

Art with a Double Meaning

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Abstract

Artists have many sources of ideas, just as they have a favorite medium. Here I describe how I was inspired by the work of poets William Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe and writer Jules Verne to create etchings with double meaning. My artworks interpret their writings and also encode hidden anamorphic portraits of the writers, revealed only through viewing in a special way. For Poe, I not only used his poem *The Raven* but also his essay *The Philosophy of Composition* to guide my creation process, just as he did for the poem.

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I studied graphic design at the University of Art and Design in Budapest where my diploma works were poster designs; later I started to make animated films, as well. The strange duality of posters—they mean different things if seen from a distance and from close up—and the miracle of the moving image led me to experiment with illusion in fine arts. All this happened in the seventies and eighties in the previous century in that part of the world where speaking enigmatically had a strange political piquancy. Enigmas and illusion lead to anamorphosis, a design technique well-known in the Baroque era and later forgotten.

This two-dimensional technique uses a special point of view or a mirroring object to reveal the secret of the distorted image. I have been making experiments with anamorphoses for quite some time: I drew the first one in the late 1970s. My interest was not only in the resurrection of anamorphoses but to improve and further develop this old-fashioned genre.

It is unnecessary to discuss anamorphoses in detail with the participants of the Bridges Conference since there has been much discourse on them, recently at Bridges Leeuwarden by James Hunt and John Sharp, and, as far as I know, at Bridges Pécs, Jan Marcusé is going to lecture about them. Of course, if you want to draw anamorphoses, you have to understand geometry and need to study the science of perspective. But once you take it up, sooner or later you will also fall in love with it. As for me, I want to get others to fall in love with anamorphoses, and maybe this is the reason for this short note.

Figure 1 gives a visual summary of a captropic, or mirror anamorphosis of a Greek column. To construct one, I use a grid of squares that was already in use by the early Middle Ages to enlarge or to reduce an image. It might have been Alberti to be the first one to use such grids to distort an image in perspective; however, to distort the grid of squares into circle arcs and radii, that is, to transform it into a cylindrical anamorphosis was a Parisian monk's, Jean-Francois Nicéron's invention.

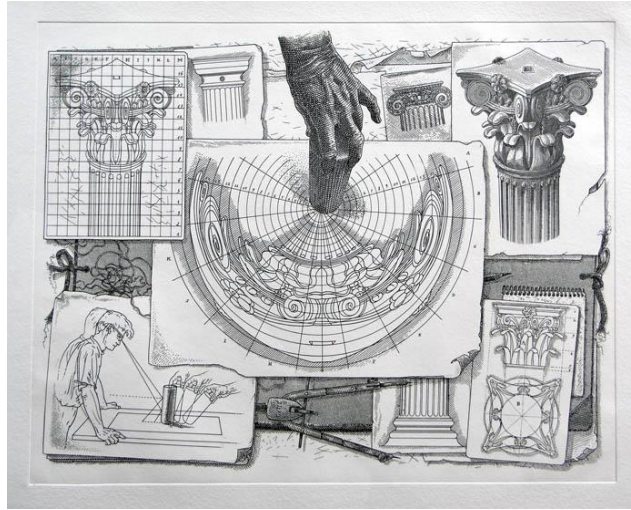


Figure 1: *Anamorphosis with Column 1*, 1994, etching, 550 x 395 mm

Shakespeare

*For sorrow's eye, glazed with blinding tears,
Divides one thing entire to many objects;
Like perspectives which, rightly gaz'd upon,
Show **nothing but confusion** - eyed awry,
Distinguish form. [2]*

This short poem occurs in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, and shows that Shakespeare was well aware of the technique of anamorphosis. Also the theatre-goers of the time in London must have known it, although it was not yet named "anamorphosis" but "the perspective."

"There is nothing but confusion" reads Shakespeare's text. In representing this visually, that means that there should be only the chaos of a confused, almost unrecognizable base image. But, instead of having a totally confused image, I intend to bring some sense to the base anamorphosis, and to give it meaning on its own. "Eyed awry, Distinguish form" — a second reading of the etching, eyeing it from a different viewpoint, will reveal a hidden form. The ambiguous layers revealed by this approach make use of the analogy or contrast between the two images within the same picture, which are, in the meantime, independent from each other. This approach also can bring a philosophical reading to these anamorphoses.

In my etching of *The Theatre of Shakespeare*, the two images complete each other in a thematic way. If we look at it from the front (Figure 2), as we usually do in the case of a picture, we will see a theatre (Shakespeare's Globe Theatre) from the sixteenth century, with a pointed roof over the stage. There are actors, the audience, and people gazing around. In the foreground at the right, two members of the audience are actively engaged, and a mustached artist (guess who?) is trying to capture a scene. If we, the viewers of the etching, step to the right side of the exceptionally wide panoramic picture and look at it from a narrow acute angle from which the picture is seen as a narrow strip, a second picture is revealed. The elements of the theatre not only disappear but also transform into a portrayal of Shakespeare. The picture of a busy theatre becomes a portrait (Figure 3).



Figure 2: *Front view. The Theatre of Shakespeare, 1998.*
Copperplate etching, aquarelle colouring, 1000 x 360 mm



Figure 3: *The Theatre of Shakespeare, 1998. Side view.*

Jules Verne

“The Pole’s (...) so special, my good Johnson, because it’s the only point of the globe that is motionless, while every other point turns at great speed.” [3] This special spot is where Captain Hatteras in *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* by Jules Verne is heading. He is a character with the typical duality of Verne’s figures, since he passes through romantically exaggerated extreme adventures while he is obsessed to solve one of the relevant scientific problems of his time. For Captain Hatteras, this problem is the exploration of the North Pole. At the time, the book was published in 1866, the expeditions already were relatively close to the Pole, but the Norwegian explorer Amundsen could only reach it in 1926. Verne’s protagonist maniacally, and in the end as a true madman, is after the Pole. There is a similar special point that you as the spectator of an anamorphosis should discover or, if you like, that is the spot where you should place a mirror cylinder in order to solve the riddle and to realize the meaning of the elements in the picture.

In the illustration for *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* I used a mirror anamorphosis to encode double meaning in my etching. If you place the etching on a flat surface, and place a mirror cylinder with its base on the sun-disk, it will reflect the face of the French writer (Figure 5). The polar landscape is transformed into a portrait.



Figure 4: Jules Verne Anamorphosis, 1983, offset print, 500 x 700 mm.



Figure 5: Jules Verne Anamorphosis with mirror cylinder. Mirror size: 60 x 100 mm

Edgar Allen Poe

*Leave my loneliness unbroken! — quit the bust above my door!
 Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!’’
 Quoth the Raven, ‘Nevermore’.
 And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
 On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
 And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,
 And the lamplight o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
 And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
 Shall be lifted — nevermore! [4]*

Thus ends the poem *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe [4]. Poe wrote an essay, *The Philosophy of Composition* [5], in which he offers a radical theory on the creative process as he describes what lies behind his poem. Inspiration or design? When speaking about a work of art, you may want to know which of these predominated in its creation. Poe also asked this question and his answer was that a work of art can be created consciously “with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.”

The Raven remains one of the most widely recognized and respected poems in literature. But the scene it describes is astonishing, embarrassing and even faintly comic. A talking raven lands in a room: at

a first reading (or listening), you can hardly take it seriously. However, with Poe, you can never tell what he takes seriously and how seriously he takes it. An idea making no sense could end in a question of life and death, and sentences that sound straightforward may be intended as parodies. Therefore his *Philosophy of Composition* too has to be read with certain reservations. Who would believe Poe's claim that intuition is not needed to compose poems, that inspiration does not exist? That all you need to compose a poetical work is a logical, step-by-step design and that effects have to be cautiously and precisely calculated?

My first step translating the poem visually was to show the time and the place, or at least what we know of it from the text. Clearly, it is the home of the narrator, easily depicted through "homely" disorder (shoes kicked off, books all over the place, etc.). Rather than refer to the fact that the poem was written in 1845, I depicted these objects as of today. Also, I "left" some of the devices there that I needed for designing my anamorphosis (Figure 6).



Figure 6: *The Raven (Edgar Allan Poe Anamorphosis) 2006.*
Copperplate etching coloured with aquarelle, 360 x 500 mm

Picturing the precise time of day was more complex—the poem says it is midnight. The geometrical equivalent of midnight in the image is symmetry, and so I used a sphere within a square as the basic structure of the composition and distinctly highlighted its centre. The symmetry, present in Poe's poem as well, is the result of viewing from above, a bird's-eye perspective. But to picture a top-view, with the raven's eye view of the milieu would definitely not be enough to fully interpret the situation. To depict the raven itself would be perhaps overdoing it.

This problem also goes back to the question of whether in the poem a raven really does make its appearance, or is only the product of the narrator's imagination. The greatest virtue of the poem is that it does not come down decisively on either side. If a real raven is depicted, then a side is taken. Is it possible for the illustrator, as it was for Poe, to keep an open mind? Yes, it is, if a depiction of the bird is avoided, and only its shadow, its image in a mirror, is represented. My illustration presents all three possibilities. The dark shade in the middle of the picture can be taken as the shadow of the bird hovering above; in the wine cup, the beat of a wing is reflected; the illustrations in a natural history book lying open on the table also depict a raven.

The next issue is the identity of the narrator. The poem begins,

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door. [4]*

He hovers between sleep and wakefulness, hence he is shown as slumped over the table. This also circumvents the question of whether Poe and the narrator are the same. The empty armchair opposite this figure and the drapery on it refer to the loss of the lady in the poem. To symbolize love, two books are intertwined.

In *The Philosophy of Composition* Poe argues at length that the monotony of the frequently-repeated refrain lends the poem its melancholy. In the illustration, there is a monotony in the repetitive pattern of the parquet floor, and in the books and the sheets of paper scattered everywhere. The books and their illustrations bear out Poe's notion that consciousness and calculation, intellect instead of "fine frenzy" lead the creative process. None of the important details should be omitted. The open books allowed me to include the bust of Pallas Athene, highlighted by Poe in his poem.

On re-reading the poem or Poe's comments on its creation, one senses that he is intentionally hiding something. The blurred mystical-metaphysicality of the poem and the provocative brainstorming of *The Philosophy of Composition* seem to distract the reader. It is so that you wouldn't recognize a soul torn by fear and doubt, so that you wouldn't take the first-person narrator seriously, so that you wouldn't identify him with Poe. The poet did not have a dead lover called Lenore, his room did not contain a bust of Pallas Athene; yet there is no doubt that the shadow of the raven hovers over Poe's soul, destiny and life. The fifth line of the penultimate stanza ("Take thy beak from out my heart") confirms that here it is the poet speaking and not his narrator, slumped over his books. This is the first metaphor that re-interprets the whole poem as it has developed and clarifies the symbolic character of the bird.

Someone viewing my illustration when it lies flat will place a cylindrical mirror over the reflection of the raven's wing in the wine glass; in so doing, they emphasize the metaphoric interpretation of the poem and of the picture. In the mirror is reflected Edgar Allan Poe's virtual face, made up of the objects that lie in the etching horizontally, the requisites of the illustration for *The Raven*. Once the cylinder is raised, the face disappears and what is left are these scattered objects, the shades, the man lying on his face and the empty room.



Figure 7: *Placing a mirror cylinder on the coloured engraving, mirror size: 60 x 100 mm*



Figure 8: *Looking at the image in the mirror reveals Edgar Allan Poe.*

Poe claims in his essay that the most important effect to be created in a work of art is that which allows it to be interpreted backwards. His conclusion explains all the parts of the composition and their role in the whole. In fact, the same backwards interpretation is at work in an anamorphosis that has a double meaning, since by placing a cylindrical mirror onto the centre of the paper, the viewer will realize why certain objects have been placed in the picture.

How can you distort an image so that it only becomes visible and recognizable in a mirror of the right size and from a certain angle? Here is how I created *The Raven* etching. I selected a photograph of Poe and made a line drawing from it (Figure 9, left). Then I produced a reflection of the picture (so that when its reflection appears in the mirror, the original image can be seen). I drew a grid of 11 columns and 9 rows upon the picture, adding numbers and letters for the sake of clarity. The drawing was first reflected vertically, and then horizontally to be readied to turn into the anamorphosis (Figure 9, right).

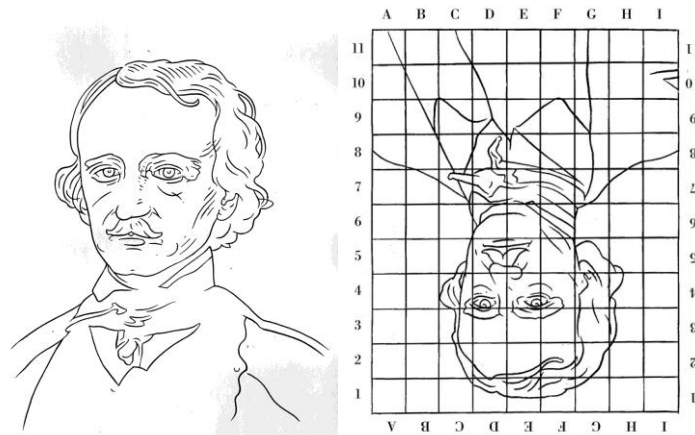


Figure 9: *Poe's photograph converted to a line drawing, then inverted and transferred to the grid.*

Next, I drew eleven equally-spaced concentric circles from the centre of the illustration, and split the area into nine pie slices. In other words, I made a distorted form of the grid of squares. I then had to redraw the image in each small square exactly deformed to fit into the corresponding annular region (Figure 10). I placed the cylindrical mirror from time to time onto the centre to check the work. Once the squares were filled in correctly, Poe's image appeared in the mirror. Now came the most interesting part: I had to figure out how the elements of the distorted image could be replaced by other objects that would be in the picture. I had to see a round desk-top as the curve of the forehead, a pen or a pencil as an eyebrow, a watch as a necktie, the shadow of the raven as the writer's waistcoat, and so on. I drew these objects conventionally then arranged them in the composition (Figure 10).

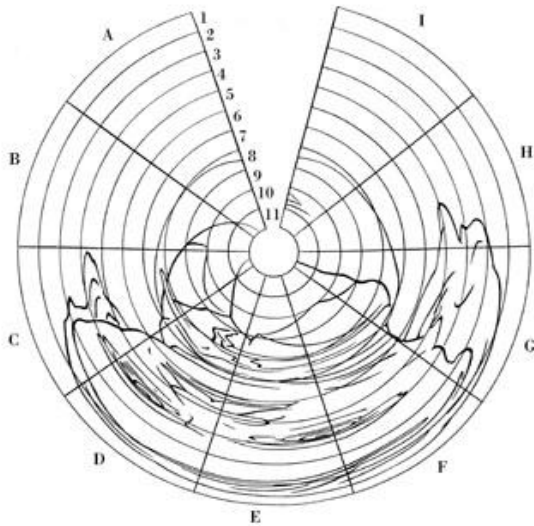


Figure 10: The drawing of Poe transferred to the circular grid.

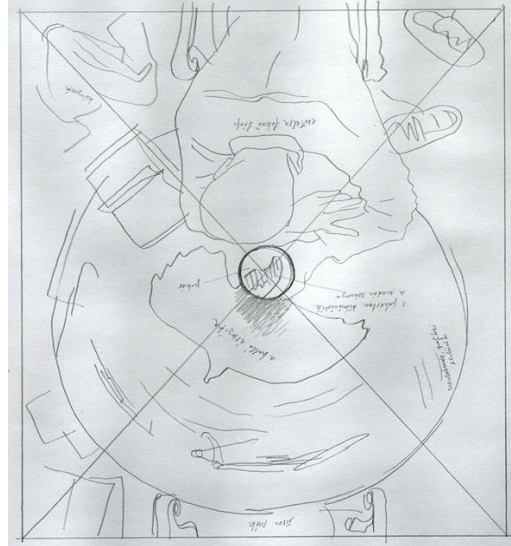


Figure 11: The objects arranged in the positions needed on the distorted image.

I find it interesting that Poe expressed great interest in the characteristics of optics and visual perception. In his short story, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* [6], the detective Auguste Dupin explains how the details and the different viewpoints should be used to examine something as a whole—and then, with surprising precision, he describes the technique of distorted perception.

Reflections

Truth is not always in a deep well. In fact, as to most important knowledge, I do believe that it is invariably superficial. The depth lies in the valleys where we seek it, and not upon the mountaintops where it is found. This is well typified in the contemplation of the heavenly bodies. To look at a star by successive glances—to view it in a side-long way, by turning the exterior portions of the retina toward it (these are more susceptible to feeble impressions of light than the interior) to behold the star distinctly—is to have the best appreciation of its luster. This lustre grows dim exactly in proportion to the degree we turn our vision fully upon it. A greater number of rays actually fall upon the eye in the latter case, but in the former, there is a more refined capacity for comprehension.

When designing my anamorphoses, I attempted to work with a conscious and calculating mind, but I was also aware of traps that such childish logic might lead me into. All I could hope for was that the “inexplicable” too, will always have a role in all kinds of creative work.

References

Portions of this essay are based on a recent article of mine. [7]

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