

Artistic ideas regarding 'Print Gallery' by M.C. Escher

andréGénard
Freelance artist
Sint Andriesplaats 18
Antwerpen B-2000, Belgium
E-mail: info@genard.be

Abstract

The blank, circular area in the centre of the lithography 'Print Gallery' ('Prententoonstelling' 1956), by M.C. Escher (1898-1972) was examined and 'filled in' in the year 2000. This was done simply by reconstructing the circumstances in which the print was created, and in particular by picking up the drawing process where Escher had stopped. Of course, the question remains whether Escher had ever intended to 'fill in' that blank, circular area.

1. Introduction : an insight on the print according to the method advised by M.C. Escher.

According to Escher^[1], in order to explore the print it is best to start in the lower right corner (Fig. 1). Right there is the entrance of the print gallery in which artwork is exhibited. Through window beams the viewer sees in fact works of Escher himself. These are hung side by side, enlarging as the viewer's gaze continues to move along the gallery to the left of the print. There a young man is looking at one particular print showing a ship at anchor. The top half of the print is filled with a drawing of a seaport town. Back to the right of the print the attention is drawn to the upper floor of a house. A woman looks out at an open window apparently in eye-contact with the young man (or is he rather looking at the boy on the roof?), and underneath Escher drew a glasshouse that is being supported by the window beams of the print gallery itself. This final turn concludes the circular movement. Regarding the so-called 'blank', Escher explains it as being a guide for the viewer to take the journey through the print.

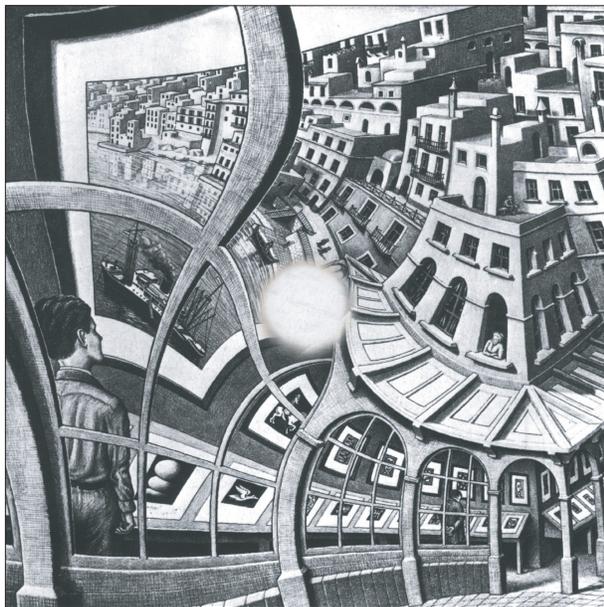


Figure 1:
The original 'Print Gallery'.

To enable himself drawing his lithography Escher made use of a self-designed grid which turned out to be known as a 'Riemann-plane', so named after the German mathematician Bernhard Riemann (1826-1866) (Fig. 2). He picked out, it seems, particular curved lines from his grid, selecting the most relevant for that part of the print he was drawing. The best example for this can be seen in the upper left side, in which a curved window framework is drawn. However, closer examination shows Escher was no slave to the grid, as his drawing regularly moves away from it. The elaborate network of the grid he carefully continued towards the centre even suggests that, at least, he may have had thoughts on filling in the centre. Considering his passion for completeness and his skill of drawing to nearly microscopic detail, with a few lines and some textures the filling of the centre would not have caused him much trouble (Fig. 3), which comforts us in the thought that Escher finally has deliberately completed the print as is.

2. Refining the Riemann-plane.

The pivotal issue in the case of ‘Print Gallery’ can be reduced to the question of WHAT could Escher have intended to draw in the centre of the print, if anything. For in doing so he would have been obliged to fit in ‘something’ that would have looked natural in the rest of the landscape. Indeed, the central square (the ‘heart’ of the grid), looks rather out of place in the landscape (Fig. 4). However, under the assumption that he had ever sought filling in the blank, among the number of possibilities, something occurred to us he also could have managed easily, using lateral thinking processes : by refining the Riemann-plane as shown here (Fig. 5), resizing the original centre square (represented by a red plane on the illustration) approximately by half towards the centre, could indeed have looked in better harmony with the rest of the landscape, and would have been a far easier ‘something’ to fill in, as the next illustration shows (Fig. 6).

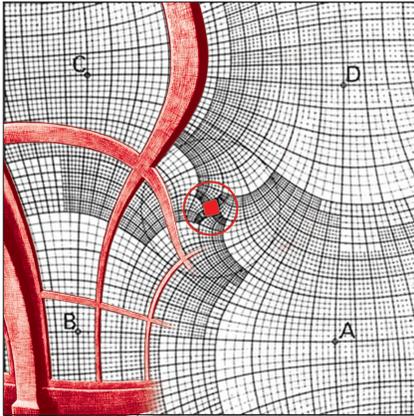


Figure 2:

Grid with the windowbeam (in red).

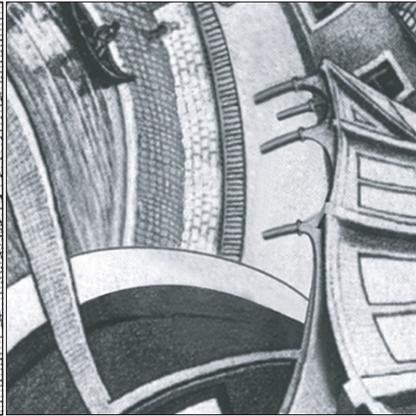


Figure 3:

The centre without ‘the blank’.

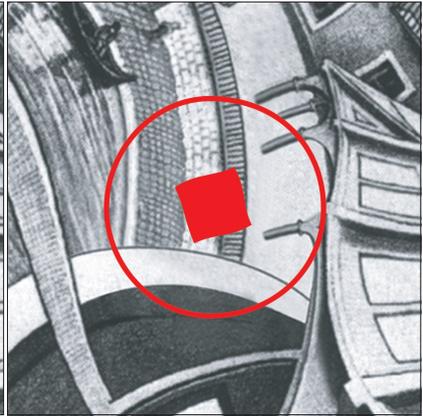


Figure 4:

Original main square in the print.

Yet, with this new proportion that suits the surroundings, closer scrutiny however shows that it still occupies an odd position in the setting. The square still seems to be ‘hanging in the air’ between the balcony and the key wall. Therefore, the idea could emerge of adding a stone staircase, comparable with the one drawn somewhat to the left on the print, to allow for two persons to be positioned to hold the resized central square on either side, and therefore, according to the viewers’ interpretation, ascending or descending the staircase. Further inspection reveals that in this peculiar instance of a possible filling of the blank the two persons could feature similar looks - that of Escher himself as if they were twin brothers (Fig. 7).

From an artistic point of view this improbable fill could be seen as a possible opportunity for Escher to have given expression to his philosophic view on life ^[2]: ‘I tend to a dualistic view on life. I hardly know the joy of the free painter who uses colour on behalf of colour itself, for myself I only apply colour according to the need of the shapes I create, in case I am forced by more than binary of my motives. ‘Print Gallery’ is another form of dualism: viewer and viewed, two persons merge into one figure. It is not the one or the other, but both at the same time.’

3. ‘The Droste-effect’.

The keystone now to complete this alternative ‘filling in’ could be entering the complete image of ‘Print Gallery’ into the resized centre square, thus providing a ‘Droste-effect’ to the whole picture (Fig. 8). However, it must be said, this does not necessarily mean a second ‘eternal loop’ to ‘Print Gallery’ is being added, as will be pointed out next. Prior to this, some background information on the Droste effect may be appropriate.

The examination of the Droste effect should start off with the original purpose of manufacturer Droste, selling cocoa in a measurable unit: a box (preferably as attractive as the base product itself). Initially, the problem was that the cocoa powder appeared too abstract once displayed on the packaging. A problem that does not occur with coffee beans, for example: those remain recognizable. The next - and apparent - option was to display the box it-

self on the packaging (Fig. 9). In doing so, the lack of attraction by the base product (cocoa) was compensated by the curiosity of the consumer regarding the Droste effect. Around 1900 an effective marketing tool, it seems !

Most likely the image of the ‘nurse’ on the box was the work of a Dutch artist, H.M.J. Misset (1875-1958), who was inspired by a pastel drawing of the Swiss painter J.E. Liotard (1702-1789) : ‘La serveuse de chocolat’, also known as ‘La belle chocolatière’. The term ‘Droste-effect’ was introduced in the seventies by a Dutch journalist and poet, Nico Scheepmaker (1930-1990)^[3]. In literature the Droste effect is commonly described as follows: ‘Displayed on a tin can packaging there is a nurse holding a tray on which a similar tin can is drawn. On that tin can one sees a similar display, and so on.’ Remarkable in this description of the Droste effect is that it ends with the words ‘and so on’. This suggests that there is more to describe than words can convey, as it points to the concept of infinity. However, there is a distinct difference between the effect and that concept.

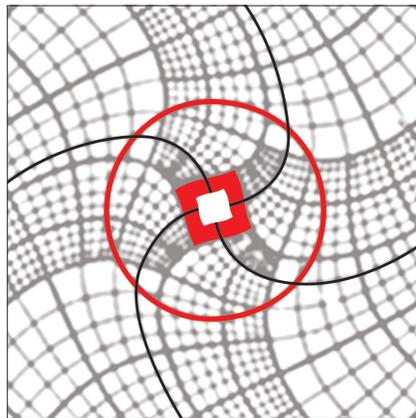


Figure 5:
The grid refined towards centre.

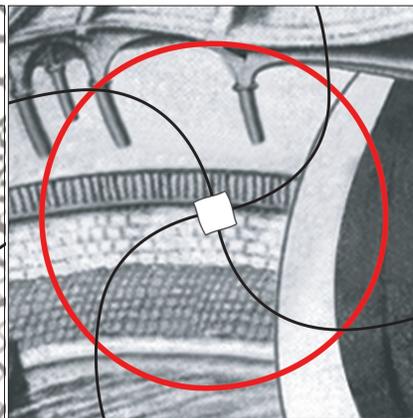


Figure 6:
Resized main square in the print.

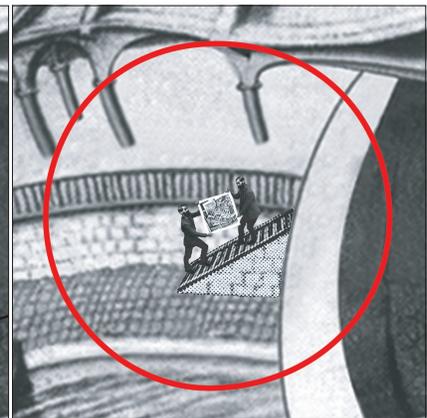


Figure 7:
Adding a ‘Droste-effect’ to the print.

Once we accept the box as a reference unit, the description of the Droste effect is quite simple: it occurs to the extent that the reference unit is recognizable as such. This way the effect can be described as for example two-level or three-level. When two mirrors are placed opposite towards each other, a ten-level or twelve-level effect may be recognized. However, once the reference unit has become indistinct the Droste effect could be considered ended.

In order to continue the further description of what is being observed, we could consider a way of looking at an object, introduced to us by the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte (1898-1967)^[4]. His 1928 painting entitled ‘La Trahison des Images’ (‘The betrayal of images.’) reminds us that what we see in fact is just paint on canvas (Fig. 10). As in the case of the Droste box we see mere ink coating on a tin can, not infinity.

To fully enjoy this particular painting by Magritte, we need to understand it. For that reason he added a painted sentence to it saying: ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe.’ (‘This is not a pipe.’). This sentence is urging the viewer to switch from looking to reading. This also holds for the version of ‘Print Gallery’ in which the Droste effect is as good as invisible. To enjoy what it is about, the viewer needs to switch from looking to reading. However, in contrast with the one sentence that is integrated into the painting of Magritte, it is impossible to integrate *this paper* into this version of the print. Therefore another concept is proposed which introduces an effect that can be described as being more profound, however it may require some unrestrained lateral or creative thinking.

4. The ‘New Clothes’ effect.

Imagine someone who is unfamiliar with the original ‘Print Gallery’ and is looking at this version. He or she may spot the two figures on the stone staircase, holding ‘something square-like’, but it is unlikely that the Droste effect would be recognized. At the most - according to Magritte’s theory - the person could be aware of looking at ink on paper. Now, in case he or she was informed, either by a text or by someone explaining,

the image would no longer reach the viewer through sensory perception but by means of an intellectual process. It would be a matter of ‘acknowledgment’ which is well illustrated in a tale of the Danish writer H.C. Andersen (1805-1875): ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ [5]. In short the story is about ‘invisible clothes’ worn by an emperor. In spite of a child’s remark saying the emperor is in underwear, he gracefully continues his journey through the crowd, whose individuals keep unwilling to openly admit the reality to their next fellow in order not to appear as ‘ignorant’ and so discrediting their own status. The clothes are turned into a ‘mental image’ through acknowledgement. This also holds for this particular version of ‘Print Gallery’. The added effect may therefore be described as a New Clothes effect, as the key-image containing the Droste effect can not be recognized nor can it’s presence be denied.



Figure 8:
A filled in ‘Print Gallery’.

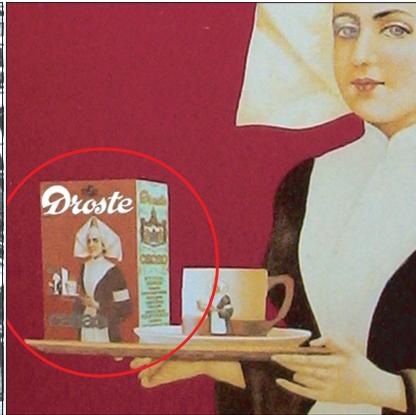


Figure 9:
Detail of the Droste packaging.



Figure 10:
Magritte’s ‘La Trahison des Images’.

Conclusion

It is possible to fill in ‘Print Gallery’ from an artistic point of view, using ordinary desktop publishing tools and ‘natural mathematics’ M.C. Escher was familiar with. Closer scrutiny reveals that it could be more accurate to describe the added effect as a New Clothes effect, rather than a Droste effect.

Acknowledgements

I’d like to thank Helena, Bea, Marita, Lucas, Christopher, and Sam.

References

- [1] M.C. Escher, Wim Hazeu, *M.C. Escher, een biografie*, Meulenhoff, Amsterdam, 1998.
- [2] Wim Hazeu, *M.C. Escher, een biografie*, p. 374, 1998.
- [3] http://www.droste.nl/data/content/engels/study_material.php,
- [4] <http://foucault.info/documents/foucault.thisIsNotaPipe.en.html>
- [5] H.C. Andersen, retold by Andrew Matthews, *The emperor’s new clothes*, Orchard, London, 2000.
- [6] andréGénard, www.escher.be

All M.C. Escher Works & Texts © The M.C. Escher Company-Baarn-Netherland
Copyright © 1998 M.C. Escher Stichting / Cordon Art / Wim Hazeu