of its expression is *that* it is so, long before the *techne* or logistics of *how* it is so.

To notice the tension between illusion and reality is to focus on their separation. Is it better or a transformation of this notion in philosophy to speak of a “*dialectical* tension” between reality and illusion on which art draws? The point of such an expression is to emphasize that art is in this way analytic, a *techne* that exploits the shifting perspectives that inform and misinform our ordinary and daily lives, not to mention extraordinary events and disruptive experiences. It is tempting to say that in life there is no strong and fast separation of reality and illusion, in the sense that reality is not given; rather, it is constructed—of experiences and perspectives that are individual as well as collective, perceived as well as decided, intuited as well as codified. The distinction that implies that reality can exist without illusion is a staple of everyday science that commends reason to a privileged perception of objective reality in opposition to ‘subjectivity’, a projection that declares the priority of facts as such, a domain of reality free of the stain of illusion. There are certainly contexts in which it is regrettable to be under the illusion that something is the case when it is not so. Most often, however, this is on the surface of things, and does not require the correction of science. In its inclusion of illusion, Art is closer to the reality of our experience and world—at least to the ordinary complexities of our shared lives in the world.

Critical philosophy began with the impulse to separate reality from appearance, in the different venues of physical observation and speculation of Thales on the one hand, and in the ethical dialectics of Socrates on the other. Distinguishing between how things appear and how things really are became a central focus of philosophical discourse as Plato extended the critique

to art. His responded to what he conceived to be the enhancing illusion of art in the deception of sense and imagination by censoring it. There is a question, however, whether something genuinely important to human sensibility may be lost in the presumption of this bifurcation. Is reality really in a separate world from that of appearance, as Plato puts the analogy? Arguably, it is an analogical illusion that Plato needs to express the reality of his conception, that is, his conception of reality.

In apparent contrast to the central tradition in Western philosophy, it is interesting to consider that appearance may be integral to reality, illusion essential to the coherence of the life-world. If science is the attempt to discern a true reality independent of appearance (it may be understood differently than this, of course), then art is surely the cultural activity that insists on their interdependence. Art is less concerned with distinguishing reality from appearance than to show the reality *in* appearance, appearance in reality—to show the depth of beauty in the surface of things—through the ordering of sound, sight, and motion. Where illusion is the means of art, it is also a means to the reality that funds its expression. Life and world are not the same of course, and the realities of their perception are different as well. But if the reality of the world of objects (the objective world) is the domain of the sciences, what domain and discipline are the realities of human life unless it be the arts?

III

Heidegger makes a point of emphasizing the ambiguity (and so fecundity) of the *work* of art, in the sense that the work itself (the thing, the object or product) is also just that: work (activity). As a work, it also elicits a response—that too, is its work, what it does, not merely what it is. Moreover, a work of art is an invitation to the percipient to work—at looking and

listening, at appreciating and understanding, at relating and interpreting. In this joint and cooperative activity of art, the artist and the viewer or listener engage in a complex process that involves the work of imagination, of conception, of production, of performance, forming alloys of illusion in the production of a shared reality which is the work.

If there are defining relations in art between reality and illusion they are to be found in the work that art is and does. The philosophical first-move in answering any question is to question the question, to inquire into the meaning of the question—indeed, to discover the answer to a question in the meaning of the question. So in the case of the relation of art, illusion, and reality: the sense of the question and any answer depends most importantly and finally on what one means by reality. Is reality as such, for example, limited to the surface of things, to raw perception—and only subsequently augmented and diluted by processes of common language and agreement? Philosophical models that argue the obvious pro and contra are familiar in G.E. Moore’s “This is a hand” countering Bertrand Russell’s sense datum’s of “cat on the mat”; instances of the empirically mundane contrasted with skeptical models which challenge the authority of any claim about certainty, e.g. Hume’s reminder of the essential contingencies of facts.

In the larger context of the metaphysics of reality, illusion again presents itself at the heart of reality. The familiar question of Ontology: “What *is* there?” Or simply “What is?” is answered simply enough: “Everything.” But then we have to decide (not describe) what counts as “everything”. Even if we restrict the question to a very limited context, the books on the table, Moore’s hand, or Russell’s cat on the mat, how are we to decide what to count? Do we count the books, *and* the pages, and the words, and the letters, *and* the acknowledgements, *and* the ideas, *and* the numbers, *and* the images, *and* the references *and* the allusions, *and* the

grammatical mistakes, *and*...? The complexity of counting “reality” gives a clue to the ambiguity of the reference, even in the most ordinary of circumstances. Quite apart from the vagaries of sense data theory, in the case of Russell’s cat—do we count the hairs, and the claws, and the eyes and ears and, meows, and fleas, and beauty, and indifference...? Do we count as reality all that *is* the cat, and *of* the cat, and how much of all this is separate from our counting, our perception, our expectations, values, history? I don’t mean to imply that to say anything, you must say everything, only that reality is not such a simple thing as the disjuncture reality and illusion might seem to suggest. This is the artistic charm in the Cheshire Cat, when only the smile remains. There is something philosophically interesting and right about this observation, hence the attraction of the story. In the absurdity, the schism of reality and illusion is itself breached, opening a space of imagination within which art deepens human understanding.

If the relation between reality and illusion is not clear in general or comprehensive terms, and if admittedly art is deeply involved in the exercise of illusion, then how do we understand the relation between art and reality? What is the interest of art *in* reality, given both the fascination and dependence of art on illusion? Is it a general intent of art to resolve the dialectical tension between reality and illusion? Or, does it rather seek to illuminate reality through illusion? In any event art finds its life and calling in the indeterminate region between reality and illusion—as does the working of language, which in its core and use exists in the play between the literal and the metaphorical.

The density of artistic experience indicates the depths of its complexity. Consider what it is to hear a melody. Even on the surface of the hearing, the experience is more than hearing the notes; more than hearing the sound of an instrument. Is the sound real, the melody an illusion? Is melody but a construction of the mind, a second order reality? Is our cognitive awareness of

melody one that is native and natural, or is it learned? Is it constructed or merely constituted, and what would this difference be? Hearing a melody takes no effort; it comes to me of its own, seemingly resonant with spirit and mind, whole and distinct. This is part of the idea that music soothes the savage breast. Put another way, how is it that horsehair drawn across catgut strung on hollowed wood can induce a mood, excite and enchant? That this is so remains a fact about human beings, a real feature of our collective nature. The hair and gut and wood, the sound, and the emotional response to the sound somehow imbedded in the nature of the beast and in the course of the culture all constitute the field of experience that is reality. Reality is not independently given or distinguishable “as such.” There is, of course, some force to the view that reality is what you trip over or bump up against, and so a stone or brick wall is more real than what goes bump in the night, what terrifies or depresses. But this speaks only to the ordinary and traditional bias of perceiving and valuing. Is one bump a fact, the other a value? One bruises, the other terrifies. The bruise is common, the terror all one’s own. The reality is different in kind, of course, but one is no less real than the other in any ultimate sense. In the end, to call something an objective fact is to give it a value, and more importantly, to prize objectivity. That facts are things universally agreed upon is but an analytic truth; its acceptance is finally a factor of social need and agreement, not an independent certification of reality. The work of Art, upper case, is that of fashioning many worlds, of expanding as well as enriching the dimensions of reality.

IV

The arts seem always pressed to defend themselves against a philosophical hostility born of suspicion that its practices are deceptive, depend on illusion, and distract from the more serious business of discerning truth and fixing reality. The dominant mode of human or at least

“Western” perception from the time of Plato is that the true is the rational, the rational is the real, and that the cool-aid-acid of testability is hypothesis submitted to evidentiary proof. But even a traditional thinker like Aristotle, committed to the core of rationality in all things valuable, granted that the true is accessible in any number of ways:

“If then the means by which the soul discovers truth, and generally discerns things unchanging, or even those things variable about truth, are science, prudence, wisdom and intuitive reason, and if no one of the first three—prudence, science, wisdom—is a means of grasping primary principles, our only possible conclusion is that they are determined by intuitive reason.” --Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Or on the other end of the scale, consider again Hume’s skeptical division that limits the reach of reason so that the modalities and measures of existential reality are exceptive of proof:

“Adam, though his rational faculties be supposed, at the very first entirely perfect, could not have inferred from the fluency and transparency of water that it would suffocate him, or from the light and warmth of fire that it would consume him. No object ever discovers, by the qualities which appear to the senses either the causes which produced it, or the effects which will arise from it; nor can our reason, unassisted by experience, ever draw any inference concerning real existence and matter of fact
--*The Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

These are two very different, but representative cases within the history of intellectual discourse that allow for the exceptive and diversive modes of inquiry and expression concerning truth.

But, granting the range of discourse concerning truth, what are the crucial questions to be decided concerning illusion and reality, and the role of art with respect to possible differences? In the case of the visual arts, why re-present things with the artifice of illusion? In the case of painting, for example, why paint? Why painting? As a creative activity—doing something, making something—there is no special puzzle. But what do we look for and see in the experience of the painting? What is attractive in the illusion for both painter and perceiver? We

learn to see through the painting—to see nature, to see ourselves, see into ourselves, to access feelings that respond to some deep need for recognition. It is an established fact that surface recognition comes more quickly to a sketch of an object than a photograph of the same thing—it is the outline, an image that captures the essential features of thing. Artists have learned to see and capture the shifting moods of a face, as well as the shifting features of a church as the sun passes through the day, or as emotions pass through the soul. Language and art (and the languages of art) are similar in this way: they require and elicit recognition and insight, they draw on the compelling nature of impulse to draw, to symbolize. The design seems as much to probe as to control, to find what is beneath the surface of our experience of an object—of a sunset, of a smile, of the penetrating light of midday or the waking light of morning. Something in our minds and souls responds to such stuff, and the artist is one who searches for the essentials of those experiences in the re-presenting of the thing in sound, sight, and motion.

The initial impulse of art is arguably of two movements: *expression*—the occasion and result of being moved to movement, to sing or dance or draw, and *representation*—re-presenting what one feels, or sees or hears in the form of that expression. In the case of drawing or painting this manifests in the discovery and construction of those aspects of an object or experience that serves to identify and enhance its occasion—information critical for recognition and meaning. In the visual arts, for example, the use of outline to distinguish form has been a constant in artistic production from cave paintings to cartoons. This suggests the human inclination to somehow capture and express the passing moments of exhilaration and sense of empowerment that perception brings—in memory and imagination, dreams and expectations. Artists have continually informed and transformed common perception and understanding of the world in the most elemental ways. The point is that our sense of what is real is transformed in the process of

artistic expression. We learn to identify the world and value its appearance in terms not only of practical need, but of imaginative expression. What we see of the world is clearly a function of how we look at the world and how we identify those aspects important to the meaning of our existence in the world. Reality, in short, is a function of illusion—how we look and see, and how we express and represent what we see and feel. The role of art in this process is obviously complex, but a few features of even the formal aspects of art will help to make this clear.

In drawing a human face the expectation is that it be drawn from the front. A picture of a horse will be drawn characteristically from a side profile, a reptile from above—emphasizing those features of things that are consequential to our perception and understanding. These forms in turn indicate how it is we understand objects and aspects of our experience. What in all this is reality, and what illusion? How much of it is an element of the world, and how much a function of our perception and valuation of things?

In realistic painting a three dimensional scene is depicted by a two dimensional image, which would seem to suggest that art is in its very nature a matter of illusion. On another level is the familiar case of the Mona Lisa smile. It is a common experience as well as a point of general agreement that to see the smile requires a kind of indirection of perception: only when one looks at the eyes, can one see, or feel the effect of the smile. The reality is *in* the illusion. Only through peripheral vision does the reality of the smile become apparent. On the other hand this may be instructive that in life as well as art, we see the smile in the eyes. How much of perception and projection depends on the fictive reality of illusion?

The history of art, up to a certain point, has been the progressive development of techniques to represent the clarity of three-dimensional experience. The techniques of perspective, of shadow, dark tones, color, and contrast to suggest depth provides a painting with

a depth of meaning as well, gives it an internal life of its own that results in the familiar and complex effect of art. Consider the different effect that the cave paintings of a bison would have, not simply in contrast with the presence of a bison, but in contrast with the blank wall of the cave. How is it that in the represented object of art we come to see and hear differently? In the history of art, for example it is common to point out the difference of a Chinese tree from a Dutch tree, an Egyptian figure from a Greek statue. Is this a difference of worlds or of perception, of culture or of levels of technique? Where is the reality buried in the illusions?

A major turn in the history of modern art, from what one can gather casually from outside particular or scholarly analysis, seems to be shift in emphasis, or in some ways a reversal of the process of progressive realistic illusion, so that art now commonly *calls attention to* the effect of illusion—the ambiguous play between mind and world, object and image, perception, conception and representation in a work of art. (e.g. Magritte's *Human Condition I*)

Of water and shadows: As with much else in philosophy, Plato is a sourcebook for a discussion of reality and illusion. Most familiar in his work is the example of the stick in the water: it appears bent but it is not. We are familiar with the physics that accounts for the appearance that, in the water, the stick bends. The difference between reality and appearance is made clear in the example: this is what we mean by illusion. But Plato's second case and discussion of illusion in the allegory of the cave is perhaps of more interest. Here the illusion is that of perceiving reality in things that are only appearance. The familiar analogy is that what we perceive as real objects are but shadows cast on the wall of a cave. What we ordinarily think of and perceive as reality is nothing but illusion. His extended analogy is that just as we can reason, to critically overcome the perceptual illusion of the bent stick in the water, so too we can overcome the cognitive illusion that the world of appearance is real. All this extends into the

field of art for Plato: mimesis in the visual arts is but an imitation of an imitation—fostering illusions of knowledge where there is but faulty opinion. Art as intentional illusion becomes willful deception and moral dissuasion.

When perception is illusory as in the bent stick, it is as if the mind were playing tricks on us. Here the distinction is clear however, between how something appears and how it is, and we call the “faulty” perception an optical illusion. What of the case of cognitive illusion? For example “Are you under the illusion that he is an honest man of integrity? He is in fact a scoundrel!” Is my mistaken view of Tartuffe a matter of perception or judgment? Not so easy to separate them, of course. He appears to be sincere, a man of honesty and integrity. But appears *to whom*, and at what are they looking? Would this simply be a mistake of categories—I mistake by attributing character to appearance, rather than deciding as a matter of judgment? We want to say that Tartuffe in reality is a fraud. His appearance remains the same, his actions are those same ones we viewed before, but now we make a judgment, and our whole perspective changes. Compare being in love, and falling out of love. We discover something about the person, and our whole perception changes. Have we come to our senses, or have we lost a sense we had? The beauty of gathering clouds in the mountains can turn suddenly terrifying, as a storm breaks upon the mountain. The case of a storm at sea is the same: the calm beauty of the benign sea suddenly becomes a torrent of violence, and fear replaces the calm as love turns to hatred. Such shifting perspectives are occasioned by turns of nature, and by our response to perceptions and judgment. Reality and illusion seem to ebb and flow into each other—the calm to violent sea, the peaceful sense of belonging to the terrifying reminder of difference.

V *Techne* and Technique

In the 19th C. Impressionist painters discovered the image as a changing pattern of colors and tones—the forms that emerge in a painting are no longer outlined, but only suggested, as if through a glass darkly, mirroring the experience that we never see the whole of things, only parts and pieces, glances and glimpses—yet at the same time comprehending something essential in what it is we are seeing. This provides us with insight into the role of the perceiver in the changing patterns of what is really perceived—a hint of the reality that is not stable in the world, but continually in the process of flowing form.

The classical linguistics of form were radically altered in the developments of abstract art in which the idea and images of perception no longer aimed at literal meaning. Uses of abstraction turned classical modalities of paintings back on themselves to evoke an awareness of technique and the contrived effects of illusion. This in effect, produced a kind of second-order illusion; in the reversal of illusionary techniques used to depict reality, abstract art demonstrated not only the illusionary nature of art, but the illusionary nature of perception itself.

Thus illusion has played different roles in the development of art, and in the consequent development of perception and imagination as a result of art. We have become aware, through visual art, of the importance of illusion in our perception of the world, in our awareness of the process of perception. If philosophy is the attempt to understand the idea of idea (knowledge), then a critical history of painting is the attempt to understand the idea of perception.—the force and form of image in human consciousness. In Gombrich's famous work *Art and Illusion*, he discusses the *linguistics* of the visual image in allegory and symbolism in making intelligible the “invisible world of ideas”. Recall Plato's “allegory of the cave” in *The Republic*, in which he shows to the mind's eye of understanding what his accompanying “theory of the divided line”

can only indicate conceptually about the journey to truth. Idea and image: to portray the reality of the process of understanding and of access to reality of the human condition, both are needed.

What is it “to look at nature”? Is this a simple process? Does the artist teach us to see better, to see more, and more clearly and deeply through the techniques of illusion? However that may be, the art of every age in some important sense is an effort toward a progressive (?) discovery of visual truth. It is a collective attempt to overcome the limits—the distractions and distortions—of cultural tradition. To see clearly, plainly..? Is it possible that art, more than any other perspective, can progressively free itself from the prejudices of its time, place, and heritage? Or is it that art only draws attention to the importance of such prejudices, while at the same time showing them to be prejudices? Is art unlike science in that it is not committed to the strictures of foundational principles and the controlled consistency of construction, so that it builds not one, but many structures, not one perspective, but many possibilities? The point of the arts, in which case, is not to do away with illusion, but to show illusion as vital to human sensibility and to the spiritual and cultural life of human beings.

There is a wonderful educational film with the title “Why Man Creates” that begins with a humorous romp through the history of cultural invention, from the lever and wheel and word, to that of creed, and law, and Armageddon, one that ends less humorously, with both a bang and a whimper. It covers artistic innovation from the serious investments of invention to the playful raptures of caprice, and provides a quick visual sketch of the dimensions of art in life. The philosophical effect of the film leads to the question of how it is that we come to identify our culture and times, our very identity as a species through an activity essentially useless, grounded in the technique of illusion. The extent of illusions common to human life suggests that illusion is essential to the character of human life: the illusion of truth, of faith, of reality—the illusion of

the meaning of life, the significance of action, the sufficiency of reason, the efficacy of politics, the justification of war, the permanence of love, the expectation of fulfillment; the illusion of present, past, and future, the illusion of forever. It is not that such things do not exist, only that their existence is embedded in illusion, in the human construction of their meanings.

Art, as a design of cultural activity, intends to create something—the intention, reason, motive for art, involves a paradox in the meaning of its activity. There may be as many motives for making something as there are artists—for its beauty, for its attraction, charm, diversion, fun, for profit, recognition...). But a general feature connected to artistic making seems to be simply for the sake purely of doing and making it, whatever it might be—its appeal is for appreciation of the thing made. The cultural fact of such making is in some important sense(s) paradoxical, and so in keeping with this animal that elaborates and enculturates the useless. It is difficult, or at least implausible from a point of view that would characterize the origin and value of all natural activity in terms of utility to give a credible account of art. However it emerged as a natural activity, the *cultural* activity of art comes to figure as essential in the development of the identity of the species, no less than of a given people.

The paradox of essential uselessness is further extended in realizing that apart from the natural activity at the root of art—the delight in movement, the release of random sound, the focused impulse of making something, its cultural development seems to have the design or motive of expressing truth and discerning reality. Thus the paradox: the discernment of reality and the disclosure of truth through the art of illusion.

End Note

A good deal of what has been argued in this essay depends upon the idea of *fictive reality*, and the role of art and literature in the constitution of that reality. There are fictions natural to the mind, as we have suggested in the discussion of illusions above. In these and other cases there is often a sense of the uncanny, of the disjuncture of meaning and expectation so that the character of reality is put in question. The fictive lies somewhere between the real of common sense and the imaginary of poetry, in Maurice Natanson's expression. The creative work of art and fiction is to disclose that acute space in which consciousness does not construct but constitutes the reality of consciousness. Such fictive reality (reality) is present—only not acute—in ordinary contexts of perception. The shock of the uncanny in the midst of ordinary life is an occasion in which this becomes apparent. And herein is a model for art—what constitutes the thrilling sense of encounter in great and singular works, whether visual, aural, or literary.

Philosophy is fond of distinguishing between minds and matter, physical and mental, objects and ideas, and has traditionally found empowerment in the analytics of opposition. We have inquired into the way in which art, in the employment of illusion, makes a case for the re-integration of our thinking about appearance and reality, about their integral relation in life and world. The question concerning the traditional disjunction between appearance and reality may be less important than is usually claimed, unless and until we have a specific reason for the asking, and acknowledge that in the greater scheme of things there is a convergence of art and life, illusion and truth, that constitutes human culture.

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