

Perspectival parody in Hogarth's *Satire on false perspective*

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Abstract

The viewer of Hogarth's *Satire on false perspective* notices many instances of perspectival parody in the picture. Taken as a whole, his picture may be regarded as an emblem for viewing Hogarth's picaresque view of the world as one based on the themes of false perspective, satire, and inversion.

Samevatting

Die betragter van Hogarth se *Satire on false perspective* let op baie instansies in die prent van perspektiewe parodie. Saamgevat, mag sy prent beskou word as 'n embleem vir die beskouing van Hogarth se pikareske wêreldbeskouing gebaseer op die temas van vals perspektief, satire, en omkering.

Hogarth's *Satire on false perspective* (Figure 1), commissioned by Joshua Kirby in 1751 as the Frontispiece for his book *Dr. Brook Taylor's Method of Perspective Made Easy, Both in Theory and Practice*, was engraved by Sullivan in time for the book's publication in February 1754. In the engraving the viewer encounters what at first sight appears to be the tranquillity of an eighteenth-century rural scene. Two men have cast their fishing lines into a river, while another fires his hunting rifle from a boat on the river. In the left-hand foreground, sheep and cattle, with their backs to the viewer, wander off down a rocky pathway. Further back, a sailing boat prepares to set sail for places beyond the horizon line of the sea. Crossing the stone bridge in the centre of the composition, a horse-drawn wagon moves towards centre right. In the upper right hand side of the engraving a traveller with a knapsack on his back, accepts the offer from a woman leaning out of an upper storey window of an inn to light his pipe from her lighted candle.

With a sudden start the viewer is stopped in his or her tracks, as the viewer notices that the traveller is supposed to be in the background of the picture, standing on the grass of the hill in the upper right, while the inn, from whose window the woman with the lighted candle leans, belongs to the middle ground of the right hand side of the engraving. The traveller

and the inn ought to occupy the right background and right middle ground positions of the composition respectively. However, the fact that the traveller is able to light his pipe from the burning candle held by a woman leaning out of a window of an inn from a different spatial designation some distance away, would come as a shock to a viewer conditioned by the norms governing conventional perspective. It is the juxtaposition of these two different distances, middle ground and background, within a close spatial proximity to one another, and the fact that the woman with the lighted candle is able to lean from a window of the inn to light a traveller's pipe, which appear to be incongruous with the viewer's expectations of perspectival spatial arrangements.



Figure 1. William Hogarth. *Satire on false perspective*. (Published: February 1745). Engraving. 20.79 x 17.145 cm. W.S. Lewis Collection, London.

[Source: Paulson (1971b: 159, fig. 245).]

Having discovered one of the perspectival incongruities in the engraving, the viewer is able to scan the composition in the search for other instances of spatial and perspectival incongruity. The fruits of the viewer's

labour soon multiply. Slightly lower down from the first discovery, the viewer encounters the sign board of the inn, a sickle shaped moon in its last quarter set on a dark background, jutting out from the inn. The signboard is hidden behind two trees growing on the hill in the background, while the supports for the signboard are attached to two separate buildings closer in space to the viewer. The horizontal support beam, from which the sign board hangs, is fixed to the inn wall in the right middle ground by means of plaster; but the supporting diagonal beam is attached to a wooden block on the wall of a wooden building in the mid-foreground in front of the inn in the middle ground. Thus the sign of the inn and its supports are even more incongruous than the traveller wishing to light his pipe from a candle some distance away. Mid-foreground, middle ground and background in this second discovery are party to the spatial ambiguity of the signboard of the inn occupying three different areas of space at the same time.

Near and far are again made to enact an incongruity with each other directly below the sign board of the inn, where the foreground fisherman in eighteenth-century dress has caught a fish in the river. The trajectory of his distended fishing rod is cast so far back into the spatial composition that it meets the same parallel as the inn in the middle ground. However, the actual line on his fishing rod goes behind the fishing rod of the other fisherman who is seated on a rock beside a seated ape in the mid-foreground between the foreground fisherman and the middle ground position of the inn. To the eye which judges the distance between the foreground fisherman and his catch, and the mid-foreground fisherman and his catch, as a rectangle of negative space about two millimetres by a centimetre apart, it seems inconceivable that the two fishermen and their catches should be able to perform their respective tasks at such near and far proximity to one another in space. Either one or the other of the two fishermen got their wires crossed; yet ironically the crossover has not caused either fisherman to become angry.

The viewer's eye, wandering up and down the three instances of spatial incongruity already discovered – (1) the traveller on the hill lighting his pipe from the lighted candle held by a woman leaning out of the upper storey window of the inn some distance away, (2) the sign board of the inn occupying three ground levels in space at

once and (3) the two fishermen and their catches in the river – finds another spatial incongruity, hidden almost unnoticed, diagonally up and to the right from the centre of the composition. Here, behind the two jutting wooden beams supporting the inn sign is a tree whose leaves on the right hand side disappear behind the inn. However, the trunk of this tree is thrust forward into space as it grows in front of one of the horses drawing the wagon across the stone bridge. The roots of this tree appear to be rooted somewhere on, or in front of, the stone bridge. It is difficult for the viewer to tell, as the tree trunk intersects with the stone bridge and the roof of the building standing in front of the inn. Be this as it may, the tree's upper half is clearly situated between the background and the middle ground, behind the inn and the beams of the sign of the inn; yet the lower half of the tree is firmly planted in front of the horse, and is spatially on a par with the bridge and the inn in the middle ground of the engraving.

Coinciding with the tree's incongruous lower half is the horse itself, who canters along behind the tree trunk, yet behind the wall of the inn at the same time. This horse also occupies an incongruous space: at once behind the tree and behind the wall of the inn, the middle section of the horse appears to be in front of them. At the same time, however, the horse appears to be leading the other horses and the wagon they are pulling right into the inn, thus pulling the load behind the horse into a position it could not possibly occupy as an object existing in space.

As if these five instances of spatial incongruity all aligned on the right hand side of the engraving were not enough, the respective vanishing points of the roof of the inn and the roof of the building in front of the inn on the right hand side of the composition do not converge at the same place of the horizon line. Neither one of these imaginary projections follow the lane of trees on the hill and the river bank leading out to sea, which initially seems to suggest that this different trajectory of imaginary perspective lines might be the one to follow to discover the vanishing point. The two white swans on both sides of the stone bridge appear to be beacons which run parallel to the river bank and the line of trees on the hill, thus not only leading the eye from the upper left side to the lower right side of the composition, but also lending support to the initial assumption that the viewer could

make in thinking that this avenue of imaginary vectors may indeed represent the proper highway of perspective and vanishing point for this scene. However, the angle and inclination of the inn's roof and the roof of the building in front of it, contradict such an assumption, and the horizon line of the sea and the frontality of the church building with three sides showing – itself a violation of perspective theory which precludes the possibility of a fixed eye station point that would allow the viewer to see full views of three sides of the church building – in the background on the left, added to the above mentioned observations, also throw the viewer's initial thinking into disarray. Indeed, careful analysis of these three imaginary lines of perspective which lead the eye into the scene from the left – swans, river bank, and line of trees – do not meet on the far horizon at all, and the viewer is forced to conclude that the numerous contradictory directions of projected lines in the picture make it impossible to determine the rule of linear perspective in which a limited number of unifying vanishing points can be seen.

Instead of the lines meeting at a vanishing point on the far horizon, the opposite happens: they meet at some point in front of the fisherman in the right foreground of the engraving. As an inverted perspective, they imaginatively lead the eye of the spectator to the feet of the foreground fisherman, where yet another inversion of perspective awaits the unsuspecting viewer. For it is here that the viewer discovers that the tiled paving upon which the foreground fisherman stands does not gradually recede into the background as it ought under the rules of conventional perspective. Instead, the receding tiles advance towards the lower right hand foreground corner of the composition, become smaller – i.e., "recede" – and "fall out" of the engraving at the bottom as if pulled by an invisible gravitational force. Yet the foreground fisherman appears not to notice that the tiled paving which he is standing on is eerily receding in the wrong direction. He seems able to stand upon them with solid ease, and his gaze, directed at his catch in the river, seems so pre-occupied with this sport, that the sport of perspective in its various guises – including his own involvement therein – does not seem to cause him any sense of alarm, or unease, in any way. Standing on receding tiles which advance towards the viewer instead of recede, is as natural as to the

foreground fisherman as standing and fishing are.

The fact that the calm waters of the river flows as frontally as the church in the left background stands, as indicated by the lines describing the reflection of the stone bridge, while the river leading to the sea beyond the stone bridge flows askance in the direction of the curved and tilted horizon line of sea, also indicated by dense parallel lines, does not seem to bother the foreground fisherman overmuch. Neither does the fact that a bird can sit on top of a tree while being the same size as the bird in the background as if the tree were a mere branch, or that close by the sign board of the inn could hang behind two trees as if it were an enormous painting standing in a landscape, detached from the fact that it is still the sign board of the inn.

If the above inversions of perspective were not enough, another example of the violation of artificial perspective rules is also apparent in the engraving. In the proper application of the rules of artificial perspective, objects are supposed to appear to diminish in size as they recede into the visual depth of the picture, as a result of the principle that objects should appear progressively smaller in direct proportion to their distance from the viewer. Yet the sheep in the lower left foreground of the engraving, like the tiles upon which the foreground fisherman stands, are arranged in just the reverse fashion. Contrary to perspective theory, the small sheep in the foreground are in front of the larger ones.

While the figures in the engraving – the foreground fisherman, the mid-foreground fisherman, the traveller on the hill, the woman holding the lighted candle – the buildings on the right and the church on the left and nature – the tree on the bridge, the two trees and the sign board of the inn, the bird on the tree, the horse pulling the wagon, the flow of the river in two directions, the small sheep in front of the bigger ones – do not seem to be disturbed by the obvious discrepancies between a plausible first perception and what we analytically know of space and its presentation in Hogarth's *Satire on false perspective*, the viewer might well find most of the objects involved in this parody of perspective, particularly on the right, to be paradoxical participants aiding and abetting the inversion of perspective throughout the rural scene.

Such a viewer may be both

disturbed and amused by the incongruities as visual deceits on perspective represented in this work, since the outcome is a series of visually illogical relations. The paradoxical relationships within the work are matched by the disturbed or amused reaction of the viewer of the engraving. This is underlined by the inscription under the engraved frontispiece illustration which reads: "Whoever makes a DESIGN without the Knowledge of PERSPECTIVE / will be liable to such Absurdities as are shown in this Frontispiece", and by Kirby's advertisement for his book, in which he stated that the Frontispiece was "design'd ... not only for the Use of Painters, and other Persons concern'd in the Arts of Drawing and Designing, but also for Gentlemen, whose Inclinations may lead them to this polite Amusement". It could thus be said that it was Kirby's intention – and perhaps Hogarth's as well – that the engraving by Sullivan, based on Hogarth's drawing, should serve to instruct artists in the way of perspective and compositional design by showing them the "Absurdities" and incongruities that would arise if they did not apply the rules of perspective properly.

The Frontispiece engraving *Satire on false perspective* thus aimed at educating the artist seeking to master the rules of perspective as laid down by the Renaissance theorists of artificial perspective by means of the litotic default of rhetorical *adynaton* on the one hand, and on the other, by the parodying of perspective, by means of inversion, to the frowning and disapproval of the viewer, or to the viewer's delight and humour. The rhetorical persuasiveness of the visual offer thus accords with the three aims of ancient rhetoric still observed in the early eighteenth century: to teach, to delight, and to please the viewer. While striving toward these rhetorical aims Hogarth's engraving could also have caused a possible mixed reaction in an eighteenth-century viewer as either the praise or amusement at the inversion of perspectival norms and/or the blame or disapproval of the violation of those same perspectival norms. Such praise and blame are the two contesting sides of epideictics and parody.

Moreover, the whole of the Frontispiece resembles a page from the emblem books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the word "Frontispiece" above, corresponds to the *super-scriptio*, the engraved picture *Satire on false perspective* corresponds to the *pictura*, and the inscribed warning to the

designers of perspective to follow the rules, along with the required knowledge, or else end up with "Absurdities", corresponds to the *subscriptio* of the emblem. Apart from the work's formal layout resembling an emblem, the Frontispiece can also be regarded as an emblematic work in at least two ways. Firstly, its rhetorical *adynaton* has as its aim to teach, to delight and to please the viewer: thus serving the didactic purposes of an emblem. Secondly, if one regards the engraving as an emblem, then its compositional configuration might also be read in an emblematic way. The cattle leading the sheep down the well trodden path on the lower left hand side of the work, with their backs to the viewer, and in back-to-front positions, may be read as emblematic of artists and designers who turn their backs to the rules of perspective and follow the herd along the well trodden path to "Absurdities." Similarly, the ape sitting on its haunches besides the mid-foreground fisherman and gazing out at the "Absurdities" of the *adynaton* of the fishing lines in the river, may also be regarded as an emblem for the traditional fool, who, observing the "Absurdities" of false perspective, nevertheless, not only watches them, but if foolish (unwise) will be inclined to ape them as well.

An emblematic reading of the parodic *Satire on false perspective* enriches the observations of the "Absurdities" and incongruities of perspective represented in the work. Such a reading can also paradoxically be read as a joint parody on emblematics and perspective, since instruction in proper design by means of the improper has replaced the moral instruction of the emblem book, and the "ethics" in following the rules of perspective have usurped the ethical stance of the emblem book. Instead of serious epigrams of wisdom, the viewer is advised by humour to follow perspective rules, and is "amused" by the "Absurdities" resulting from the creation of "false perspectives" if and when these rules are disobeyed. Hogarth's parody can be said to lie in the fact that "wisdom" has boiled down to a "knowledge of perspective", but that this "knowledge" is gained only after the viewer has ironically first been shown what should not be done, and seen first hand the reasoning behind the engraving's warning.

Hogarth's enterprise of representing false perspective, however, is no mere satire on false perspective as the title suggests. Alongside the proving of

the absurdities possible in linear perspective, Hogarth also reveals how he views the world: as a place where perspectives are often inverted, where conventions are there to be parodied, where enlightened "Absurdities" come to the fore even while the viewer is given some kind of witty medicine in exchange. He even puns visually and verbally upon the rule of artificial perspective which has been inverted by false perspective, since both the words "artificial" and "false" suggest each other, even although they are completely different in both the theory and practice of perspective. Hogarth's *Satire on false perspective* thus represents the world as a world askance, thrown out of perspective, or rather, a world put in a different kind of perspective, as a World Upside Down full of rhetorical litoties, *adynatons* and parody. In this sense, *Satire on false perspective* may serve as

an emblematic key to viewing Hogarth's picaresque view of the world as an ontic order based on inversion as well as satire and false perspectives.

References

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