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Marian Hobson

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

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# I

## ILLUSION AND LIKENESS

The illusion of art: this has often been characterised by a scornful twentieth century as a fascination, a passive trance in front of a work which has effaced all trace of its production, which presents itself as directly given or merely there; a branch of the bourgeois drug trade, to lull the consumer from all critical spirit and even all activity, to envelop him and insulate him, to act as a diving bell in which the plunge into unreality may be effected; a smudging over of contradictions, a conjuring up of an idealised harmony (see, for example, Brecht, 1966, pp. 217, 249).<sup>\*</sup> In such terms does the twentieth century reject what was the current eighteenth-century account of the audience's relation to art. Illusion is held now to be the rose colour of unconscious wishes; to give full rein to the spectator's emotional vampirism: 'We willingly overlook [such] contradictions when we are permitted to wallow in the spiritual launderings of Sophocles, in the sacrifices of Racine, in the runnings amok of Shakespeare, in which we try to get hold of the fine and mighty feelings of the principal personages in these stories' (Brecht, 1966, pp. 209–10).<sup>1</sup> Brecht socially and practically condemned the nineteenth century's onanistic use of the theatre, and illusion as its agent: the entering into the souls of others, the taking on of their experiences as if they were real, ensuring that the emotions given play are never directed onto the outside world. His *Verfremdungseffekt* was designed to disrupt it.

What was Marxist in Berlin has become metaphysical in Paris: the *nouvelle critique* has striven to expel or restrict illusion, stigma-

<sup>\*</sup> Bibliographical references in the text use the author–date system, except in the case of works by Diderot and Rousseau, which are given in short-title form. Full references will be found in the Bibliography, where a date in square brackets is used to indicate the date at which a book was actually written, if publication was significantly later.

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Marian Hobson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

tised as part of the 'metaphysics of presence' in Western thought. For the weak consumer of art it is a womb-like version of the search for the unmediated intuitive presence held rightly to be characteristic of some European philosophy. Criticism reflects practice: the *nouveau roman* constantly disturbs the narration to remind us of the medium, preventing an absorption in content by compelling attention to the form.

Such is the present ill repute of illusion. Whereby it is not, clearly, 'unreal' art forms which are accused of effecting this drug-like unreality, not symbolism, not surrealism; but it is rather naturalism, realism, and their progeny, the techniques of railway-kiosk literature, which are supposed to be the mind's morphine. Enemies and friends of illusion alike believe there is a relation between certain types of realism and illusion. Both enemies and friends accept, in one version or another, a proposition like 'the closer art is to nature/truth/reality, the greater will be the illusion', and some sophisticated enemies will wriggle out of this unsatisfactory formula by bidding higher for truth or reality: sentimental art is ultimately unreal, or less real than life-enhancing art (Leavis); bourgeois art is less practical/real because it doesn't produce real effects (Brecht); true art cannot use worn-out techniques (Boulez).

The difficulty we have in separating what seem polar opposites, truth/verisimilitude or reality/illusion, is historically conditioned, and derives from the eighteenth century. 'Illusion' was common currency in eighteenth-century aesthetics, and it was in terms of illusion that the century answered certain general questions about representation. But that specific answer has moulded the cast of those questions as we now ask them, so that any aesthetic available to us now uses 'illusion' explicitly or implicitly in taking up a position on them. To reject illusion in the terms discussed above is then to remain confined within the intellectual purlieu which 'illusion' was used to create, for in general, as Derrida has said,

Prétendre se débarrasser immédiatement des marques antérieures et passer, par décret, d'un geste simple, dans le dehors des oppositions classiques, c'est, outre le risque d'une interminable 'théologie négative', oublier que ces oppositions ne constituaient pas un système *donné*, une sorte de table anhistorique et foncièrement homogène, mais un espace dissymétrique et hiérarchisant, traversé par des forces et travaillé dans sa clôture par le dehors qu'il refoule. (Derrida, 1972a, p. 11)<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in certain modern criticism, one may find that illusion or surrogate concepts are expelled as undesirable aliens from modern writing: but the act of expulsion fails to take into account the dia-

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Marian Hobson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Illusion and likeness*

lectic between representation and form, between imaginative tissue and awareness of production. The failure is the more grave in that this dialectic forms the basis of the theory motivating the exclusion. Or, on the other hand, the concept of illusion may be present unacknowledged, at work surreptitiously in theories which are ostensibly moving in a different direction.

**Wherein illusion, being thrown out of the door, reenters through  
the window**

The expulsion of illusion has been attempted by Ricardou and Kristeva, among others. In his meaty little book, *Le Nouveau Roman*, Ricardou contrasts a novel's *dimension référentielle* with its *dimension littérale*, the story, to speak crudely, and the text as form, not meaning. *Littéralité*, characteristic of the new novel, is analysed with great care and inventiveness; *dimension référentielle* is not. We gather that this dimension is nearly related, perhaps equivalent, to *fascination*, and possibly to *crédibilité*.<sup>3</sup> It is held to originate in a mistake: 'Demander au récit qu'il fonctionne correctement, c'est exiger de lui qu'il nous donne l'*illusion*, aussi parfaite que possible, de l'entrée de Salomé dans la salle, entière et d'un seul coup [. . .]. Le bon fonctionnement du récit demande une ordonnance littérale telle que le lecteur puisse aisément la mettre en veilleuse et *prendre* Salomé *pour* un être de chair et de sang' which is equated with 'faire croire à l'absence de la dimension littérale' (Ricardou, 1973, pp. 30–1). *Illusion référentielle* and awareness of the text as matter, as *agencement*, are postulated as incompatible: 'En effet, l'attention du lecteur ne peut percevoir l'une qu'au détriment de l'autre, en l'effaçant au moins provisoirement' (Ricardou, 1973, p. 29). No reason is given for this incompatibility; it may be due to the influence of E. H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (see below, pp. 8ff.), but it can clearly be maintained only if the consumer's reaction to the story is as close as possible to a mistake. Ricardou's definition of 'illusion' is in fact a *repoussoir* – if illusion is to be interrupted and expelled vigorously then it must be as ridiculous as possible.<sup>4</sup> He accepts that illusion and literality are, in his definition, inseparable contraries: but the dialectic, the interplay in the excluded middle between false illusion and true text, is never worked out; the conditions of their inseparability are not examined.<sup>5</sup>

In a seminal article Julia Kristeva had earlier proffered a related opposition: 'La productivité dite texte' was opposed to 'la "littérature", le "vraisemblable"' (*vraisemblance* is the precursor of illu-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

sion; see below, pp. 32ff.). The *vraisemblable* is doubly defined: first as ‘semantic’, where to be *vraisemblable* is to resemble something already there (Ricardou’s reference) – the value of Kristeva’s account is that she is interested in the process of complying which this assumes; second as ‘syntactic’ (a covert attack on the first *nouveau roman*, this) which is defined as a reflexive relation holding between the parts and the whole (as such close to probability) in which the sequence of the discourse can be derived from the discourse as a whole. However this latter *vraisemblable* soon threatens to infect all speech: ‘Complice de la convention sociale (du principe naturel) et de la structure rhétorique, le vraisemblable serait plus profondément un complice de la parole: tout énoncé grammaticalement correct serait vraisemblable’ (Kristeva, 1969, pp. 214–15). In order that *vraisemblable* may remain pejorative, a twin concept, *sens*, must be brought in to take over the productivity of language and text. In Kristeva’s argument, it is the adjective *rhétorique* which acts as the razor separating what seems inseparable: ‘le vraisemblable est inhérent à la représentation rhétorique et se manifeste dans la rhétorique. Le sens est propre au langage comme représentation’ (Kristeva, 1969, p. 215). And this crucial distinction is finally reduced to its chronological position in the linguistic act: the *vraisemblable* ‘apparaît obligatoirement à la consommation du texte (par le public qui lit une “œuvre”, un “effet”’)’. So it is the gap between the creative artist and the passive public which jacks up the distinction between *sens* and *vraisemblance*. We have here the heritage of Dada: the consumer is the fall-guy. What is on one level rightly announced as a ‘contradiction [qui] constitue toute parole’ (p. 209) is, in a gesture close to that of Ricardou, effaced in evaluation.<sup>6</sup>

In these critics, illusion or its precursor *vraisemblance* is established as one term of a dialectical movement, but is then driven out: this causes the argument to implode. In a different type of theory dealing with realism, or more generally with representation, illusion is not hyperbolically defined and expelled; it is not defined at all, but acts as an unacknowledged or semi-acknowledged factor. Thus Philippe Hamon, seeking to redefine the terms of the problem in order to formulate a more valid answer (an attempt which makes his article one of the few useful works on realism available) rejects the question ‘comment la littérature copie-t-elle la réalité’ in favour of ‘comment la littérature nous fait-elle croire qu’elle copie la réalité’ (Hamon, 1973, p. 421). The question is ambiguous: does it bear on literature or on our ideas about literature? And

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Marian Hobson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Illusion and likeness*

down to this ambiguity it repeats eighteenth-century definitions of illusion: 'L'art consiste donc principalement à paroître historien lors même qu'on imagine, & à tromper agréablement par la liaison & la vraisemblance des faits' (Passe, 1749, p. 104).

Hamon, then, defines realism in terms of the reader's beliefs. But there is an ambiguity in the status he attributes to these beliefs – are they actual? This is clearly an untenable position: we do not, most of us, take even realist art for reality. Or does 'belief' do service for the concept of convention? That is, do we assume literature is aiming to copy reality, and approach any work with this assumption? Even in this hesitation between actual beliefs and convention, Hamon's phrase is true to its eighteenth-century origins.

Roland Barthes, too, in reaction against the rigour and anti-subjectivity of a certain structuralism, reintroduces the reader, his shifts of attention, his vicarious pleasure in the content:

Certains veulent un texte (un art, une peinture) sans ombre, coupé de 'l'idéologie dominante'; mais c'est vouloir un texte sans fécondité, sans productivité, un texte stérile (voyez le mythe de la Femme sans Ombre). Le texte a besoin de son ombre: cette ombre, c'est *un peu* d'idéologie, *un peu* de représentation, *un peu* de sujet: fantômes, poches, traînées, nuages, nécessaires: la subversion doit produire son propre *clair-obscur*. (Barthes, 1973, p. 53)

The matter, the 'ombre', of a text is not 'reality' as for Hamon; it does not cause a mistake; illusion is equated not with presence, but with *fading* of presence. Barthes is switching to the other tradition of the term 'illusion', to art as non-presence, to its ghost-like nature in which the mind dallies in an area between subject and object. The relation of the reader is thus not a mistake, but a voluntary–involuntary seduction. 'Beaucoup de lectures sont perverses, impliquant un clivage. De même que l'enfant sait que sa mère n'a pas de pénis et tout en même temps croit qu'elle en a un (économie dont Freud a montré la rentabilité), de même le lecteur peut dire sans cesse: "*je sais bien que ce ne sont que des mots, mais tout de même . . .* (je m'émeus comme si ces mots énonçaient une réalité)" ' (Barthes, 1973, p. 76).<sup>7</sup> The formulation is again close to the eighteenth-century terms: 'Je me doute bien que les Bergers [dans les Idylles] ne sont pas tels qu'on me les représente et je saurois bien, si je voulois, que ceux qu'on me peind sont imaginaires: mais je ne veux pas sçavoir & je me livre au plaisir qu'ils me font par le plaisir que j'ai à m'y livrer' (Rémond de Saint Mard, 1734, p. 48). This split in the reader, his love of and sadism towards the text, is an oscillation: involvement and consciousness

Cambridge University Press

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Marian Hobson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

run together and succeed each other in Barthes' brilliant metaphorical play on the erotic zones of the body; and the summing up is precisely that of illusion, the imaginary non-presence which feels like presence: 'C'est ce scintillement même qui séduit, ou encore: la mise en scène d'une apparition-disparition' (Barthes, 1973, p. 19).

Ricardou and Kristeva reject illusion or its precursor *vraisemblance*; in doing so they mutilate their argument, removing a contradictory factor which should have been investigated, not suppressed, for as the negative pole in the system they set up, it has inevitably shaped the structure of that system. Hamon and Barthes both take for granted the concept of illusion they use. If I have separated them, it is because this book will in part seek to explore the conditions of their difference. For Hamon, illusion is a homogeneous experience, for Barthes a series of waves of participation and retraction from the imaginative tissue of the work.

**Art and illusion**


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Socrates to Theatetus: And if someone thinks mustn't he think *something*? – Th: Yes, he must. – Soc. And if he thinks something, mustn't it be something real? – Th. Apparently. – Soc. And mustn't someone who is painting be painting something – and someone who is painting something be painting something real! – Well, tell me what the object of painting is: the picture of a man (e.g.), or the man that the picture portrays? Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 518

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What meaning can be attached to a formulation such as Hamon's: 'Comment la littérature nous fait-elle croire qu'elle copie la réalité?' I have already asked whether it is a question bearing on literature or on our ideas about literature; the problem may be widened by asking whether it bears on the relation of art to nature, or of Western man's opinion about this relation, or both? It is one of the greatneses of E. H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* that it asks such questions openly and assumes fully the history of 'illusion' which helped to frame them in the first place. Gombrich constantly relates the natural and cultural history of vision. He shows that if nature be taken as 'what we really see', we do *not* see retinal impressions nor a visual field, nor even pure appearance, so that an art claiming to imitate 'pure vision' is claiming nonsense. But does this mean that representation in art is merely a style, or a family of styles, a result of culture? And granted an intention to represent, is this a bizarre turn taken by Western art since the Greeks? For if the

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Marian Hobson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Illusion and likeness*

relation to nature of most Western art is well defined in terms of an intention to transmit information, as Gombrich thinks, then it is a cultural relation but inevitably one latched on to natural conditions. Both physiology and culture, Gombrich shows, determine our interpretation of a configuration of certain lines on a canvas as a representation of an object. We interpret according to what we expect to see. The adaptation of what the eye sees to what it expects to see takes place within a framework of possibilities which is not neutral; it is a scale hierarchised and emotionally alive, where tonality and meaning are acquired through a complex series of contrasting elements. Western perspective is thus correct, 'natural', if vision is monocular and the eye doesn't move – where it is restricted by a peep-hole, say. (But the eye has a natural tendency to move, and if it does not do so, in the end vision fails, as experiments with contact lenses have shown.) I believe Gombrich underestimated the cultural force of these restricting assumptions; they are not 'natural'. They may be inevitable simplifications in the development of the geometrisation of space, but as such, they have a history, they are particular developments made by a particular society<sup>8</sup> and imply a particular relation of the individual to the canvas. In fact, the interpenetration of culture and physiology goes very deep if we accept the experiments which seem to show that peoples living in a round culture – Zulus for instance – do not see perspective in quite the same way (Gregory, 1966, pp. 161ff.).

For Gombrich then, perspective has a natural basis: but the projection of a shape from three dimensions to two involves an inherent ambiguity. It can be effected in many different ways, as anamorphoses show, according to the angle of vision and the angle to the canvas of the object to be represented. Our natural and cultural experience makes us expect three-dimensional objects to be seen from certain angles and not from others. However many are the possible geometrical interpretations of what we see, 'we can never see ambiguity', 'we will always see an object at a distance, never an appearance of uncertain meaning' (Gombrich, 1962, p. 219).<sup>9</sup> This is as true of drawings of objects as it is of objects themselves. The trick drawing of the duck which viewed in another way can look like a rabbit, made famous by Wittgenstein, can never be seen as both at the same time. Gombrich holds that the case of the picture is the same: one cannot at the same time see the plane surface of the picture *and* what is represented, the battle horse or scene (Gombrich, 1962, p. 237). It is in this way that the term 'illusion' is justified; it is what happens when we see something the picture is of. 'The character of that illusion [is that] in certain circum-

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Marian Hobson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

stances we would be unable to *disprove* that a *trompe-l'œil* is “real” – unless, that is, we could apply some movement test either by touching it or by shifting our position’ (Gombrich, 1962, p. 233). An eighteenth-century definition again, this time deliberately assumed, though it has the disadvantage of conflicting with other of Gombrich’s insights.<sup>10</sup> He is surely right in his account of the development of painting: painters have taught us to interpret cues to shape and depth, in ways related to the functioning of the celebrated visual illusions. But the assimilation of specific visual illusions to the *whole* of painting is as surely excessive. It neglects the problem raised by Theatetus: ‘Tell me what the object of painting is, the picture of a man or the man that the picture portrays?’ The viewer can see the *picture of a man*, not merely either the man or the dabs of paint. There is a kind of imbrication inherent in all images; we do not ever ‘see an appearance’. But what images do – and this is perhaps the source of their power, and of the awe with which they have been regarded – is to make us aware of an *appearance of something*. For an image ‘in revealing itself [. . .] also reveals that which it reproduces’ (Heidegger, 1962, p. 98), and this process of being given as well as being given as appearance is infinitely relayable. Any image can contain an image: ‘From such a reproduction, it is possible to make a new reproduction, e.g., one may photograph a death mask. This second reproduction immediately represents the death mask and thus reveals the “image” (the immediate aspect) of the deceased himself. The photograph of the death mask as the reproduction of a reproduction is itself an image but only because it provides an “image” of the dead, i.e., shows how the dead person appears, or rather, appeared’ (Heidegger, 1962, p. 98). The mind can thus oscillate from the image of a thing to the thing the image is of: yet only contemplation of the latter is taken into account by Gombrich, in accordance with his discussion of structures of vision in terms of perception rather than of the imagination.

Seeing the subject of a picture and seeing its surface are both types of perception for Gombrich: but they are mutually exclusive. Husserl accepts this sealing off of illusion, but opposes it not to another perception, but as perception to the work of the imagination. The opposition is not between subject and surface, but between a mistake (a perception) and a seeing an image *of*: ‘As long as we *are* tricked, we experience a perfectly good percept: we see a lady and not a waxwork figure that only represents a lady [. . .]. The same matter is at one time matter for a percept and at another

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11502-5 - The Object of Art: The Theory of Illusion in Eighteenth-Century France

Marian Hobson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Illusion and likeness*

time matter for a mere perceptual fiction, but both can evidently not be combined. A percept cannot also fictitiously construct what it perceives and a fiction cannot also perceive what it constructs' (Husserl, 1970, vol. II, p. 609).<sup>11</sup> That the image should refer beyond itself is however essential to Gombrich's own account of Greek art, the crucial turning in Western art. He shows how it was that the onlooker was systematically encouraged to look at art in terms of appearance, as representing, not being. Robert Klein has commented: 'Le réalisme en art est la première conséquence de l'irréalisation corrélatrice du modèle et de l'œuvre (c'est-à-dire, que l'apparence et l'imaginaire sont psychologiquement du même ordre)' (Klein, 1970, p. 399).<sup>12</sup> Illusion as an aim in art is possible only when the work represents, not when it is.

That the picture could not be simultaneously perceived as plane and as a subject was with Gombrich a psychological incompatibility. For Husserl and also for Sartre it is perception and imagination which are incompatible: the imagination contains within itself the postulating of what is seen as represented, not real. The incompatibility is both logical and ontological. For Gombrich, as in the analysis of realism or the intention of realism by Hamon, what was at stake was the production of the effect of reality; for Sartre, as for Barthes, the work is a kind of phantom. According to Sartre, the 'conscience imageante', the positing of what is seen as represented, is a negation. The work of art is 'posited as unreal' and this positing is an integral part of the imaginative participation the work incites, and not a breaking of the imaginative circuit by reflexion. The image is not immanent in consciousness (and Sartre follows Husserl's critique of Hume here), the mind is not a box with pictures inside it. Images are *objets fantômes*; 'ils semblent se présenter comme une négation de la condition d'être dans le monde' (Sartre, 1940, p. 175).<sup>13</sup> What in Gombrich is perceptual inability to see the picture both as object and as image is with Sartre power to make unreal, which finally becomes the definition of imagination and the source of human liberty. 'Nous voyons donc que la conscience, pour produire l'objet en image *Charles VIII*, doit pouvoir nier la réalité du tableau et qu'elle ne saurait nier cette réalité qu'en prenant du recul par rapport à la réalité saisie dans sa totalité' (Sartre, 1940, p. 233). Precisely, to seize reality in its totality and to postulate the work of art as unreal outside that totality, is to negate the world. 'L'acte imaginaire est à la fois *constituant, isolant et anéantissant*' (Sartre, 1940, p. 230). The work is thus unreal and real at the same time.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the subject of the work is real and unreal, this time not in