

3 AMBIGUITY

LEAVING THE WORK OPEN TO DIVERSE INTERPRETATION

Sometimes a work of art acquires strength by projecting a structure or meaning that is ambiguous and open to diverse interpretation.

VARIETIES

- **Perceptual ambiguity**

A representation of a three-dimensional formation that can be interpreted in alternative ways. The classic example is the Necker cube, a drawing of a cube that can be seen as occupying space in two alternative ways. The most notable artist to explore perceptual ambiguity was M. C. Escher (1898–1972). In many of his works, ambiguities of both recognition and spatial construction are presented in endlessly playful and provocative ways.

- **Ambiguity of recognition**

A representational element has more than one interpretation due to inadequate or confusing cues. A shadowy shape might be a human head or an apple, for instance. The surrealist artist Yves Tanguy (1900–1955) made many paintings in which he rendered forms that had ambiguous and confusing identities, deliberately presenting the viewer with a sense of puzzlement and mystery.

- **Ambiguity of meaning**

The sense or import of the artwork is ambiguous. The viewer is presented with an ongoing conundrum because symbols, narrative action, or other cues do not coalesce around a clear idea. This was a favorite strategy of the French artist Balthus (1908–2001) whose paintings often present narrative scenarios of indeterminate meaning.

See also: *Surrealism* on page 184; *Allegory* on page 12

1 Necker Cube

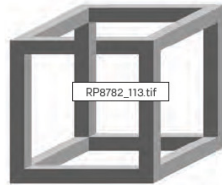
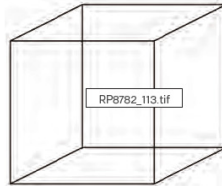
The cube can be read as being seen from above or from below. There are insufficient cues to tell the viewer which way is meant.

**2 William Hogarth (1697–1764)
False Perspective, c. 1750,
Engraving 8 1/8 x 6 9/16 in
(20.6 x 17.3 cm)**

The artist plays various amusing games with spatial ambiguity.

**3 Balthus (1908–2001)
The Mountain, 1936–37, Oil on canvas,
98 x 144 in (248.9 x 365.8 cm)**

The meaning of the painting remains tantalizingly ambiguous.



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