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EXPERIENCE AS A FORM OF INSPIRATION. M.C. ESCHER AND HIKES IN ABRUZZO

DOŚWIADCZENIE JAKO FORMA INSPIRACJI. M.C. ESCHER I WĘDRÓWKI PO ABRUZJI

A b s t r a c t

M.C. Escher's work is deeply rooted in his travel experiences. Following his trail, one can experience similar sensations. The author's wanderings along the endless staircases of the historic towns of Abruzzo, often forming a labyrinthine landscape, were one of the methods used to analyze Escher's experiences and sources of inspiration. The impossible spaces and forms he created were juxtaposed with the concepts of architects and artists in various artistic genres.

Keywords: *Abruzzo, art, experience, inspiration, M.C. Escher*

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Twórczość M.C. Eschera ma swoje głębokie korzenie w jego doświadczeniach z podróży. Podążając jego szlakiem można doznać podobnych wrażeń. Wędrówki autora tekstu po niekończących się schodach zabytkowych miasteczek Abruzji, stanowiących często trudny do rozpoznania labirynt, były jedną z metod analizy doświadczeń i źródeł inspiracji Eschera. Tworzone przez niego przestrzenie i formy niemożliwe. zostały zestawione z koncepcjami architektów i twórcami w różnych gatunkach sztuki.

Słowa kluczowe: *Abruzja, doświadczenie, inspiracje, M.C. Escher, sztuka*

1. INTRODUCTION

Maurits Cornelis Escher – experience determines the direction of artistic creation

In their creative work, artists and architects often balance between practical minimalism and complex forms. The latter, through their spatial relationships, engage the viewer's senses, often with their complex dynamics, multi-level structure, and the interplay between individual surfaces and shapes. Creators utilize the idea of a labyrinth or endless staircase not only to involve the viewer in the spectacle, but also to treat it as a metaphor symbolizing the human condition: our confusion, disorientation, and searching in the face of the necessity of making choices. Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898–1972) was an extraordinary artist who, drawing on his experiences from numerous journeys, translated them into the language of graphic art, introducing viewers to a remarkable world of unreal spaces. Escher's prints present an artistic

vision of extraordinary spatial labyrinths, in which the familiar principles of architecture and the laws of physics are relegated to the background or completely ignored. Escher does not use the classic language of labyrinths, but creates labyrinths that seem logical, and as we explore them, they increasingly engage our minds while simultaneously increasingly disorienting our eyes. When we try to understand the space depicted in the 1953 lithograph *Relativity,* we see it formed by three mutually perpendicular fields of gravity. However, before he began creating this unreal world, his works before 1937 did not indicate such a deep interest in illusion or mathematical paradoxes, although his play with geometry had appeared earlier. The mountainside towns of Abruzzo, known for their unique multi-level layout and labyrinthine winding streets, fascinated Escher. The most famous of these, the Ruetta d'Italia in Civitella del Tronto, is only 40 cm wide at its narrowest point. As a defensive measure, this arrangement effectively slowed attackers. Another exceptionally beautiful town belonging to the *I Borghi più Belli d'Italia* association, which promotes small historical centers of exceptional artistic and landscape value, is Pacentro, where a dense network of narrow streets, ramps and stairs creates an extraordinary labyrinth winding around a small hill. In 1930, he created a lithograph, *Street in Scanno, Abruzzi*, depicting one of the many alleys of this Italian town. The work depicts a selected section of the town, which has remained unchanged to this day. Escher highlighted the contrasts of light and shade here, creating depth with the overlapping, characteristic Scanno staircases leading to houses. Among the Abruzzo towns, Scanno is the largest spatial labyrinth. Wandering the streets, which end or begin with stairs or ramps, we get the impression that they simultaneously form Le Corbusier's architectural promenade. Changes in altitude constantly accompany movement through the town. After a few minutes of walking, one loses one's sense of direction. The stairs unexpectedly curve, change their width, and become landings to houses built on successive elevations. Walking through this town, one feels suddenly transported to a world envisioned by Escher. It is very likely that it was in Scanno that unexpected, often surprising spatial situations and the feeling of being lost in a maze of stairs began to shape his imaginative world. As in this Abruzzo town, Escher's engravings reveal the trap of perpetual motion. Trying to reach a destination, we are constantly forced to search for the right path. Walking through Scanno, just as in Escher's prints, we cannot find our destination. Wandering up and down the stairs, like the wanderers in Olga Tokarczuk's *Flights*, we cannot complete this journey. The author explains this state of affairs by referring to psychology:

> An important concept in the psychology of travel is desire; it gives the human being movement and direction and stimulates clinging to something. Desire itself is empty, that is, it indicates only a direction, not a goal; for the goal always remains phantasmagorical and unclear; the closer we get to it, the more enigmatic it becomes. There is no way to achieve such a goal, nor can it thereby satisfy the desire.[1]

Escher found his next destination for his endless staircase in Villalago, also known for the families of deer that roam the town. The village's most famous "tourist" is Giorgetto, a large deer who regularly wanders the streets. In the mornings, he enjoys the refreshing waters of the nearby lake, and in the afternoons, he rests in the center of Villalago. It was there that Escher created his renowned lithograph, *Still Life with a Mirror*, which drew the artist's attention to optical illusions, which determined the future direction of his work.

[1] O. Tokarczuk, *Bieguni*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2018, p. 86.

His later print, *Belvedere*, from 1958, became an artistic and emotional return to Abruzzo. The backdrop for the structure, in which he employed an optical illusion, was a landscape he had previously sketched in Pettorano sul Gizio. The Gran Sasso massif, the Subequana Valley, and the Sirente mountain range can be seen there.

Escher was captivated by the extraordinary town of Castrovalva in Abruzzo, currently inhabited by just thirty people. The town, founded in ancient times, developed dynamically thanks to its location. Tolls were collected here from travelers between Rome and the Adriatic coast. A narrow, winding, and steep road leads to the hilltop town, ending in a tunnel carved into the rock. Escher returned here several times, fascinated by this extraordinary microcosm and the surrounding views. He walked and sketched constantly, surprising the mountain dwellers, who were accustomed to hard work in harsh natural conditions. For many years, the town has been gradually depopulating. It is not on the tourist trails. It is a popular destination for lovers of Escher's work and fine cuisine. Davide Nanni, one of Italy's most renowned chefs, has his restaurant here, using only local produce. His restaurant is open only a few months a year, closing when his family's own produce runs out. He offers traditional mountain cuisine based on regional recipes from Abruzzo, where dishes are prepared in what he calls a "wild" style, reflecting his distinctive approach to cooking close to nature.

Every summer, from 1929 to 1935, Escher and his friend, the artist Giuseppe Haas-Triverio, explored the most interesting corners of Abruzzo. Escher sketched constantly. Later, in his studio, he used the scenes he had recorded to create lithographs and woodcuts. During their stay in Castrovalva, both artists were unexpectedly arrested for several days. The artists who were wandering in the mountains, without any particular purpose, were suspected of involvement in a conspiracy and an attempt on Mussolini's life. Fortunately, the intercession of prominent figures from the world of politics led to their release.

The emergence of different forms of impossible stairs, such as those depicted in 1960 lithograph *Ascending and Descending*, has been linked to the geometric paradox of Lionel and Roger Penrose, who created an impossible figure in the form of an endless staircase. In the introduction to their 1958 article, they wrote:

> two-dimensional drawings can be made to convey the impression of three-dimensional objects. Under certain circumstances, this fact can be used to induce contradictory perceptual interpretations. Numerous ideas in this field have been exploited by Escher (1954). /…/ Here is a perspective drawing, each part of which is accepted as representing a three-dimensional rectangular structure.[2]

The same applies to Escher's drawings of buildings and of staircases that have no beginning or end. However, if we introduced a few lines into these works to define perspective, we could easily eliminate this illusion. But the game is precisely about tricking our eyes.

Many scholars of Escher's work emphasize the symbolic dimension of the artist's works. They evoke the repetitive nature of human activity and cycles that never end. They evoke the pursuit of impossible goals, or perhaps metaphors for human life. A fascination with geometry guided his artistic endeavors. A visit to the Alhambra in 1922 and his exploration of Moorish mosaics set his work on a new path. Although he had already been interested in the division of space during his studies, it was not until he saw the geometric forms and

[2] L.S. Penrose, R. Penrose, *Impossible objects: A special type of visual illusion*, "British Journal of Psychology" 1958, no. 49(1), p. 31.

abstract patterns in Granada that he translated them into representational language. Another line of artistic reflection in which he utilized optical illusions was *Cycle* from 1938, in which three-dimensional perspective transforms into two-dimensional forms. Escher felt a constant need to explore and experiment: "My subjects are often playful. /…/ I can't keep from fooling around with our irrefutable certainties."[3]

A spatial maze. The impossible becomes possible

At the same time that Escher was creating lithographs depicting unreal structures, filmmakers were occupied with equally unreal, yet structurally possible, visions of cities of violence and evil. While Escher's spaces were planned to evoke an impression of order, the world of the film often descended into a dark chaos. In the unreal world of Gotham City, first introduced in the 1940 Batman comic book and later depicted in the 1943 film, the world surrounding the characters does not form a coherent whole. It was characterized by a pervasive, unrealistic turn to the past, whose architectural forms evoked historicizing architecture, primarily Gothic. This dark fictional city ushered in a new architectural direction that combined Gothic forms and their structural details, the geometric order of Art Deco, a Brutalist penchant for concrete, and elements of industrial architecture. This unusual connection between the spatial labyrinth of stairs and ramps and the architectural aesthetics of Gotham is unexpectedly found in Shanghai, where a decade earlier, in 1933, a large slaughterhouse was erected. Most online sources indicate that Scottish architect Andrew Balfour designed it. However, the most reliable source of information on Scottish architects, the *Dictionary of Scottish Architects* (1660–1980), does not indicate his authorship.[4] A more likely source of information regarding the building's authorship can be found in the master's thesis of H. Wei (Tongji University, Shanghai), who identifies the architects Wheeler and Unterberger[5]. The concrete, four-story monumental edifice in the Gotham Art Deco style is likely the only surviving example of this architecture in China. This industrial building features decorations and motifs drawn directly from Art Deco, although it also features over 300 neo-Gothic columns. The heart of the entire square-plan design was a central, circular atrium, connected by a circulation network to the external blocks that completed the overall layout. A system of winding ramps was used to move cattle and allowed workers to move between the individual wings of the building. The sudden changes in the direction of the ramp were intended to slow the animals' progress while also providing workers with places to hide as the cattle, sensing their fate, rushed madly forward. Therefore, the concrete forms of the circulation elements, forming a kind of spatial labyrinth, create an extraordinary image that changes with every step. Subsequent planes shift and disappear behind closer forms. The drama is enhanced by light, which streams into the rooms through windows with geometrically arranged screens or creates long, unsettling shadows from the ramps and stairs suspended around the rotunda. The building has now been renovated and adapted for commercial and cultural purposes. Jos Tomlow and Cornelius Reppe attempt to demonstrate the similarities between slaughterhouse structures

[3] A.M. Carreño Leyva, *Escher and Tessellation: Islamic Mosaics Are His Alhambra Muse*, "Aramco World", 1.07.2023, https://www.aramcoworld.com/en/articles/2023/escher-alhambra-infinity (access: 12.06.2026).

[4] "The Dictionary of Scottish Architects", https://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/apex/r/dsa/dsa/architects?p8_id=100136&session=3104769055873 (access: 15.06.2026).

[5] He W., *Research on Architecture Archives of the Slaughter House of Shanghai Municipal Council*, Master Thesis of Architecture, Tongji University, Shanghai 2011, p. 49.

and earlier and later European projects by prominent architects.[6] They point to Le Corbusier and his architectural promenade in unrealized projects: the refrigerated slaughterhouses in Challuy (1917) and Garchisy (1918), the Muziekcentrum Vredenburg by Herman Hertzberger in Utrecht (1978), and the Terminal 1 building at Paris-Roissy Airport designed by Paul Andreu (1967). The authors demonstrate the shared power of spatial forms within these structures, while simultaneously attempting to distract us from associations with Piranesi's engravings depicting vast, dark prisons. The scale of their spaces and internal structures may evoke associations with the Shanghai slaughterhouse, which also served as the final stage of a journey for animals.

The idea for an unexpectedly winding path can be found in other Le Corbusier designs. He proposed two completely different concepts for the museum space. The first, the Mundaneum (1929), involved a spiral expansion of the visitor's path around a vast, empty space. The *Musée à croissance illimitée* (1939), on the other hand, was set on a single level. The first room was to be the starting point for the visit and, at the same time, the center of the entire building, around which the museum could be expanded endlessly in a spiral pattern. The motif of the Mundaneum's square spiral stemmed from the changing ways in which art has been presented throughout history and the idea of humanity's constant evolution. This was directly linked to Carl Gustav Jung's analytical psychology. In his depth psychology, which explores the hidden layers of the human psyche, the spiral symbolizes evolution. According to Jung, development is not linear but recurs to the same stages at successively higher levels of consciousness. The spiral becomes a universal image of constant development and transformation. Even in space, the spiral unwinds, symbolizing constant movement, growth, and cyclicality, and yet it can be endless. In a completely different context, the word "end" in connection with a labyrinth of stairs can be found in the song *Let Somebody Go*. Chris Martin and Selena Gomez used the motif of a gigantic, winding, spiraling, endless, and simultaneously unreal staircase in their music video to express the emotional separation of two people. Although none of the video's creators admitted to any references to Escher's work, the concept for the set design is reminiscent of his lithographs. Set designer François Audouy justified the idea for a spiral staircase, "which can evolve and grow, and then be pulled as worlds fall apart. /…/ After weeks of dreaming up these images, everything comes to life before our eyes. We feel incredibly fortunate to be able to help create this magic."[7] As you can see, the power of impossible forms or spaces constantly provokes the search for new solutions. Artists bring Escher's experiments with gravity, or the lack thereof, into the real world. French choreographer and director Yoann Bourgeois brings to life before audiences what Escher depicted in his lithographs but what is impossible in three-dimensional space. He creates his performances by playing with the invisible laws of physics. Using a trampoline, harnessing the flexibility and mass of his body, he creates the illusion of zero gravity. Using tension, balancing forces, and playing with the interactions between them, he creates extraordinary performances that allow one to forget about gravity. "In a way, I was looking

[6] J. Tomlow, C. Reppe, *Shanghai Municipal Slaughter House (1933) – Fundamentals of a Post-colonial visionary design and structure*, [in:] *La technologia en la arquitectura moderna (1925–1975): mito y realidad*, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura – Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona 2018, pp. 489–494.

[7] G. Rowley, *Coldplay & Selena Gomez Take to the Skies in Behind-the-Scenes Look at 'Let Somebody Go' Video*, "Billboard", 15.02.2022, https://www.billboard.com/music/pop/coldplay-selena-gomez-let-somebody-go-video-behind-the-scenes-watch-1235032058/ (access: 24.06.2026).

for a way to get back home. /…/. It wasn't just about returning to the physical building, but the spirit of childhood. I really wanted to continue to be a child. I've searched for a life where I can continue to play; it drives my career even now."[8]

Escher and the world of surrealism

Escher was a loner, working in silence, in complete isolation, and secluded himself in his studio, never allowing anyone to observe him at work. He created a completely individual and easily recognizable art world. He was not affiliated with any artistic group and did not acknowledge any affiliation with any movement. Many critics and viewers of his art perceive it as a surrealist approach to creativity, in which he escaped reality and relied on associations. Like the surrealists, he attempted to distract the viewer from reality by constructing a world of dreams and imagination. His works are often compared to the unreal world and optical illusions of René Magritte's paintings, which questioned reality. His work is also associated with the disturbing paintings of Salvador Dalí, who was influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis. Magritte consciously manipulated our perception of what we see, not only through illusion, but also through words. The verbal message did not correspond to what he painted. The treacherous nature of the paintings and the pipe painted on them, with the inscription "ceci n'est pas la pipe," make the viewer aware that what they see is not a real pipe but an image of one. René Magritte also deliberately misled the viewer. Or perhaps the opposite? Perhaps he wanted to transport them to another dimension and share his perspective. The captions under his works are also not the key to understanding his paintings. Magritte was convinced that the artist, through painting, possessed a secret power to influence reality. Escher never met the Surrealists, did not refer to their work, and did not even comment on their work in his notes. He constructed the atmosphere of his works in a unique way. He used geometric forms and mathematical principles to interpret the rules of perspective in a uniquely individual way. He constructed spaces where appearances intertwine with fantasy.

2. CONCLUSIONS

In creating his prints, M.C. Escher built a world of spatial puzzles inspired by his experiences. His walks through the unique towns of Abruzzo, perched on mountainsides or crowning rocky outcrops, were recorded in drawings, lithographs, and woodcuts, but they also informed his ideas for spatial labyrinths of stairways that lead nowhere. The constant change in altitude, the climb, the descent to ever lower levels, only to follow the steps marking a new direction, was such an unusual experience amidst the dense medieval architecture that it provoked new explorations in the world of art. What he saw, the roads he traveled, the houses whose roofs became terraces of other buildings or sections of streets above, were transferred to paper in the form of impossible spaces. He consciously employed optical illusions, creating new, often surprising solutions that had never been used before. In the field of graphic art, Escher's greatest predecessor was Piranesi, whose visions of prisons, although they do not deliberately employ optical illusions, depict vast spaces in which it is difficult to discern the

[8] L. Winship, *Yoann Bourgeois on his mindblowing viral stair climbing act: 'I want to return to the spirit of childhood'*, "The Guardian", 28.07.2025, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/jul/28/yoann-bourgeois-interview-viral-stair-climbing-trampoline-act (access: 15.06.2026).

logic of the order of stairs, galleries, ladders, and bridges. However, Escher incorporated mathematics and geometry into his work, subordinating them to surprising visual effects. Optical illusions deceive our perception, suggesting things and events that do not exist. The sense of sight perceives a two-dimensional drawing, which, after being transformed by the brain, becomes a three-dimensional image. Escher understood that we cannot alter our impressions without a deeper analysis of the tricks employed. His work is incredibly intriguing and provocative, and has become an endless source of inspiration for many artists. Cut off from the art world that surrounded him, Escher paid no attention to it. He lived solely for his work and was so independent that he did not even know the Rolling Stones existed and rejected Mick Jagger's request to design the cover of their new album because he did not know who Jagger was.

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