Is it Art or Not?

A Husserlian Phenomenology of M.C. Escher’s Art

Husserl explains in *Phantasy, Image-consciousness and Memory* that the way in which an image-object appears in image-consciousness, or pictorial awareness (*Bildbewusstsein*), can elicit aesthetic contemplation since “image-consciousness is the essential foundation for the possibility of aesthetic feeling in fine art.” With neither an image nor a rich creative inner world, there would be no fine art. Furthermore, image-consciousness is disturbed when aesthetic contemplation is constantly interrupted to discern the components of the image. The implication of this claim seems counter-intuitive however, for M.C. Escher’s art, which is aimed precisely at engaging the viewer’s discerning eye while also engaging his aesthetic sensibilities, and for this reason cannot sustain aesthetic contemplation.

The first section of this paper will be an explication of Husserl’s analysis of perceptual apprehension in representing consciousness, i.e. image-consciousness, followed by an explication of what aesthetic contemplation is for Husserl that begins in interest, moves into immersion, and concludes with creative investment within image-consciousness. These first explications enable our further analysis of M.C. Escher’s disorienting-art that elicits aesthetic contemplation, but requires justification for Husserl’s aesthetic that opposes art which does not wholly engage image-consciousness without interruption. Finally, I will claim that Escher’s work will be considered art and a legitimate object of aesthetic experience since Husserl does not provide an explanation for why aesthetic art creates its correlative experience, but rather only describes the intentional elements necessary for its phenomenon.

I. HUSSERL’S AESTHETICS

Before understanding what an aesthetic experience is and how it differs from regular apprehension of image-objects, we should begin with an analysis of the kinds of intentional objects, such as phantasms, that appear when encountering a painting or, in Husserlian terms, a *picture-subject.*

Perceptual apprehension begins with a picture appearing as a physical thing, as an object hanging, for example, on a living room wall or in a museum gallery. The actual object given in perception awakens or excites intuitive representation. The frame and surface (canvas, paper, wood, or some other surface for the deposition of the artistic medium) are the first elements that elicit a perceptual apprehension in consciousness.

Next, the *image-object* between the four sides of a frame on a surface becomes distinct, “as an image that depicts.” An image-object can take various shapes like a biblical scene or bowl of fruit. In this stage, a perceiver becomes aware that there is a glob of paint that resembles a woman, a dog, a landscape, or even something as unearthly as God. Gradations of light, positions (of light, of color, of shape) in the picture, and color-tones are apprehended.

The third stage, *image apprehension,* comes about once the image-object in normal contemplation becomes alive and excited in image-consciousness. That is to say, the picture visually becomes a *figment* rather than a spatially present subject as belief-consciousness, sensuous-intuition, and objectification occur. For Husserl, it is at this stage that the woman in Raphael’s theological painting now becomes divine and that babies turn into cherubs. The image-objects have a plastic form but do not come into full
expression in the physical picture, though grounded in and elicited there. The saint as “holy” is not something that appears, in the proper sense, in the image of the art, but rather in the image-apprehension of the viewer in this third stage.

Husserl describes at length the different stages of image-consciousness and movement between them. For example, Husserl assures us that although these three stages visually happen in a single objective nexus, they cannot occur simultaneously. The objectivity of the painting’s surroundings, the image-objectivity, and the objectivity of the whole appearance are all grounded on one physical-object, namely the painting hanging on the wall. Husserl notes, “in fact one is conscious of the surroundings of the image, that in fact the image-object […] appears in the manner of a perceptual object. And so we have nothing but perceptual apprehensions, which, in conformity with our experience, enter into unity.”7 Even so, when someone perceives the surface on which a painting appears, or the vivid colors the artist chose to use, he cannot also create the imagined world for the image-object. The two belong to different stages of perception, associated with different intentional objects. For example, one cannot imagine an evil Medusa while also wondering if the artist used a thick or soft brush because the first has an element of non-actuality or nullity to it.8

Different stages cannot be perceived at once because of the unreality, or absent imaginings, the viewer adds to the image-object in representational consciousness. The viewer constitutes the image with the assistance of non-genuine representational content, such as phantasms or belief imagining. For imagining, perception extends inward, beyond the image-objects presented between the four sides of a frame. Similar to the way in which a symbol points to a meaning outside, beyond itself, so too do imaginings in representational consciousness point their perceiver beyond themselves to something else. The beyond to which they point however, is inward into the beliefs and phantasies of the observer’s inner world.9

Our pool of intuitive associations for constituting a painting is not limitless. Image apprehension in representing consciousness is limited in its plasticity. The physical-object and the image-object share their content. For example, the same lime-green that colored the “woman’s face” is that which gave her an old and evil look. For that reason, any experience whatever cannot be elicited in the same viewer but must, on contextual grounds, be provided in the painting. The two aspects, image-object and physical-object, cannot be looked at simultaneously according to Husserl, but their shared appearance ensures a specific range of representations its painter can evoke. Image apprehension, therefore must be founded on the appearance of the physical-object. This type of apprehension, “comes about because, below everything else, the sensuous sensations undergo a perceptual apprehension by means of the physical image (which) becomes constituted” (parentheses added).10 Husserl calls this direct objectivation and it is the very basis of image apprehension.

Another element that differentiates between the stages of image apprehension is the degree imagination saturates the image-object. Degrees of phantasy are involved in aesthetic contemplation of image-objects. Phantasy properly defined is an object that itself appears but does not appear as present, whereas in perception something objective is present.11 The distinguishing mark between phantasy-presentation and an object of perception is having that image with an object to ground it.

In the fullest stage of image apprehending, representational consciousness, the perceiver invests a large degree of phantasy in the image-object. Qualities like evil, wickedness, or divinity cannot properly come from the physical-object but are contributed to the image by the perceiver. In Husserl’s words, “not nows” appear in the now of the image-object to create a world in the reality of the image. Reality is contained within the boundaries of the frame “as if [one is looking] through a window.”12 Objects become fuller intuitive presentations, depending on the perceiver’s involvement in the subject of the picture.

### i. Culmination of Representational Consciousness in the Aesthetic attitude

The aesthetic attitude comes from a particular combination of moments that arouse interest and pleasure solely in the appearance of an object.13 Husserl distinguishes between interest in the appearance of an
object from interest in the subject as such. In the first, one becomes interested in the look of an object. No element is a superfluous detail for its physical composition. The degree of aesthetic and intuitive excitement in the object of consciousness owes to unity, which contributes a “wealth of appearance.”

Every detail is received in perception from immanent imagining. Delivered “from within, through their moments, or through moments of analogy, do the aesthetic distinctions between the ‘more beautiful’ and the ‘less beautiful,’ the ‘beautiful’ and the ‘ugly,’ come into consideration.” In the aesthetic attitude, distinctions of less or more beautiful are immanently intuited, rather than thought or judged.

Relevant to our later discussion on Escher, Husserl claims that aesthetic excitement comes from the appearance of an image, free from cognitive anchors. In the aesthetic moment any regard to the utility of an object, its theoretical being, or psychological effect must be set aside: “The pleasure in the aesthetic attitude leaves existence out of play and is essentially determined by the mode of appearance. If it is an object of use, then it is not its existence as an object of use that is in question, but how the object of use presents itself as an object [...]” While the objective reality of an object is of no importance in aesthetic contemplation, its reality must not come in conflict with its representation. Husserl states, “The object itself, adapted to its purpose, [must be there], or otherwise [there would be] conflict between the form of the object and its function. Something unpleasant would be mixed in.” The conflict between form and function is intuited, rather than thought. As such, asking why or what is causing such an effect dispels the aesthetic contemplation, for its possessor has stepped out of it. The phenomenology of an aesthetic moment, therefore, cannot be done while having an aesthetic moment.

Next I offer a short recapitulation of the stages in image-consciousness that describe the elements of aesthetic contemplation, thematically organized into three I’s; Interest, Immersion, and Investment.

ii. Interest

Perceptual interest in the appearance of an image-object will always ground the act of its constitution. In completing the image-object, even the most ironic aesthetic comprehensions can arouse interest. However, that experience is precisely as an ironic representation of the image-object. Symbols, for example, are not capable of inspiring an aesthetic experience since those do not interest the perceiver enough to constitute them in image-consciousness. They point to an object already existing outside of them. Similarly, interest is not aroused if there is merely a representation of a landscape or chair that look as similar as the landscape or chair themselves. If interest is aroused, it is only as a duplicate representation of an object and this does not belong to aesthetic experience. In those cases, additional representational beliefs that interact with the image-object do not come about and, at this stage, the image cannot arouse aesthetic contemplation.

iii. Immersion

A unique form of imaging is characteristic of representational consciousness; it is called immanent imaging. In contrast to symbols that point to an object outward from itself toward something beyond its symbol, immanent imagining presents its new objects by absorbing the viewer within its image. Husserl states, “Only consciousness belonging to immanent imaging plays a role in the aesthetic contemplation of the image.” By using elements that are internally representative, the viewer is invited to immerse himself in the image-object, elaborating the inner world associated with a painted subject, offering “him a richer representation of it.”

The depicted-subject is successfully seen in the image-object. A defense of abstract art would be interesting: How would Husserl explain an aesthetic experience that is elicited by abstract art since it only uses jarring lines and non-representation-able content to inspire its audience? What arouses the viewer’s initial interest as a step toward deeper immersion without clearly-intended associative objects or a
sufficient subject to inspire it? Furthermore, what internal world is enlivened when all the viewer sees are lines or smears of paint? These questions will be addressed in the second part of this paper.

iv. Investment

Consciousness becomes immersed in the image-object after interest is aroused. The whole of image-consciousness invests in the appearance of the image-object. A new presentation emerges and the picture object and its components come to complete intuition. Now the image-object is brought to life. It becomes animated in the aesthetic representation. As Husserl puts it, “The play of phantasy may be set in motion such that we become immersed in the world of the subject, as when, on seeing the pictures of Paolo Veronese, we feel ourselves transplanted into the magnificent, opulent life and activity of the grand Venetians of the sixteenth century.” This is Husserl’s description of aesthetic involvement that must have contextual-objectivity with the investment of phantasy presentation to experience a creatively dynamic inner-world.

II. HUSSELR’S AESTHETICS AND ESCHER’S ART

After reviewing Husserl’s phenomenological analysis on perceptual activity during aesthetic contemplation we can investigate whether and how, if at all, the illusory worlds depicted in M.C. Escher’s artworks can arouse an aesthetic experience in image-consciousness. By using distinctions and terminology presented in Husserl’s phenomenology we can pursue this pivotal question: If Escher’s art requires theoretical work, can it sustain aesthetic contemplation? Furthermore, if Escher’s objective was to capture what, according to him, “man is incapable of imaging […] this problem of eternity,” then we are begged to ask how one can invest in the image without the proper representational content to constitute his image-objects?

For most of his life, Escher was preoccupied with depicting realistic “spatial structures” such as Italian landscapes or buildings. In 1937, when Escher could no longer travel and re-present real life images, he started turning inward to the realm of “invented constructions” to depict things like eternity. He used his remarkable artistic skill learned early in life to create in his later life realistic images that push the boundaries of that very realism.

As viewers approaching one of Esher’s artworks, we begin investing representational content in the image-object presented to us. In the next moment however, Escher compels the viewer to invest elements of nothingness and architectural-absurdities. This necessarily creates tension in image-consciousness. If one further constitutes those image-objects with phantasms, this yields a world that challenges or pushes beyond human capabilities. Typically, “we bring to our experience of the image-object a fund of knowledge about the type of thing being depicted. […] Because we are aware of these possibilities we can also be aware of the conflict between moments of the image-object and corresponding moments of the subject.” Escher’s art invites perceivers into a confused image environment in which the image cannot come to a complete intuition or apprehension. After the viewer is lured by its realism to the stage of immersion into the artwork, he is pulled out of that immersive impulse by his need for reflection, thus arresting the aesthetic feeling in “fine art.”

Escher’s sophisticated artistic manipulation of phenomenological elements like absence, presence, and identity contribute to the different sorts of confused-beauty he inspires. Perceivers are constantly pulled in and out of aesthetic contemplation in order to analyze the image-objects. Husserl’s stages of image-consciousness can help clarify where the phenomenological confusion or disequilibrium arises in art typical to Escher’s style. For this, M.C. Escher’s 1960 lithograph print, Ascending and Descending, will be used as the primary art object for analysis.

An example characteristic of Escher’s early work is The Bridge, made in 1930. He uses appropriate depth measurements at the “fore” or “back” of the image-object. Arching stairs and valley-to-
mountain peaks allow the perceivers immanent-immersion into the image, garnering a comfortable and proportioned image-object of a landscape. Juxtaposing this image to his later work, *Ascending and Descending*, we see a progression of imaginative content or phantasy. The same architectural realism and proportion are present, but with slight modifications. Before phenomenological reflection slight modifications go unrecognized. Most of the image-object is proportional, using absent space or sizing appropriately. However, rather than offering a realistically vivid mountain range typical of his early art, the realistic images here melt together to construct an absurd realism. When image-consciousness reaches the top portion, there is disequilibrium. Sense is expected to be found in the image but that expectation is disappointed. A distinct judgment is not intuitively made, particularly about the stairs.

After interest has been aroused and perception immersed enough to re-present or depict a realistic building topped with realistic stairs, the absence between the presences of stairs subtly confuses its representation. No house could look like the one Escher imagined, nor could anyone place himself in a staircase that simultaneously ascended and descended for the same climber going in one direction. Regular perception created that expectation for our investment. Typically where there is no step there is room for the next ascending or descending step to appear. What the observer knows about stairs is not being fulfilled in this painting.

Escher manipulates absences to create an inverted series of stairs. If the phenomenological perspective, outside of the aesthetic, focuses particularly on the front line of stairs, coming out of the gazebo perpendicular to the lower stairs at the bottom entrance of the building, the source of confusion becomes apparent. The subtle artwork Escher used to depict the single side of the staircase creates an impression of perpetual ascent, after descent by the very same stairs (vice versa for men walking in the opposite direction). Staircases that have empirical referents inform our intuition that staircases always reach a final top or final bottom. These stairs do not reach either a top or bottom. For Husserl, these are “groundless imaginings” that are mediated by intellect, rather than a sensuous semblance of a real staircase.

When empirical knowledge fails to explain or interpret what is represented, then something else must take its place. The paradoxes of absence and presence in Escher’s impossible works point toward such unrepresentable concepts as eternity and infinity, and eternity becomes a filled or present intentional object even though it must essentially remain absent. Realistically, Escher cannot capture eternity on a two dimensional surface that is bound by space and time. In *Circle Limit IV*, for example, Escher attempts with his image-objects to fill this intention that can only be forever absent. Eternity, which cannot have an empirical ground, is supposed to present itself in immanent imaging to re-present the image-object. This impossibility is precisely where phenomenological disequilibrium occurs. Empirical knowledge reaches its limit and cannot fill the represented image and so, the theoretical work typical for Escher’s art begins.

Escher lures our interest, moves us into immersion, and then uses the the absent spaces in the staircase to prevent a final investment within image-consciousness. In the phenomenological account of Escher’s art, interest appears as discernment in the perceiver. Escher’s audience works to discern where and how his art causes the impossible image of infinity. In order to answer whether this art invokes what Husserl calls aesthetic pleasure, we must defend him against Husserl’s claim that:

The image must be clearly set apart from reality; that is, set apart in a purely intuitive way, without any assistance from indirect thoughts. We are supposed to be taken out of empirical reality and lifted up into the equally intuitive world of imagery. Aesthetic semblance [Schein] is not sensory illusion [Sinnentrug]. The delight in blunt disappointment or in the crude conflict between reality and semblance – reality and semblance playing hide-and-seek with each other, as it were – is the most extreme antithesis to aesthetic pleasure, which is grounded on the peaceful and clear consciousness of imaging.
Escher’s art seems to hinge precisely on that hide-and-seek and phantastic semblance of reality. Can we reconcile the aesthetic pleasure received from an experience of Escher’s art with Husserl’s aesthetics?

III. POSSIBLE RECONCILIATION BETWEEN HUSSERL AND ESCHER

Husserl cannot accept as art any work that fails to elevate image-consciousness into an aesthetic affair. In Escher’s defense, we can argue that perception is always already engaged in image-consciousness, and that Escher’s play is always already founded in image-consciousness. Escher interests his viewer in realistic images for immersion, then disorients them at the stage of investment within image-consciousness. When Husserl speaks against sensory-illusion as aesthetic, in those cases it is a physical-object appearing as it naturally is not (mannequin), or re-presenting an object that is not interesting enough to engage image-consciousness (panorama). Intentional-modes are in conflict in both, perception and image-consciousness.

By contrast, Escher’s art is always founded on an image and within that image-consciousness is engaged. The degree of phantasy capable of contributing to Escher’s art presents image-consciousness with its conflict. If, according to Husserl, image-consciousness is the essential foundation for the possibility of aesthetic feeling in fine art, then Escher at the very least meets this criterion. However, a Husserlian aesthetics must address the question whether aesthetic comprehension can be elicited from un-representational objects like eternity.

Confused, or, contrary to distinct judgment, may be the appropriate terminology for describing a Husserlian aesthetics of Escher’s art. Escher’s audience moves from a confused judgment about the realism in the image-object toward a distinct judgment that imminently unfolds an inner world of eternity, infinity, paradox, and impossibility. These were the very elements that Escher hoped to inspire in his audience. Phenomenology reveals the source of the confusion. Could one create representational content about an endless space? This question is similar to the one asked about abstract art, only instead of geometric shapes or splatters of paint used to inspire aesthetic moments, Escher uses un-imaginable ones.

In Husserl’s short appendix to Aesthetics he provides an explanation for how a perceiver comes to have an aesthetic experience. Husserl does not, however, clearly explain or answer why it is that certain patterns, forms, shapes, harmony, unity, or wealth of appearance creatively elicit representational-content for an aesthetic feeling. His is more a descriptive account of what occurs already in the aesthetic moment. In the concluding remarks to his book on Husserl, Dermot Moran says “Husserl’s whole philosophy is, in a sense, driven by the recognition of different attitudes (natural, personalistic, aesthetic, scientific) correlated with different forms of objectivity, some of which are given detailed descriptions, others of which are simply assumed. […] Husserl does not give a detailed philosophical account of what it is to be an attitude; or rather, he focuses in particular on descriptions of the natural attitude and the scientific attitude and on their interrelation.” In the kind of descriptive endeavor he engages, Husserl does not provide an explanation for the condition of the possibility of aesthetic experience. In other words, why there are aesthetic experiences at all is left unanswered.

The lack of explanation in Husserl for why pleasure can be had from an object’s mode of appearance leaves open the possibility that any sort of art may be a candidate for aesthetic experience, as long as the perception is immersed, interested, and invested. If the correlative aesthetic attitude is present, then the object may be a legitimate object of aesthetic experience, and therefore, truly art. Furthermore, John Brough affirms, “since aesthetic valuation is concerned with an object’s way of appearing (388), anything that appears can supply material for aesthetic contemplation.” Though it does not seem that any appearance could provide an aesthetic experience, but only those in image-consciousness, we can see that Brough confirms the open-ended characterization of Husserl’s account of aesthetics.

Thus, maybe categories like “more beautiful” or “less beautiful” are not exhaustive of the kinds of beauty that are possible. Confused or disoriented-beauty, or the representation-less beauty typical of abstract art, may be more types of “beauty” to be added to Husserl’s list. He may have started the
categories of beauty with the most straightforward kinds—more and less beautiful. These would be the most intuitive categories to someone making a preliminary sketch of attitudes within aesthetic contemplation. Husserl’s list can be taken as a preliminary one, ready to be made more robust by future phenomenologists that investigate different forms of art.

The word analogy in his appendix provides room for Escher’s confused or disorienting-imagistic art. In comparing Escher’s art to other, more straightforwardly pleasurable kinds, it would be false to say that Escher’s art conveys no beauty or that it conveys no pleasure. The beauty however, is just more disorienting in its style. Its aesthetic character requires discernment to see where image-consciousness was fooled in the realistic depictions. Without the type of metaphysical support that explains conditions for the possibility of aesthetic contemplation, Husserl’s aesthetics does not propose its purpose, such as grasping an absolute ideal. Nor does his aesthetic deny that ideal forms are at play. Husserl just simply does not address the why, opening the possibility that art such as Escher’s does indeed mediate aesthetic experience and performs harmoniously with the unreality found in aesthetic contemplation.

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Endnotes


2 Ibid., 29.


5 Ibid., 43, 51.

6 Ibid., 48.

7 Ibid., 50.


10 Ibid., 48.
11 Ibid., 18.
12 Ibid., 50.
13 Ibid., 168.
14 Ibid., 169.
15 Ibid., 169. The distinctions that Husserl draws here will be useful later in this paper.
16 Ibid., 168 (editor's note).
17 Ibid., 168.
18 Ibid., 39.
19 Ibid., 38.
20 Ibid., 40.
23 Husserl’s understanding of geometry is helpful here, but excluded for the sake of brevity.
25 The problem of identity is developed in a fuller version of this paper.
29 Ibid., 172.
31 Husserl, *Husserliana*, 44.
32 Ibid., 44.
34 Brough, “Depiction and Art,” 256.


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**Bibliography**


