2D/3D Producing Illusion

João Cabeleira &
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Notes

1. (Editor's note) In the conference, Hanneke Grootenboer refered specifically to Agostino de Rosa's presentation "The apocalypse of optics, the eyewitness of the Apocalypse: time, space and illusion at Trinità dei Monti."

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What is wrong with
trompe l'oeil

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ABSTRACT
Richard Wollheim's seeing-in theory is one of the most powerful and ductile philosophical accounts of depiction. It portrays the experience of art as the phenomenon of conscientiously acknowledging something being represented in a material support. A disturbing consequence, however, and one fully endorsed by Wollheim himself, is the disavowal of the representational status to all graphic forms that deny the viewer the twofold experience of the represented object and of the "marked surface". This anathema affects hyper realist works but also, and most significantly, trompe l'oeil painting. After surveying Wollheim's arguments we propose a different solution, by entertaining the thought that it is possible to have a kind of aesthetic seeing-in without the need for a perceptual seeing-in.

Two friends, A and B, are visiting the Nelson-Atkins Musem of Art in Kansas City. Upon entering in one of the exhibition halls they notice a painting on a tripod placed in a corner of the room. A admires *Venus Rising from the Sea*, a painting by the American artist Raphaelle Peale (1822) which constitutes an intriguing partial copy of an earlier work with the same title by Irish painter James Barry (1791). She utters a remark so as to draw her friend's attention to the exquisite *trompe l'oeil*. B replies "Humm, there must have been complaints." (Meaning that maybe the painting was considered too sexist or too erotic.)

Figure 1
Venus Rising from the Sea — A Deception,
Raphaelle Peale, ca. 1822

The two friends had two very different experiences of the object held in the tripod. A acknowledged it *prima facie* as a painting and admired its technical prowess accordingly. B however mistook it for a painting covered with a rather large napkin hanging from a thread. In order to get to the moral of this story we need to consider at least three questions. First, does B's early experience amount to any kind of representational seeing given that she really thought a real napkin was hiding the *actual* painting? Second, does A ever get to experience the painting as a *trompe l'oeil* given that she recognized it *prima facie* as a deception? And third, what was Peale's categorial intention in creating this work of art — and how is the category of *trompe l'oeil* pictures related to the more general

category of pictorial depiction? The latter question leads to the related issue of how to understand *trompe l'oeil* as a pictorial genre. Does the success of any *trompe l'oeil* necessarily involve deceiving the viewer into believing she is perceiving something other than a bidimensional rendition, or is the awareness of the illusion a necessary condition for properly experiencing *trompe l'oeil* pictures? If the latter, then only A had a proper experience of Peale's painting. But if the former is correct, then it is B who indeed experienced the painting as mandated by the author and the rules of the genre. Now, this second hypothesis, fascinating as it may be, leads to a complex and inconclusive philosophical discussion of whether *trompe l'oeil* pictures should be classified as a pictorial genre at all, given that they require, for proper enjoyment, that the viewer ignores that she is contemplating a pictorial depiction. In other words, how can one entertain a pictorial experience of a painting that requires, for proper enjoyment, that one dispenses with its pictorial nature? For lack of a better expression, let us call this an artistic *contradiction*.

Trompe l'oeil pictures have become a philosophical topic because they constitute a serious problem for those theories of picture that grant a special role to the viewer's awareness of the pictorial means for representation, namely, the awareness that one is looking at marks in a surface, that the author is transposing a tridimensional reality into a bidimensional rendition, that one should pay attention to the brushwork or indeed the lack thereof, the contour, punch mark, aerial perspective, the ruggedness or smoothness of the surface, fineness of detail or sketchy and raw execution.[1] According to these medium-oriented theories, to be aesthetically involved with pictures necessarily means that the spectator is interested in the *making* of the work, i.e., the particular way in which the representing surface was produced.[2] This opens up another important aspect of our aesthetic enjoyment of art, namely that we are always probing the ways in which the painting's plasticity or its material implementation hold symbolic meaning, or to put it in other words, how the artist's particular choices in her treatment of the medium makes us see an object presented in a quite unique way. Arguably the most notorious of such theories is contained in Richard Wollheim's aesthetics of painting. Most notoriously, *trompe l'oeil* pictures became a subject of aesthetic controversy after the sort of anathema that Wollheim has thrown upon them, denying them the status of pictorial depiction and withdrawing them from the realm of proper representation. Whatever they may be, *trompe l'oeil* pictures are not depictions. The reason for this cancelling lies in the fact that *trompe l'oeil* pictures work in contradiction to the kind of representational seeing that Wollheim describes as the basic tool for the perception of pictures. He calls this *seeing-in*.

Wollheim's seeing-in provides a sure path towards finding a reply to the three above mentioned questions and to explore the issue of *trompe l'oeil* pictures and the particular instability they

provide between the bidimensional medium and tridimensional perceptive awareness. First of all, we must start by understanding how seeing-in acts a tool for pictorial comprehension. Wollheim describes seeing-in as a basic perceptual ability with the function of identifying an object in a marked surface. To discover the faces of famous actors in the clouds hovering our heads, to recognize wild animals in the humidity stains of a wall, or to identify the face of a young woman in a Vermeer painting, are all instances of seeing-in. They all have in common the simultaneous twofold awareness of both a) marks in a surface (the configurational fold) and b) the emergence of a foregrounded and bounded object (the recognitional fold). Notice that, in order for the recognitional fold to manifest itself all that is required is that the viewer is able to perceive that there is one object *in front* of another. The protruding, receding or occluding of objects among themselves, or in relation to the painted surface, is all that is required for proper recognition of a depicted object to occur. This constitutes an important edge of Wollheim's theory of painting *vis-à-vis* other theories (such as Ernst Gombrich's partial illusion theory) because it allows him to encompass within the breadth of representational art the wide range of abstract and non-figurative art. Once abstract art gets accepted aboard the vessel of representational painting, the only difference between abstract and figurative art lies in the kinds of concept we use when we want to refer to that which is seen in the marked surface. When viewing figurative art, we use figurative concepts such as "boy", "ship" or "flower". In abstract painting we use abstract concepts such as "sphere", "space", or "depth".[3] They both constitute nonetheless genuine cases of seeing-in in different kinds of representational art.

Essentially, we cannot classify something as a depiction that does not allow for this twofoldness, or somehow expects the viewer to dispense one of its folds. Thus, the gamut of pictorial depiction is confined, on the one side, by works (we should hesitate to call them "pictures") in which there is, so to speak, nothing to see, i.e., marked surfaces that don't offer the minimal basis required for the viewer to entertain the thought that she is looking at an object in a surface, not even the slight hint that could induce awareness of depth.[4] That would be the case of Barnett Newman's *Vir, heroicus, sublimis* (1950–51).

The other side of the gamut confines with that kind of work that demand from the viewer that she suppresses awareness of the marked surface in her visual experience. That is precisely the case of *trompe l'oeil* pictures, that negate the role of the recognitional fold and consequentially the twofoldness characteristic of the seeing-in that defines the pictorial experience: "[Some] paintings are non-representational [...] because they do not invoke, indeed repel, attention to the marked surface. *Trompe l'oeil* paintings are surely in this category."[5]

Thus, seeing-in is a necessary condition for representational seeing and proper experience of pictures. But it is not sufficient because, as the case of famous actors in the clouds show, we can have manifestations of seeing-in outside the realm of depiction. Therefore, Wollheim introduces a second condition for the obtaining of depiction and that is constituted by the painter's intentions, or more exactly, by the viewer's awareness that the surface in front of her was intentionally designed. Notice that she is not required to grasp (at least not at first) nor to be informed of the real intentions of the author. All that is required is that she knows that the picture is intentionally laden. The picture's motivation — its *design* — will then act as a sort of more or less conscious criterion for assessing which interpretation of the picture is the correct one — a standard for correctness. Something which is obviously absent from our twofold experience of clouds *qua* famous actors. If my friend denies that the face of Kristen Stewart is presented in the cloud above us, there is nothing I can do to prove her wrong. But if she is not able to see Dora Maar in one of her portraits, I can always use Picasso's intentions to condition her recognition of the portrait.

But when we get to this point, we plunge into some rather muddy waters. In order for some visual surface to be classified as a depiction, it must support twofoldness *and* be an intentional object. This assumes the form of a definitional implication:

(p) a is a depiction if (q) a supports twofoldness and (r) a is an intentional object: $p \supset (q \cdot r)$

Trompe l'oeil pictures negate (q) because they supposedly expect the viewer to ignore the configurational fold, as was the case with friend B in our initial example. However, if we resist that suppression and deny ourselves the possibility of being deceived, in some way or another, by the marked surface (friend A's experience), then we negate r because we are not experiencing the object as it was intentionally designed by the author. Either way, p is not the case.

Another contradiction seems to arise here for although we recognize the whole object as a painting and thereby acknowledge the surface as an intentional object (otherwise we'd be already deceived and not be able to acknowledge the illusion, like in the case of friend B) we are *ipso facto* unable to follow the author's intentions, which should be assumed as the standard for correctly engaging with the object. In order to assume the painting as an intentional object we have to somehow dismiss the fact that the author's intentions constitute the standard of correctness for pictorial seeing and, to some extent, prescribe the proper way to look at a picture.

To sum up the problem:

a) In order to have proper representational seeing we require twofoldness and be willing to abide by the intentions that originated the depiction.

b) Friend A does not suppress the configurational fold (either because she is not willing or no longer able to do so) and thus does not experience the work as *trompe l'oeil* but as a depiction — arguably, the fact that the illusion is not held makes the entire project a lesser work, if indeed deception was the intention of the author.

c) Because she *prima facie* acknowledges the work as a depiction, she is *ipso facto* aware that the work is an intentional object, and that the author's intentions provide a standard for correctly viewing the picture. But then she is not able to experience the work according to that standard, which entails that she is not willing or able to see what the author wants her to see. Even worse: in order to keep twofoldness she has to ignore the author's intentions as standard for correctness and thus the two conditions for depiction seem to go against each other.

d) The second friend is unaware of the configurational fold and thus *suffers* the work literally as a *trompe l'oeil*.

e) Although she is unaware of the illusion as an intentional object (or she may reserve intentionality to the picture that she falsely believes is hidden behind the napkin), she is indeed following the standard of correctness constituted by the author's intentions, which also means losing twofoldness.

Let us now return to our previous set of questions. Does the second friend's early experience amount to any kind of representational seeing? According to Wollheim's model, we should reply "no" because (1) she lacks any attention to the configurational fold and is therefore not experiencing the object as twofold, and (2) she is also not aware of the intentionality behind the existence of the entire object. *However*, she is actually corresponding to that standard by perceiving the object in the proper way and therefore, albeit in a quite peculiar fashion, she is entertaining some kind of representational seeing.

Does the first friend ever get to experience the painting as a *trompe l'oeil*? According to Wollheim's model, the answer is also negative. Notice that Wollheim does not consider non-delusional experiences of *trompe l'oeil* as proper *trompe l'oeil*. *Trompe l'oeil* is *ex definitione* designed to baffle and repel the viewer's attention to the marked surface.[6] It could be argued that in *trompe l'oeil* illusion itself becomes the topic and the aesthetic focus, and therefore in order to proper appreciate it the viewer should be able to move between letting herself be tricked and bouncing back to a distanced view of the painting.[7] But this wouldn't do basically because there is a

normative constraint regulating how *trompe l'oeil* pictures should be experienced, namely*,* being tricked into thinking we are facing a tridimensional object, which implies experiencing the depiction as something different from what it is. *However*, only the first friend is able to recognize the painting as an intentional object and although it may be argued that she won't be able to correspond to the standard of correctness for watching the painting, she is in a position to value her friend's mistake as ultimate evidence of the author's success.

But why should we accept Wollheim's thesis that twofold seeing is required in pictorial experience? Well, first of all, it is significant that such a basic ability carries enough weight as to become the main tool for the appreciation of art. Given sufficient information, it is a tool for understanding the many symbolic levels generated by the synergy between the configurational and the recognitional. Sometimes it is the configuration that elaborates on the recognitional. A significant part of the pleasure that we derive from appreciating art derives from our identifying how certain formal traits of the configuration provide a commentary or a symbolic modulation of the represented object. Some other times it is the recognitional that provide the viewer with a guide to the configuration. Another source of such pleasure is constituted by identifying how the recognizable object makes aesthetically salient some (but not all) features of the marked surface.

The interplay between the configurational and the recognitional folds is manifold and unpredictably rich. It can be the function of a number of often very unexpected factors joined together in the kind of pleasure that we tend to seek in our aesthetic transactions with artworks. Take Sassetta's *Saint Francis and the Poor Horseman* (1437–1444) **[Figure 2]** as an example of this interplay.[8]

Sassetta chose to use lapis-lazuli as pigment for colouring the cloak that Saint Francis offers to the Horseman. Sassetta's contemporaries — and particularly his patrons — knew exactly how expensive this pigment could be (and still is). The material used — a straightforward component of the configurational fold —, when properly recognized by the viewer, increases the generosity of Saint Francis' gift and thus makes the recognitional fold more precise.

Quite often this interplay is ignited by certain configurational "anomalies" that, as it so happens, are there to guide the viewer's recognition of the depicted object by making salient a particular element or an otherwise neglected layer of the representation. This is the case with Anthony van Dyck's *Equestrian Portrait of Charles I* (1637–1638).

Hanging on the wall well above the visitor's vantage point, it seems obvious that Van Dyck clearly meant the horse and the king to be observed from a lower perspective. That explains why we see the belly of the horse or the sole of the king's boot. To assume that perspective is also important in order to explain the strange disproportion between the horse's torso and its head. However,

if this was indeed the realistic perspective organizing the entire scene, why is Charles I face designed as if the king is looking straight at the viewer's eyes, i.e., as if we are no longer looking upwards but at the same level as the king? The dual focal point in the configuration introduces instability that shakes the superficial realism of the entire picture and prompts the viewer into searching for other layers in the recognitional fold. She could, for instance, start entertaining the idea that maybe Van Dyck's intention was not merely to portray the king but his political agenda, a sort of *primus inter pares* interpretation of absolutism of the kind he so admired as a young prince visiting the courts of his French and Spanish cousins. A political program that ignited the Puritan Revolution and led to Charles I own demise.

Both cases exemplify the power of seeing-in as an explanation of pictorial experience. The theory also holds its value against other very strong competitors. When compared to its most immediate rival, Ernst Gombrich's partial illusion theory, it offers a much more simple and straightforward phenomenology of our experience of painting. Instead of an alternate attention either to the marked surface or to the depicted object, the twofoldness thesis grounds our experience of depictions in the more basic ability of seeing an object in a marked surface. Also, Gombrich neglected the role played by the artist's intentions in our perception and

interpretation of pictorial art. To Wollheim, the standard of correctness composed of these intentions constitute a fundamental condition of pictorial experience, by upgrading common seeing-in to the level of intersubjective appraisal.

Seeing-in theory is also a formidable opponent of similarity-based theories of picture. Fundamentally, because seeing-in grounds representational seeing in the relation between a marked surface and a represented object, and not in a comparison / similitude between the represented object and the *real* object. Many authors, such as Nelson Goodman, have successfully argued that visual similarity occurs after and not prior to representation and cannot thus qualify as the epistemic basis for the latter. As the extreme case of caricatures eloquently show, it is often a manufactured representation that generates the set of similarities upon which the viewer will then juxtapose the real object and its depiction.

However, and contrary to conventionalist views, such as Goodman's, or imagination-based theories of picture, such as Kendall Walton's, Wollheim insisted that seeing-in is a kind of perception not a top-down cognitive state or a kind of imagination. Imagination is, to great extent, an act of will but seeing-in is, at least most of the time, an involuntary exercise. As soon as the visitor enters an exhibition room in the art gallery, she *recognizes* men and women, animals and flowers in the canvas hanging on the wall. Viewers tend to pay close attention to the details in the marked surface and to consider how these marks condition the way the represented object should be perceived and interpreted. An imaginative appreciation of art neglects or ignores the marked surface because the appreciation of art is a mental affair and the object is but a prop that affords such elaboration.

Now, Wollheim had very specific purposes in mind when he developed his theory of depiction based on seeing-in. First, by noticing how depiction demands the exercise of a very clear perceptual skill ("seeing-in"), pictorial depiction could now be again analysed in a very objective and non-relativistic way. Accordingly, painting was retrieved from the dominion of conventionalist views such as Nelson Goodman's or Louis Marin's, in which depiction was perceived as having a semiotic nature, and pictures were described as conventional symbols working in a way not unlike other symbolic systems, such as notations or verbal language. Second, seeing-in made it possible for the broadening of the realm of pictorial depiction so as to encompass genres traditionally deemed to be more eccentric, like abstract painting, that were now rehabilitated as appealing to the very same perceptual skill — for the recognitional fold to be present the awareness of a simple juxtaposition of surfaces was sufficient. Third, seeing-in rehabilitates one of our "most basic intuitions about painting", namely that depiction is essentially a perceptual phenomenon

(and not a cultural, imaginative or conceptual one). And fourth, his theory showed how this perceptual skill, employed in such a basic function as that of identifying an object in a marked surface, could also be used, given sufficient information, to understand the different symbolic levels in which the represented object may acquire meaning.

On the other hand, however, seeing-in was presented as an extremely elusive phenomenon and one very difficult to fully explain: "[t]he nature of the perceptual kind of which the seeing-in is a species is [...] very difficult to characterize"[9] and "[n]ot all the marked surfaces will have this effect, but I doubt that anything more can be added regarding the exact way in which a marked surface has to be produced in order to hold such effect."[10]

In support of twofoldness as the basic experience on which our representational seeing is built, Wollheim would add two main arguments, one psychological and one historical. The psychological argument, derived from the work of Maurice Henri Pirenne and Michael Polanyi, drew attention to the "perceptual constancy" of representational seeing.[11] If we look at a real object, say a table top, and then we move to one side, there occurs a distortion in perspective. The top looks more like a trapezoid than a rectangular shape. But that distortion does not occur in the case of depiction. If we are looking at a painting of a table straight on and then we move away from the centre of the canvas, the shape of the table top remains the same. The fact that no shift in perspective takes place in the case of depiction is explained by Wollheim through twofoldness and the fact that the observer is constantly aware not only of the depicted object but also of the marked surface.[12] Notice that *trompe l'oeil* does not seem to comply with the principle of perceptual constancy. In fact, *trompe l'oeil* is subjected to perceptual *inconstancy* because as soon as the viewer moves away from the ideal vantage point, rectangle become trapezoid shapes. Since perceptual constancy constitutes a necessary condition for depiction to obtain, *trompe l'oeil* painting cannot be included in that category.

The second, historical argument reviewed twofoldness as constituting a normative restriction of the way pictorial artworks are traditionally appreciated and underlined the fact that proper interpretation of paintings has historically been involved with providing an account for the interaction between the configurational and the recognitional. An example proves particularly eloquent in this regard.

Heinrich Wölfflin famously described Raphael's *The Expulsion of Heliodorus* (1512) as affected by a "great void" in the centre. Wölfflin acted as a sort of ultimate formalist critic and art historian recuring whenever possible to the jargon of geometry and visual dynamics in order to describe compositional technique. However, and quite significantly, even a staunched formalist such as Wöllflin could not dispense with referring the shapes or forms he was analysing back

to the characters or events depicted by those formal configurations. It is only through his reference to the actual story of the expulsion of Heliodorus that Wölfflin's formalist assessment of the fresco's configuration makes sense:

> It is hard to see how could someone 'read' the void in the middle without being simultaneously able to acknowledge the spatial relationships between Heliodorus and the young men that come to mock him, or between the Pope and the scene he contemplates in calm detachment. [...][13]

On the other hand, the full significance of what is there for the viewer to recognize only becomes apparent through proper perception of how the scene depicted is engendered by the intentional disposition of the marks in the wall:

> The representational attribution of the painting as a whole is dependent upon the specific attributions (that the painting has depth, great movement, diagonal recession, etc).[14]

Wollheim's idea of what constitutes pictorial understanding through the ages, was in deep contrast to Ernst Gombrich's cumulative notion of art history, according to which art proceeded on a steady path towards the goal of partial illusion, in which awareness of the marked surface becomes negligeable: "[i]n the course of time, artists have in fact succeeded in simulating one after the other of these clues on which we mainly rely in stationery one-eyed vision, and the result is that mastery of *trompe l'oeil* illusion in which painting beat photography by a few generations."[15] And this may very well be the main reason behind Wollheim's discomfort *vis-à-vis trompe l'oeil* paintings.

Once we accept that simultaneous and unlimited attention both to the medium and to the work's meaning or content (be that the object we see depicted in the marked surface) constitutes the core characteristic of any pictorial experience, we are ready to remove *trompe l'oeil* paintings from the universe of pictures that afford authentic pictorial experience. In the case of *trompe l'oeil* paintings, attention to the marked surface is only possible at the expense of losing the optical delusion which was the author's intention when producing that painting.

There is another reason for discriminating *trompe l'oeil* painting and proper depiction. The fact that we have to somehow suspend our judgment that we are watching a marked surface in order to properly engage with the illusion, turns *trompe l'oeil* paintings into a special case of seeing-as — we see either the marked surface or the illusion, but we cannot be aware of them both at the same time. Now, the experience of seeing-as is subject to the *localization requirement* whereas seeing-in is not.[16] When looking at

Figure 3
The Deluge,
Michelangelo, 1508–1512

Salvador Dalí's *Slave market with the disappearing bust of Voltaire* (1940), if someone is unable to detect the two nuns lurking in the bust of Voltaire, we can always point to the eyes of Voltaire and localize the heads of the nuns.

However, if I say to someone that I see a crowd in Michelangelo's *The Deluge* (1508–1512) **[Figure 3]** and someone else asks me where exactly the crowd is, I may "refuse" to give an answer because, in a very important way, that question is meaningless: I cannot point to *the* crowd where only a few members are not "obscured from view by a fold on the ground".[17] But I may properly say that I *see* the crowd nonetheless.

Perhaps even more significantly, *trompe l'oeil* painting and pictorial depiction possess opposing epistemic demands. On the one hand, the *artistic* success of *trompe l'oeil* paintings vary in reverse ratio to our knowledge about them: as the case of the two friends showed, the less we know about the displayed object, the better. On the other hand, however, "proper" artistic depictions increase their aesthetic value as the spectator becomes more and more informed and experienced, as the case of Sassetta's *Saint Francis and the Poor Horseman* exemplifies. But it also becomes apparent once we consider the way spectators entertain different "rival perceptions" of the same configuration and how some of them are distinctively more valuable than others, namely because they make us see more things in the painting. Take the case, for instance, of Erwin Panofsky's discussion of Rogier van der Weyden's *Vision of the Magi* (circa 1450).[18]

In order to underline the importance of iconographic analysis of painting (i.e., the kind of analysis that takes into account the symbolic value of the work), Panofsky noted how difficult it would be to present a pre-iconographic description of the Van der

Weyden's panel. For that description to be possible, one would have to ignore concepts such as "Magi" or "Child Jesus", although it would be impossible to ignore that a baby was hanging in the sky. Depending on her level of information, the viewer could entertain three different rival perceptions. First, on an extreme pre-iconographic level, she could interpret the suspended circle, for instance, as serving as a claypigeon for the three men in what would then become a scene of skeet shooting.[19] On a second level, the suspended figure could be perceived as indeed a real human baby in the sky. But on a third and fully iconographic level, it would be correctly interpreted as an apparition, as the result of knowing what Panofsky designated as the "history of style", i.e., the pictorial conventions at the time of Van der Weyden's creation. This information then acts upon our perception of the painting's configuration in a remarkable way: the suspended apparition becomes its true symbolic centre and a heuristic signal guiding the three Magi's journey and the viewer's gaze towards the right, to the centrepiece of the Bladelin tryptic in which the Nativity is depicted. Even more significant in the way it alters the viewer's perception, because the child in the Nativity scene and the apparition in the right panel are identical, the golden circle is easily perceived as a sort of magical looking glass through which the Magi are already anticipating the contemplation of the new-born. As Panofsky points out, it is our knowledge of the pictorial conventions governing the motif of apparitions that makes us see the Child Jesus in that part of the canvas; we don't just infer from the presence of the suspended child that it is Jesus. This *augmented vision* makes us see-in something that we would otherwise miss.

Finally, *trompe l'oeil* is distinct of "proper" painting because it does not have a particular perceptual experience that determines their content. The more successful *trompe l'oeil* are those that will deceive the observer in a wider range of perceptions and points of observation, whereas painting usually requires the observer to place herself at a given position in order to get the "appropriate experience".[20]

One way to try to solve the apparent distinction between *trompe l'oeil* painting and proper painting is to consider *trompe l'oeil* as a kind of piecemeal pictorial experience, in which the observer is at first affected by the illusion and then "recovers" from the illusion in order to attain a more vivid kind of seeing-in in which she (finally) experiences both the marked surface and the item it presents.[21] When we finally realize that we are facing the *trompe l'oeil* and not the object it presents, we can still *see* the *trompe l'oeil* as such an object although we no longer *believe* it to be that object; quite the contrary, we now believe it is *not* that object. Now, it could be argued then that at that point we engage on a twofold seeing-in experience in which the illusion, or rather, "knowingly" mistake the picture's configuration for another object, becomes one single

fold and the equivalent to the recognitional fold of Wollheim's twofold experience. In a way, it is a more radical experience of seeing-in because the content of that recognitional fold amounts to an experience *as of* that other object — a knowingly illusory experience.[22]

This suggestion implies that *trompe l'oeil* painting should be categorically distinguished from other illusory experiences, such as the Müller-Lyer arrows [Figure 4].

Figure 4
Müller-Lyer arrows

In the case of the Müller-Lyer illusion we experience a property that the picture does not possess, namely that the two horizontal segments have different lengths — it constitutes a false experiential ascription of a property, a false experience. In the case of *trompe l'oeil* pictures we *knowingly mistake* the picture's vehicle for another object — it constitutes the experience of a deception. If we include that deception in the items we are supposed to recognize in the picture, then *trompe l'oeil* joins the ranks of twofold pictorial experience given that one sees the "pictorial vehicle" in the configurational fold and one *knowingly illusorily* sees that vehicle as the object. Thus, the recognition of *trompe l'oeil* as such involves a twofold experience and so, *pace* Wollheim, *trompe l'oeil* paintings qualify as proper depictions and hold figurative value.

This way out of the conundrum, however, seems too good to be true. The fact that we recover from most (if not all) *trompe l'oeil* paintings is irrelevant to the case raised by Wollheim, because he wants to consider the normativity associated to *trompe l'oeil ex definitione*, i.e., as "pictorial presentations" (Feagin) that are to be perceived under the perceptual mode prescribed by the genre (like the one followed by the friend A). And under that mode, skillful deception prevents any kind of "knowingly illusorily seeing". Therefore, if we call "*trompe l'oeil*" to the experience we have when we "recover" from the illusion, what should we call the pictorial deception as it takes place? Wollheim thinks that true *trompe l'oeil* (*trompe l'oeil* qua genre) corresponds to the actual deception and that to ignore this would be tantamount to reject the author's categorial intentions (i.e., the way in which the painting should be perceived). In proper depiction there is a pictorial *contract* between author and viewer: the author lays down something for the viewer to discover. Instead, *trompe l'oeil* is based upon the spectator's ignorance. A little bit of information is already enough to lead to the dissolution of the presentation and the corresponding immersive experience.

But there may be another way to deal with the problem of *trompe l'oeil* while maintaining at least some part of the seeing-in doctrine.

Exactly what does it mean to consider the marked surface as the configurational fold? And what exactly goes into that fold? Some authors have pointed out to the fact that there may be two different kinds of twofoldness amalgamated in Wollheim's theory: a perceptual and an aesthetic kind.[23] Perceptual twofoldness
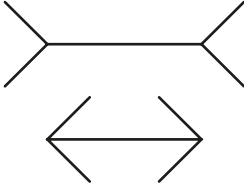
is present in the usual way by which Wollheim describes the twofoldness of seeing-in, such as this:

> Looking at a suitably marked surface, we are visually aware at once of the marked surface and of something in front or behind something else.[24]

Wollheim takes perceptual twofoldness as a necessary condition for experiencing pictures in general. Every mark in the surface of the picture enters the configurational fold and is therefore acknowledged by the spectator. However, it seems farfetched to sustain that whenever we look at pictures — such as pictures in newspapers or magazine photographs — we pay necessary attention to the whole surface (the kind of paper, the distribution of ink, the particular colours, etc.).[25] And even when we are looking at some paintings, it seems excessive to defend that all marks in the surface hold aesthetic importance and necessarily enter the spectator's experience. Take the case of this *Portrait of a Young Girl* (circa 1470) by Petrus Christus [Figure 5].[26]

Over the ages the oil on the oak wood cracked and all these cracks became an inevitable trait of the marked surface. However, unless some creative art historian convinces us that the ageing of the wooden panel was somehow anticipated in Christus' creative intentions, it does not seem right to acknowledge that the cracks take part in the spectator's pictorial experience. They are cancelled by the second kind of twofoldness, the aesthetic twofoldness:

> [I]n Titian, in Vermeer, in Manet we are led to marvel endlessly at the way in which line or brushstroke or expanse of colour is exploited to render effects or establish analogies that can only be identified representationally, and the argument is that this virtue could not have received recognition if, in looking at pictures, we had to alternate visual attention between the material features and the object of the representation.[27]

Since only perceptual twofoldness seems to imply a necessary attention to the marked surface *in totum* and only some "marks" are aesthetically relevant, then perceptual twofoldness is not engaged in the pictorial experience and the recognitional fold is redescribed as "aesthetically meaningful marks in a surface".

But if this is true then we can have aesthetic twofoldness, in which the viewer is somehow able to sort out those marks that are aesthetically meaningful, without perceptual twofoldness. Now, this disconnection runs against Wollheim's project of drawing our attention to a fundamental perceptual dimension of the appreciation of art that had been constantly ignored by most historical, psychological and aesthetic studies of painting — and

Figure 5
Portrait of a Young Girl,
Petrus Christus, ca. 1470

the fact that what we see in pictures is not dependent on our will or imagination is an essential element of that project. Also, perceptual twofoldness was a compelling way to explain both perceptual constancy and the different indexing of objects in the real world and in pictures. When I show someone a photograph of a group of schoolchildren and I point to myself on that photograph my finger is directed at the surface of the photograph, and not at something *beyond* the photograph. But above all, the fact that the spectator pre-selects the marks that are deemed to be aesthetically significant and then compose the configurational fold, would entail that there is another, perhaps even more primordial, experience prior to seeing-in. And this would be particularly damaging to Wollheim's view according to which seeing-in is the uncontrolled bedrock of every pictorial experience. Ultimately, assuming that such a *choice* occurs prior to seeing-in would eventually surrender painting back under the rule of theories against which the whole notion of seeing-in was proposed and developed, and according to which art was a culturally relativistic and conventional affair.

But maybe there is a way of considering aesthetic twofoldness without perceptual twofoldness and the idea that the configurational fold is somehow the product of the spectator's pre-focus without collapsing into a semiotic conception of art. One way to achieve this is to consider the issue of twofoldness in seeing-in under a functional definition of artistic form.[28] What exactly makes up the formal structure of an artwork, or more specifically what exactly fits into the configurational fold of pictorial seeing-in? Functional definition of form points out to the rather remarkable fact that spectators can quite easily discern what constitutes the formal structure of any artwork, i.e., its configuration. This is explained by the postulating that artistic form has an intrinsically semantic quality, i.e., that it is composed of all and only those formal elements and relations that contribute to the recognition of its pictorial purpose. To put it in another way, it is the work's meaning that acts as a filter that makes aesthetically salient some formal features of the work while suppressing others that the spectator will actively ignore (such as the cracks in Petrus Christus portrait). Aesthetic saliency identifies the work's characteristics that identify it as member of a genre, or period, or any other artistic category (like *trompe l'oeil*), and that identification conditions our understanding of its content.

Based on the knowledge that anticipates her contact with the artwork, the spectator will focus her attention precisely on those formal elements and relations that are instrumental in conveying the work's purpose. Knowledge that ranges from the compositional strategies of the author, stylistic conventions and artistic practices, to a proper understanding of the author's intentions, and particularly her categorial intentions, i.e., the specific way she intends her work to be perceived. The work's genre, its historical period as well as other artistic categories play a significant role in determining what formal features of the work should be made salient and what should be suppressed. If we know we are watching a horror movie and recognize that the character is disgusted at the sight of a zombie, when the point/object shot of the monster arrives, "we will attend to the open sores on the zombie's body and not to his designer jeans".[29] In the case of Petrus Christus' portrait, it is because we know that we are looking at a sixteenth century oil on wood painting and not a contemporary artwork that we will actively dismiss the cracks as elements of the configuration and attend rather to the expertise with which the author conceals the brushwork.

Accepting the functional role of artistic form may lead to some significant changes in the way we appreciate art. Take the case of Arthur Danto's *defense* of Van Meegeren's "forgeries" of Vermeer.[30] Van Meegeren's original intention was to play a ruse on Professor Abraham Bredius, the leading authority on Vermeer at that time, and his wrong assessment of Vermeer as having been influenced by Caravaggio. Having been asked to certify the fake *Christ at Emmaeus* (1937) as a Vermeer, this was Bredius' verdict:

> I am inclined to say that this is Johannes Vermeer of Delft's masterpiece... It is so different from all his other paintings and yet every inch a Vermeer.

If we stop considering Van Meegeren canvas as a forgery and look at it instead as the core piece of the critical trap laid against Bredius, we change the artistic salience of its formal features by acknowledging the relevant associations between the painting's content and Bredius' wrong conjectures about Vermeer's life (that he had come acquainted with Caravaggio's work during an Italian trip, etc.).[31] In a way the rather obvious perceptual differences between Van Meegeren's painting and Vermeer's work become irrelevant and the work strikes us as a sort of *Caravaggian* version of Vermeer, and an obviously false one — an obviousness Van Meegeren wanted us to recognize, and not ignore.

As Arthur Danto puts it, it is not so much a question of what we see in a painting but rather what is shown in what we see.[32] And what is shown determines what we see. Recent discoveries in cognitive neuroscience provide tools to consider this pre-focusing of the configurational properties as a transcendental cognitive condition and the consequent "choice" of what fits into the configurational fold to be regarded as a psychological matter, thus preventing art to be regarded as a conventional and cultural product, as Wollheim would have it. Human beings are capable to run longer distances than virtually any other animal. This is to large extent the result, in part, of the evolution of the human brain and its ability to dissipate energy due to its relatively numerous circumvolutions. This allows the human brain to keep its temperature within an operative threshold even under strenuous circumstances such as a long run under a scorching sun. But another important factor for preventing the brain from overheating consists in the way information processing has also been made quite efficient, and namely by conceptually blending different phenomena under a restricted number of categories and by privileging visual information that is easier to process. That is the cognitive reason why we privilege symmetry, centered objects, and balanced proportions. That is also the reason why human being have developed *biased competition models of selective attention* as cognitive tools by which distractions are ignored and attention is focused.[33] Our perceptive systems make salient certain environmental characteristics such as contrast, sudden movements, etc. A number of categorial expectations are generated about the identity, the structure, the dynamics and the emotional relevance of the objects and events we hope to find and these expectations shape what we perceive and how we perceive. Significantly, meaningful environmental characteristics are seldom the more salient from a purely perceptual point of view. This means that not everything we see will sustain our attention and many visible

elements will be actively ignore under a biased model — like the cracks in Christus' portrait. Our cognitive systems will guide our perception in real time and in a flexible way by making salient some perceptual characteristics, according to an interpretation of the context. Expectable characteristics are processed while distractive, redundant or eccentric elements are inhibited.

If this is so, then the configurational fold in Wollheim's twofoldness is not to be understood as a pre-established structural form neutrally offered for the observer to recognize an object. The visual elements and their relations that compose the configuration will vary in saliency according to content, artistic genre or historic period. They should be flexible enough for incorporating 2D–3D transition to the extent that optical illusion will have the same status as perspective as components of the configurational fold.

Lastly, *trompe l'oeil per se* is seldom the painter's intention and its function should be connected to the artist's authorial intentions. That seems to be the case with anamorphosis, such as Andrea Pozzo's monumental frescoes. Visiting the Church of Saint Ignatius in Rome, the observer starts by observing the distorted shapes in the false vault above. Once she arrives at the yellow marble spot that marks the ideal vantage point the anamorphic illusion dawns on her and the ceiling rises up in an apotheosis of augmented reality. The distortion and fuzziness observed earlier are now part of the configurational fold in which she sees the *Glorification*. The message is clear: one should also look for that particular vantage point from which everything comes into perspective, visually and existentially. That is the *bias* that guides the viewer's attention and makes her pre-focus the configuration.

Notes

1. Cf. Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987: 75.

2. Cf. Andrew Harrison, "The limits of twofoldness: A defence of the concept of pictorial thought", in *Richard Wollheim on the Art of Painting*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001: 41.

3. Wollheim, 1987: 62.

4. Wollheim, 1987: 62.

5. Wollheim, 1987: 62.

6. Wollheim, 1987: 62.

7. This shuttle between illusion and marked surface corresponds to Ernst Gombrich's description of pictorial experience. Wollheim's denial of *trompe l'oeil* as proper representation should also be understood in the context of his criticism of Gombrich's views.

8. The example comes from Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* and is quoted in Wollheim, 1987: 90.

9. Richard Wollheim, *Art and its objects*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980: 209.

10. Wollheim, 1987: 46.

11. Michael Polanyi, "What is a painting?", in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 10, 1970, 225–236; Maurice Henri Pirenne, *Optics, Painting, and Photography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970

12. Wollheim, 1980: 216.

13. Wollheim, 1980: 14.

14. Wollheim, 1980: 14.

15. Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion, A study in the psychology of pictorial representation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960: 275. One should recall here that *Art and Illusion* presented the still lives of Henri Fantin-Latour as the epitome of pictorial partial illusion.

16. Wollheim, 1980: 211–212.

17. Wollheim, 1980: 212.

18. Erwin Panofsky (1939), *Estudos de Iconografia — Temas humanísticos na arte do Renascimento*, translated by Olinda Sousa, Lisboa: Estampa, 1982: 23–24.

19. Cf. Wollheim, 1987: 91.

20. Cf. Susan Feagin, "Presentation or representation", in *Richard Wollheim on the Art of Painting*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001: 193.

21. As proposed by Alberto Voltolini, *A syncretistic theory of depiction*, Nova Iorque: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015: 77–80.

22. Voltolini, 2015: 78. Voltolini transforms Gombrich's notion of pictorial experience as the partial illusion of seeing the configuration as the object into the recognitional fold of *trompe l'oeil* illusions.

23. Cf. Jerrold Levinson (1998), "Wollheim on pictorial representation", in *Richard Wollheim on the Art of Painting*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 28–38; Bence Nanay, "Is twofoldness necessary for representational seeing?", in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 45-3, 2005, 248–249; Dominic Lopes, *Understanding Pictures*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

24. Richard Wollheim (1998), "On pictorial representation", in *Richard Wollheim on the Art of Painting*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001: 19.

25. Jerrold Levinson goes even farther and denies that twofoldness is actually present in our experiencing of pictures in general: "If you see a woman in a picture in virtue of visually processing a pattern of marks, then of course in some sense you are thereby perceiving the medium in which those marks inhere or consist. But it is far from clear that when you see the woman in the picture you must in some measure be attending to, taking notice of, or consciously focusing on the picture's surface or patterning as such." (Levinson, 1998: 31)

26. The example is discussed in Nanay, 2005: 251.

27. Wollheim, 1980: 216.

28. Cf. Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Art*, London: Routledge, 1999, 137–148; W.P. Seeley, "Art, meaning, and perception: A question of methods for a cognitive neuroscience of art", in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol.53, number 4, 2013, 443–460.

29. Noël Carroll, "Toward a theory of point-of-view editing", in Theorizing the moving image, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 132.

30. Arthur Danto "Art and Meaning", in *Theories of art today*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, 130–140; cf. Seeley, 2013: 452.

31. Danto, 2000: 134.

32. Arthur Danto, "Seeing and showing", in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59, 2001, 1–9.

33. An exploration of the ways in which these biased competition models can help in our understanding of aesthetic issues is proposed in Seeley, 2013.