4 Surface, viewpoint and narrative space

Now there was no land to be seen, the horizon was a circle of water and the night sky was lit up by the moon.

J.W. Goethe *Die Italienische Reise*, 30th March 1787.

In the diary for his *Italian Journey,* Goethe recounts a sea voyage from Naples to Sicily undertaken at the end of March 1787, during which the vessel's progress was delayed as a result of "adverse winds". An initial bout of seasickness confined the author to his cabin but the ensuing calm led him to describe the voyage as a "decisive event". Having arrived in Sicily after an extended trip, Goethe remembers the particular sensation of being surrounded entirely by water with no reference point other than the horizon. He describes this horizon as a "simple, noble line" (W.H. Auden's translation), the singular perception of which profoundly affected his conception of self in relation to world. "No-one who has never seen himself surrounded on all sides by nothing but the sea can have a true perception of the world and his own relation to it. The simple, noble line of the marine horizon has given me, as a landscape painter, quite new ideas."[1] One imagines the beleaguered vessel in the midst of the ocean as if seen from above with the observer occupying the centre of a vast circle indicating the limits of his vision. The simple, noble line of the horizon is straight and level when viewed from our usual vantage point five feet or so above ground - or sea - level but can be imagined, in the terms offered by Goethe's account, as a segment of the circumference of our visual field itself. On the circumference of this field, the horizon is merely the shortest distance between two points. Yet while its form in *plan* can be conceived of as an arc - a segment of the visual field - and in *elevation* as a straight line, any increase in the observer's altitude, a flight in an aeroplane for example, turns the line into an object. It begins to define the edge of the world. The line of the horizon both indicates our relative proximity to the terrestrial surface of the globe and acts as the demarcation of the visible world. It is as much a function of vision itself as it is a property of the space external to us. In a sense, it will always maintain its distance and elude attempts to reach it: the horizon line represents absolute distance in purely visual terms.

1. J.W. Goethe *Italian Journey* (trans. W.H. Auden & E. Mayer), London: Collins 1962, pp215-220.

Figure 18
Blinky Palermo *Stoffbild, dunkelblau-grau*
1969

In an essay on the work of the German painter, Blinky Palermo, Max Wechsler discusses the artist's work in terms of the use of pure colour to define the flatness of a picture plane to such an extent that it can appear to open out into or onto a space and he relates this sensation to what he calls Goethe's *horizon experience*.[2] The resolute flatness of Palermo's paintings asserts the 'hereness' of the surface whilst simultaneously seeming to invite projection and

2. Max Wechsler 'Palermo', *Blinky Palermo 1943-1977* (eds. E. Maas & D. Greenidge), New York: Delano Greenidge Editions 1989, pp32-33.

absorption - both optical and mental - into depth. In Palermo's cloth-paintings or *Stoffbilder*, the picture is literally made of lengths of monochrome fabric which are sewn together and stretched over a frame. Colour and material are one and the same, they coexist on, or rather *in*, the same plane. These pictures typically contain two or three bands of fabric and are bisected by the horizontal seams demarcating the separate areas. In *Stoffbild, dunkelblau-grau* (1969, figure 18), a mid grey fabric occupies the lower quarter of the square format with the rest being taken up by a dark blue-grey. The hyphen (-) of the title which separates the words describing the picture's colours can be mentally stretched to form what can be read simply as the divide between above and below or perhaps also as the line of a horizon. The line exists only as a result of one colour area ending and another beginning; the separation is tangible in purely two dimensional terms as we can literally see the join. Yet it serves also as a demarcation between *here* and *there*, it creates the illusion of a space simply through the juxtaposition of different areas of colour. If the *seen* horizon indicates the limits of our visual field, both picture surface and pictured horizon can be representative of the threshold and extent of that field. The portion of lighter grey fabric in Palermo's painting can serve as the horizontal surface stretching from here to infinity, offering the eye a means of travelling to the furthest perceivable point but all the while reminding it of the picture's flatness. The horizontal seam in Palermo's cloth picture is both what it *is*, a seam, but also an intersection of our circular field of vision, a representation of Goethe's *horizon experience*, which Wechsler interprets as "an intuitive and immediate consciousness of the uncertainty of the conditions on the peripheries of perception, where line, plane and space resist their logical definitions and become fictional elements."[3]

3. Ibid. p32.

In her discussion of the 'art of describing' in 17th Century Dutch painting, Svetlana Alpers proposes an alternative means of analysing the specific properties of the so-called 'Northern' mode of representation in terms of the picturing processes of the eye and camera obscura.[4] She uses Kepler's account of the physical aspects of seeing - the eye almost as a camera - to situate the Dutch picture as a fragment of the visible world rather than the constructed space of Albertian perspective. Like Alberti and others before him, Kepler separated the physical facts of image formation in the eye from the physiological and psychological problems of interpreting how the brain processes visual information into what we understand as vision. His use of the pinhole camera to observe solar eclipses led him to draw conclusions about how the viewing apparatus affects the experience of viewing a phenomenon. According to Alpers, in order to explain anomalies in the apparent or perceived lunar diameter when

4. Svetlana Alpers *The Art of Describing* Harmondsworth: Penguin 1989 (1983), pp26-71.

observed during a solar eclipse with a pinhole camera compared with telescopic observations at other times, Kepler argued in *Ad Vitellonium Paralipomena* (1604) that the "apparent changing diameter of the moon is... an inevitable result of the means of observation". That is, the precise optics of Kepler's pinhole camera (the shape of the pinhole itself) determined the shape of the rays of light and so the nature of the image formed on the viewing surface.[5] In the light of these observations, Kepler goes on to treat the eye itself - our primary means of observing the world - as an optical device and the image 'painted' on the retina is designated a 'picture'. As in Descartes' (later) experiment, the eye is removed from its physiological context and treated objectively as a means of representing the world. It is important to note that this conception of the picturing properties of the eye is not intended to explain vision in anything but highly specific terms nor propose that the act of painting itself is somehow the art of transcribing retinal images. It is apparent, after all, that we do not *see* our retinal images; these constitute the visual data through which we see the world.

5. Ibid. p33.

Alpers uses Kepler's examination of an aspect of seeing in order to propose an alternative model of representation to Albertian perspective, or as Jay interprets and expands it, an alternative "scopic regime" to a supposedly dominant "Cartesian Perspectivalism".[6] If Alberti's method is posited on the notion of the picture as a window between the artist and pictured world and on human proportion as a means of measuring and ordering pictorial space, for Alpers, the Northern mode assumes "no prior viewer to establish a position or a human scale from which... to take in the work... Such an image, rather than being calculated to fit our own space, provides its own."[7] It is perhaps debatable whether or not this is entirely true in practice as one can identify specific examples of 17th Century Dutch painting which very much anticipate the scale and position of a likely viewer as can be seen, for example, in Samuel van Hoogstraten's *Perspective from a Threshold* (1662) at Dyrham Park. This life-size painting represents the view through a doorway and was originally hung behind a closet door. Whenever the door was opened, the view through it to a series of corridors and rooms was cunningly revealed.[8] However, Kepler's own use of the camera obscura, as a means not only of making astronomical observations but also landscape pictures provides Alpers with further material to support her theory. She relates Sir Henry Wooton's report of Kepler's tent-like camera obscura which he used to create a panoramic drawing of a landscape by "turning his little tent round by degrees till he hath designed the whole aspect of the field."[9] The resulting picture is imagined as containing a series of discrete aspects of the scene, an "aggregate of views" which Alpers perceives to be a characteristic of many northern pictures from the period in question.

6. Martin Jay 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity', *Vision and Visuality* (ed. Hal Foster), Seattle: Bay Press 1988, pp3-27.

7. Alpers, op.cit. p41.

8. see Brusati *Artifice and Illusion*, p201.

9. Ibid. p51.

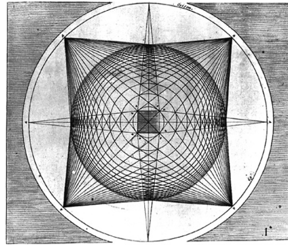

Figure 19

Jan Vredeman de Vries Plate 1 from

Perspective 1604-5

If this can be taken as an analogy or model for representing the world - the camera obscura as an eye - then this 'eye' is metaphorically isolated or removed from its physiological substrate and, bearing in mind Goethe's description of the encompassing line of the horizon, can be situated at the centre of a circular field of vision. Jan Vredeman de Vries' treatise *Perspective* (Leiden, 1604-5) presents a means of constructing perspectival illusions which is predicated on the notion of an eye or observer located at such a centre and which draws upon the work and methods of earlier theorists (Jean Pélerin - 'Viator' - and the French distance-point method). The treatise is presented in two parts and aside from initial pages which introduce and dedicate the work, Vredeman de Vries develops the principles of his highly practical theory in purely visual terms with successive plates becoming increasingly complex and ornate. In counterpoint to Alberti's 'window', he describes perspective as "the most famous art of eyesight which looks upon or through objects, on a painted wall, panel or canvas" with the implication that the picture is very much a *surface* onto which an illusion is inscribed.[10] The first plate in the treatise (figure 19) depicts the visual field in spherical terms, and as Martin Kemp comments, plots "the motion of the axis of sight as the eye rotates."[11] It may also, perhaps, be interpreted as an image of the visual field as if seen from above with the horizon imagined as a circle encompassing the centrally located eye.

This horizon or eye-line is the organising principle of Vredeman de Vries' procedure as it determines the initial eye level. The centre of the construction is determined by the *eye-point* which is accompanied by paired *distance-points* located on the horizon line at equal distances on either side of the eye-point. These points provide the means by which the intervals indicating spatial recession are plotted and ordered. Unlike the Albertian process which assumes a prior viewer located at a precise point in front of the picture surface, this point indicating the origin of the construction, Vredeman de Vries' space is constructed on the picture surface itself and does not require an *a priori* conception of precisely where the viewer is to be situated. Just as the initial eye point indicates both viewpoint *and* vanishing point on the picture surface, the distance-points themselves indicate the position from which the fictive space is viewed and provide a means of literally cross-referencing the progression into depth. As Adolf K. Placzek notes, the constructive principle asserts that "whatever is *above* the horizon cannot be seen from above, and whatever is *below* the horizon cannot be seen from below."[12] This seemingly obvious remark points out the deceptive simplicity of Vredeman de Vries' strategy. Indeed, a temptation in considering this or other perspective systems is to misinterpret the artist's intention and assume a modern perspective - with its attendant symbolic or philosophical intimations -

10. Jan Vredeman de Vries *Perspective* Leiden: Henricus Hondius 1604-5; reprinted with an introduction by A.K. Plazcek, New York: Dover 1968, p2.

11. Martin Kemp *The Science of Art,* p110.

12. de Vries/Plazcek, op.cit. p2.

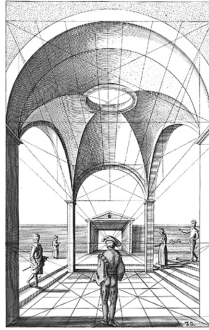

Figure 20

Jan Vredeman de Vries Plate 30

on what may have been simply a matter of creating the illusion of space in an efficacious and straightforward manner. Vredeman de Vries' fictive space is after all organized by the distribution of key points on the picture *surface*. Despite the fact that there is a demonstrable geometric correspondence between this distance-point method and the Albertian intersection method, Vredeman de Vries' spatial construction occurs on the surface itself and seems to require no knowledge concerning the geometry or optics of the viewing distance on the artist's part.[13] It is a space that proceeds from a condition of resolute flatness with linear divisions on the base of the picture determining the organisation of receding spatial intervals.

13. see Vignola's *Le Due Regole* Rome 1583, which presents the geometric correspondence between intersection and distance-point methods (illustrated in Kemp *The Science of Art*, p81).

The viewer is implied as existing on the threshold of the space and is actually represented in plate 30 of the series (figure 20). We see him from behind, head squarely positioned on the horizon or eye-line, as if about to step into the pictured space, at once both viewer and viewed, our representative in pictorial space. The paired distance-points in this instance are located at the junctures of the horizon and the vertical sides of the plate and may be imagined also as 'viewers' of the scene whose cones of vision are represented by the construction lines which determine the intervals of the squared pavement. Whereas this plate presents what appears to be a centrally organized, coherent space in the Albertian sense, other plates (11 or 12, for example - figure 21) use multiple distance points to organize the converging lines of disparate objects within the scenes. Although the system is still based around a single vanishing point - the eye-point - it seems less a method for creating a rigorously coherent space (itself perhaps a modern interpretation of perspective) than an *aggregate of aspects*, to recall Alpers' term. These object-aspects can be explored by an eye which although still anchored by the gravitational pull of the vanishing point, is nevertheless encouraged to rotate around the dominant axis in an inquisitive and active manner.

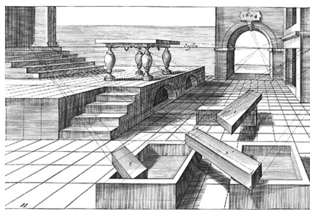

Figure 21

Jan Vredeman de Vries Plate 11

In his study of narrative in fiction films, Bordwell discusses two opposing theories which he terms *diegetic* and *mimetic*. Whilst the former interprets narration as a process of *telling*, mimetic theories of narration are concerned with *showing*, with the presentation of a spectacle; they "take as their model the act of vision: an object of perception is presented to the eye of the beholder."[14] Bordwell sees the advent of perspective as having inaugurated this narrative format and observes its development in terms of cinema in the scenic practices and spectacle of Renaissance theatre which developed in conjunction with the art of linear perspective in painting. Indeed, Alberti's treatise is itself as much concerned with the noble composition of the *historia*, a human narrative drawn from an

14. David Bordwell *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p4.

Figure 22

Hans Holbein *The Ambassadors* 1533

15. L.-B. Alberti *On Painting*, Book II, section 40, p75.

historical story, as with the correct representation and disposition of forms in space. "A historia you can justifiably praise and admire will be one that reveals itself to be so charming and attractive as to hold the eye of the learned and unlearned spectator for a long while with a certain sense of pleasure and emotion."[15] A painting's (and subsequently, a film's) faithful representation of this narrative through perspective places the spectator as a witness whose point-of-view both frames the scene and may also imply a narrative role. Similarly, the viewpoint implicit in a perspective schema can convey the narrative in terms of what could be called direct speech - this is what *I* see - as opposed to indirect speech - this is what he or she sees. In a fiction film, such a point-of-view shot frequently adopts a particular character's perspective and is often paired with a preceding third person shot of that character looking, for example, out of frame. In either medium, the narrative conventions are clear: we experience the scene as if we were on the threshold of the illusory space and rely on our experience of perceiving the real world in order to interpret its significance.

If a familiar aspect of film is its sequential cutting between different points-of-view, painting conventionally presents a single and fixed viewpoint. Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, however, combines two distinct but highly interrelated pictures together with their respective viewpoints in the same painting (figure 22). The first, which we perceive in the usual manner from a frontal position, presents a full-length double-portrait, itself almost unprecedented, complete with detailed representations of astronomical and musical instruments, books and terrestrial and celestial globes - all of which have profound significance for the painting's meaning. The various objects are arranged on the two shelves of a piece of furniture which occupies the central area of the painting between the two figures, on the left, Jean de Dinteville, Ambassador from the court of Francis I of France, and on the right, his friend, Georges de Selve, the Bishop of Lavaur. It seems that Dinteville was sent to London early in 1533 to gather information about Henry VIII's proposed divorce from Catherine of Aragon and his imminent marriage to Anne Boleyn, events which led to England's break with Rome and which were to have profound significance for religious and political life in 16th century Europe. The painting was commissioned by Dinteville whilst in London and has been seen as a meditation on the relationship between the immediate political issues surrounding his visit and the greater scheme of things, between Christian unity and secular power, life and death, celestial order and earthly chaos. The instruments on the upper shelf relate to the observation and measurement of the heavens, whilst below, the various objects, particularly the lute with its broken string seem to refer to the prevailing disorder and the religious conflict in

Europe between Protestant Reformists and the Catholic Church which Dinteville and de Selve hoped to assuage.[16]

Hovering uneasily below this scene is a peculiar shape reminiscent of a cuttlefish bone which occupies over half the width of the panel. This is the second picture in the painting, an anamorphic skull which can only be viewed coherently from a point to the right of and relatively close to the picture plane.[17] As one moves away from a central position in front of the painting towards its right-hand edge, the image of the ambassadors necessarily begins to disappear from view and as it does so, the skewed image of the skull gradually becomes legible. That is, as the visible world recedes, death asserts its presence. Looking again at the ambassadors' image, a silver crucifix can be seen half-hidden by the green drapery at the rear of the shallow space occupied by the figures and their paraphenalia. The two characters are, therefore, situated in a space demarcated by the two most potent symbols of death and resurrection. Between these poles, the ambassadors gaze out at the viewer as if to invite speculation on their position and the codified meaning secreted within the array of objects. The curtain behind them lends the painting a sense of theatricality. It demarcates a shallow, stage-like space within which the drama is enacted, albeit silently, and hints at a space or realm beyond, that of the life to come implied by the crucifix. Jurgis Baltrusaitis has discussed this element of theatre with each picture within the painting serving as a separate Act, each with its own "change of scene and decor as in a dramatic spectacle".[18] Unlike the sequential nature of theatre, however, where events necessarily follow one another in time, the painting is not subject to a syntagmatic viewing although it certainly highlights the temporal aspects of viewing. Its meaning resides in the oscillation between viewpoints; it relies on the viewer traversing the *actual* space in front of it. The surface of the visible world, that of the ambassadors, asserts its splendour (and also reveals its troubles) whilst the puzzling form beneath them, in front of them, or perhaps occupying a completely different order of space apart from them, seems to point like an arrow to a different space and to that point in space at which it will become sensible. Each viewpoint precludes a coherent *perception* of the other view or of the painting's totality. *The Ambassadors* relies instead on the spectator's mental piecing together of the opposing views and the clues they contain. It insistently reminds us of the split between the two by *concealing* the skull on the picture surface and in doing so activates the real space beyond its borders.[19] The two men look at us and the skull in turn anticipates our look as if to emphasize the reciprocal relation between artist, artwork and viewer. Bearing in mind Lacan's sardine tin, it is almost as if the painting *looks at us* whilst beyond its surface, we may glean the presence of Holbein himself as the

16. For a discussion of the painting's historical context and symbolism, see Susan Foister's chapters in Susan Foister, Ashok Roy and Martin Wyld *Making and Meaning: Holbein's Ambassadors* London: National Gallery 1997, pp14-57.

17. Foister notes that "There is an optimum viewing point when standing to the right, in a position at a right angle 120 millimetres away from the wall surface, 1040 millimetres from the bottom of the picture, and some 790 millimetres from the right edge of the painting." She also concedes that the image of the skull can become more generally coherent if the viewer is at least one metre to the right of the image. Ibid, p53.

18. Jurgis Baltrusaitis *Anamorphic Art* Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey 1977, p104.

19. Foister discusses Holbein's reversal of the convention of painting a *memento mori* such as a skull on the reverse of a painting so as to separate "the intimation of mortality from the main depiction". Op.cit. p48.

orchestrator of this spectacle and exchange of looks.

If the external viewpoint posited in an identifiable relationship to the picture may be interpreted as affecting a picture's narrative significance for the viewer (for example, Masaccio's *Trinity* or Leonardo's *Last Supper* which to varying degrees imply the spatial continuity of viewing space and pictorial space and so the viewer as witness to the depicted events)[20], so too may the notion of the viewpoint on the *threshold* of the picture, as in de Vries' engravings and, in a different sense, Holbein's painting. Another good example of such a 'narrative viewpoint' can be found in Samuel van Hoogstraten's *Peepshow with Views of the Interior of a Dutch House* (c. late 1650's) now in the National Gallery, London. The *Peepshow* consists of a cabinet measuring 58 x 88 x 63.5 cm, open at one side and currently exhibited on a pedestal with the top surface situated approximately 1.5 metres above the ground. The interior of the box is lit through the open side (this is covered at present with a plexiglass sheet - the original configuration probably had stretched, semi-translucent paper covering the aperture) and on the five interior surfaces are painted various views of a domestic interior. The presence of a letter addressed to 'Monsieur S de Hoogstraten' lying on a chair at the left corner of the box indicates that this is perhaps the artist's own house. When viewed from the open side, the differing aspects of the space appear distinctly distorted as Hoogstraten has used the technique of anamorphic projection to construct the scenes on each of the painted panels. Only when viewed from through either of two peepholes, located approximately half way up and near to the edges of the shorter sides of the cabinet, do these strangely distorted pictures appear to cohere and yield the correct and extraordinarily three dimensional impression of a domestic interior. The interior is full of details including pictures, a mirror and other assorted objects such as a broom and a coat rack with items hung on it. Further rooms and vistas are visible through the various doors and windows painted on each panel. A particular quality of light pervades the scene which is heightened by the artist's use of the actual light entering through the open side of the box as a means of determining the direction of the pictured light and the resulting shadows cast by the painted objects.

20. see Kubovy for a discussion of Leonardo's *Last Supper,* op.cit. pp139-149,

The two views glimpsed through each peephole are subtly distinct from one another. The nature of the cabinet as a container of space implies that the painted interior is itself a homogeneous space whereas in fact each view may be regarded as a separate picture - albeit across three or four planes - of a *notional* interior. As one side of the box is open for inspection our sense of the space as a unified whole is emphasized. We traverse from one view to the other and are able to compare the illusion glimpsed through the peepholes with the form and

Figure 23

Samuel van Hoogstraten *Peepshow with Views of the Interior of a Dutch House*

c. late 1650's

View through the right peephole

21. see David Bomford 'Perspective and Peepshow Construction'/'Samuel van Hoogstraten, Perspective and Painting', *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 2, 1987, pp65-77, especially p75 for a discussion of this aspect of the Peepshow. The pedestal on which the Peepshow is currently placed is not the original one and it is problematic therefore, to suggest that contemporary viewers would necessarily have experienced the spectacle as we do today.

means of its production and relate implied, pictorial space to actual space. The picture seems to be in some way a meditation on the relationship between reality and its representation as we are invited not only to partake in the spectacle of the illusion but also to consider the artifice of its construction. The experience of the original presentation would surely have been quite different as the aperture - covered with waxed paper and placed, perhaps, next to a window in order to allow the optimum amount of light into the interior - would have been hidden from view. Although aware that the stretched paper was hiding some vital clue, 17th Century observers would only have had access to the picture via the peepholes themselves and would be constrained not only by their lack of knowledge of how the painting was produced but also, perhaps, by the physical position which these viewing apertures forced them (and which still force us) to adopt.[21] As the peepholes are located suggestively at keyhole height, one is implicated almost as a voyeur and is made acutely aware of the physical awkwardness and clandestine nature of the experience. From the right hand view (figure 23), the interior is unpopulated save for a dog which dutifully returns the viewer's gaze as if to affirm their presence in the space. Behind it, a coat, hat and sword hanging on the coat rack indicate the trappings of the master of the house or perhaps the presence of a visitor, whilst through an open door, a series of adjacent spaces lead to the outside world. As previously mentioned, the actual light entering the cabinet is neatly echoed by painted shadows which behave in accordance with and imply the existence of such a source. The juncture between wall and ceiling similarly coincides with the actual juncture of the cabinet's panels heightening the sense of continuity between actual and pictorial or virtual space.

From the left peephole, two rooms can be glimpsed through doorways painted on the vertical panel but these do not appear to lead to further spaces. In the left hand room, a woman is visible lying in bed whilst in the room to the right, another woman sits by a window and reads what appears to be a letter. Significantly, a male figure outside this window can be seen peering in and watching her. Like the figure in de Vries' engraving, he acts almost as a representative or representation of the actual viewer although here engaged in an implicitly clandestine and furtive rather than ideal activity. The junctures between wall and ceiling in the painted interior, moreover, from this peephole do not coincide with the junctures in the actual cabinet as they do in the opposite view, the painted wall opposite the left peephole being projected approximately half way across the actual ceiling of the cabinet. This implies that a lower viewpoint has been used to construct the left view, a fact which may be related to the inhabitants' views of the scene. From the right view, the only living

Figure 24

Samuel van Hoogstraten *Peepshow*

Left view of the cabinet with pedestal.

thing to be seen is the dog attentively returning the viewer's gaze whereas from the left view, the male figure outside the window is similarly engaged in looking at the seated woman. In both views therefore, there are two 'figures' actively looking at something much as we, the viewers of the *Peepshow*, are scrutinising its contents. The subtle difference in height between the two implied viewpoints may perhaps be related to the heights of these 'figures' with the implication as Brusati suggests, that we are now seeing the room from the peeper's eye level, and now from the eye-level of the dog.[22]

The peepholes serve a number of functions. Firstly, they indicate the exact point from which the configuration of images coheres into a sensible whole. As Pirenne has discussed in relation to perspective and photography, a viewing aperture can also frame the picture in such a way as to limit the viewer's awareness of the picture plane itself.[23] The resulting uncertainty about the orientation of the plane in combination with the 'correct' view of the anamorphic projection serves to enhance the quality of the illusion and enables Hoogstraten to "deftly efface the walls of the box" as Brusati has put it.[24] The compelling three dimensionality of the experience invites the viewer's eye to rove about within the space and explore its nooks and crannies, its pictures, reflections and shadows in an active and inquisitive manner. Indeed, one is acutely aware of the subtle changes in the angle of view and so the relative visibility of the various rooms and spaces due to small shifts in the position of one's head. Hoogstraten delighted in the effects of changing scale enabled by such optical configurations where "a finger length figure [can] appear to be life-sized." For him, the perspective box was a perfect kind of painting for it "makes things that do not exist appear to exist and this deceives in a permissible, pleasurable and praiseworthy manner."[25] It presents both a "compelling counterfeit" of the visible world and an indication of the "deceptive artifice" common to both painting and the operations of the eye.[26]

Beyond the obvious attraction and success of Hoogstraten's optical illusion, the peephole can be considered in a more narrative sense. In the *Peepshow* as it now stands, the viewer is required to crouch down in order to look through the peepholes located as suggested earlier, at approximately keyhole height. One is both furtively engaged in looking yet simultaneously excluded from the scene, reduced merely to an attentive and acquisitive eye. Bearing in mind Jean-Paul Sartre's fear of one's gaze through the keyhole being surprised by the presence of another - the shock of being objectified in that other's look - the activity of looking at or into Hoogstraten's *Peepshow* becomes highly charged given the intimation of voyeurism.[27] Of course, lack of knowledge regarding the original mode of viewing means such readings can only be speculative. Other viewing

22. Brusati, op.cit. p190.

23. Pirenne, op.cit., especially pp95-115 and pp116-135.

24. Brusati, op.cit. p191.

25. quoted in Brusati, pp169-170.

26. Ibid. p170.

27. Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (trans. Hazel E. Barnes), London: Routledge 1996 (1943), p260. See also Martin Jay's discussion in *Downcast Eyes*, pp277-290, and Jacques Lacan *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis,* p84.

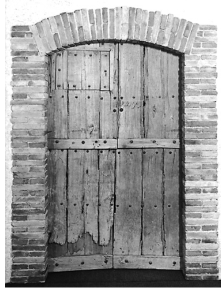

Figure 25

Marcel Duchamp *Etant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau 2° le gaz d'éclairage* 1946-66

The door

conditions could similarly push a reading of the *Peepshow* in other directions. For example, the design of the pedestal as it now stands would allow one to sit on a chair pulled up close to the cabinet, so enabling a more comfortable and perhaps less clandestine viewing experience.[28] Returning to the keyhole analogy, however, we perceive a woman in her bed and another reading whilst unwittingly being spied on and are caught in the gaze of the dog which alone seems aware of our disembodied presence. This exchange or currency of 'looks' lends the *Peepshow* an undercurrent of sublimated eroticism and seems to emphasize the motivated nature of looking itself. In addition, the subtle disjunction between the two views, together with the tension between reading the space as a unified 'interior' in the literal sense and as a sophisticated illusion lends the depiction a sense of narrative mystery. No 'story' is overtly being told - the viewer is merely *looking* after all - but there remains a strong impression of continuity, narrative as well as spatial, between the two 'pictures'. The space between the two viewpoints seems as important, in this respect, as the scenes depicted and could imply a sense of time elapsed, each picture as a fragment not only of space but of time captured.

28. I am indebted to Martin Kemp for suggesting this possibility.

Hoogstraten's *Peepshow* locates the viewer firmly on the threshold of the picture and in doing so, dislocates the eye from the body and the accompanying sense of scale or measurement that body provides. This is partly the reason why the illusory space in the box is so compelling. We have few clues as to the orientation of the picture planes and the images' actual scale relative to our own and easily project ourselves into the painted world. Its emphasis on looking, on the look, both in the means of its production, its subject and the conditions of its viewing provides an interesting parallel to some of Duchamp's work, particularly his last major work, *Etant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau 2° le gaz d'éclairage* (1946-66, figures 25 & 26), which was made in secret during the last twenty or so years of his life and revealed to the public after his death in 1968. It has since been installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.[29] Like the *Peepshow*, Duchamp's tableau is to be looked at from a very particular position - in this sense, it is truly anamorphic - but unlike the earlier work, its elements are less pictorial than sculptural, or rather, it uses three dimensional objects in order to create a 'picture'. Whereas with Hoogstraten's work the viewer is privy to the mechanics of the illusion, Duchamp's assemblage gives no clues as to its organisation. The viewer is confronted with an ancient wooden door originally discovered by Duchamp in a small town near his residence in Cadaqués, Spain. Spanish bricks frame the door and the surrounding wall has been roughly stuccoed. The door itself is impenetrable save for two small holes located at

29. see Anne d'Harnoncourt & Walter Hopps *Etant Donnés: 1° la chute d'eau 2° le gaz d'éclairage: Reflections on a New Work by Marcel Duchamp* Philadelphia: Falcon Press 1987; 2nd reprint of the *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* LXIV/299 & 300, April & September 1969.

Figure 26

Marcel Duchamp *Etant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau 2° le gaz d'éclairage* 1946-66

View through the eye-holes

eye level which provide the only means of access to the scene on the other side. Through the holes, a brightly lit landscape is visible through what appears to be another hole in a brick wall and on a bed of branches lies a female nude, her legs apart and her genitalia exposed to the unsuspecting viewer. Her face is cropped by the hole in the brick wall whilst in her left hand, she holds aloft a small gas lamp which burns brightly in the already light-filled landscape. Behind her, in the distance, a waterfall can be discerned glittering in the sunlight. Like Hoogstraten's *Peepshow*, *Etant Donnés* presents the viewer with an obstacle to vision though in this instance, the obstacle - a door - plays a more overtly narrative role in the work. The explicitness of the view through the spy holes turns any viewer automatically into a voyeur. Our reaction to the tableau literally contributes to its meaning or as Octavio Paz has written, by the very act of peeping, we share in "the dual ritual of voyeurism and aesthetic contemplation" which he sees as the driving force behind the work's organisation.[30]

One is reminded of Durer's engraving of the large recumbent female figure and her smaller male counterpart discussed earlier. As much a meditation - to modern eyes at least - on sexuality and power as it is a demonstration of the rationalising control of perspective over nature, the engraving graphically displays the motivated nature of looking or, indeed, of being looked *at*, which Duchamp in *Etant Donnés* takes to still further extremes. The woman in the assemblage is none other than the Bride of *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23, figure 33, also known as *The Large Glass*) who, according to the notes in the Green Box, imagines herself seen by her Bachelors as she is stripped bare. The Bachelors are products of her imagination, a series of empty vessels fashioned to resemble the liveries of stereotypical male occupations which form part of an intricate machine dedicated to the fulfilment of the Bride's pleasure. They occupy the lower half of the painting and are subject to the laws of perspective, in stark contrast to the nebulousness of the Bride who resides directly above them. The Bachelor machine is a manifestation of her narcissistic desire to see herself in the gaze of another. That role is offered up to the spectator whose own reflection can be seen in the mirrored concentric circles and lines delineating what Duchamp called the Oculist Witnesses (témoin oculiste) which occupy an area on the right-hand side of the painting.[31] In the assemblage, it is the viewer who takes the place of the Bachelors and Oculist Witnesses. In looking through the peepholes, they complete the circle of looking or being looked at and become literally part of the work and the spectacle it generates for other spectators. Whilst the assemblage fixes the spectator in a particular position and forces them to peep, the subject of the

30. Octavio Paz '* Water Always Writes in * Plural', *Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare* (trans. Rachel Phillips & Donald Gardner), New York: Arcade/Little Brown and Company 1990, p114.

31. Richard Hamilton notes that a *témoin oculiste* is, in French law, an eye witness and also a chart used by opticians for testing eyes. Duchamp used three ready-made charts stacked one above the other and viewed in perspective for the Oculist Witnesses in the *Large Glass*. These were transferred to a section of the *Glass* which had been silvered and the figures revealed by laboriously scraping away the surrounding areas of silver by hand. See Hamilton's 'The Large Glass', *Collected Words* London: Thames and Hudson 1982, pp218-233, p232.

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work itself also plays on the desire to see oneself being seen. So the viewer not only completes the work in an optical and spatial sense by installing him or herself at the relevant vantage point, but, like Kabakov's artist, also in a narrative sense. We play the role of the Oculist Witnesses; we are the figment of the woman's imagination; we provide the gaze through which she sees herself being seen. Bearing in mind G.E. Moore's assertions about the existence of things external to us, without the viewer's gaze to be seen *in*, the work is literally incomplete. Paz puts it succinctly in the following:

"*Etant Donnés* is realized by means of his [the spectator's] look: it is a spectacle in which someone sees himself seeing something. And what does he really see? What do the Oculist Witnesses see? *They don't see*. It is the Bride who sees herself. The vision of herself excites her; she sees herself and strips herself bare in the look that looks at her. Reversibility: we look at ourselves looking at her and she looks at herself in our look that looks at her naked. It is the moment of discharge - we disappear from sight."[32]

32. Paz, op. cit. pp117-118.

Given the obvious artistic differences and separation in time, it may seem extreme to draw such a comparison between Duchamp and Hoogstraten. My reason for doing so, however, is to point out the extent to which such 'implicating' viewpoints can affect our reading of a work. Viewpoints both frame the pictured space and the things it contains and can have a narrative function within the work. By situating the viewer in a primary role and presenting the spectacle in terms of a first-person narrative - *I am seeing this* - the work implicates that particular viewer in the illusion of space and in the space of the narrative. Similarly, through the deceptive artifice of the peephole, both Hoogstraten's cabinet and Duchamp's door induce in the viewer a strong sense of *being there*, of inhabiting the pictured space. They provoke an almost physical identification with this 'other' space which is paralleled by the particular nature of their respective subjects, ranging between the voyeuristic and the contemplative. The works disclose themselves in what could be described as a kind of *epiphany* yet the spaces they present - and the spectacle we participate in - dissolve as soon as we walk away and remain only as mental images, memories of a space or a moment in time. The next chapter will consider this notion of reciprocity, of the work anticipating our look and acknowledging that look in the way in which it is structured particularly with regard to what has been called the *gaze*.