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Impossible Worlds

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in voce **a.Escher**

Abstract

M. C. Escher’s impossible architectures as deliberate violations of physical world models—and as epistemological experiments in what representation can demand.

I. Diagrams that cannot be built

M. C. Escher’s staircases and aqueducts delight because they obey local rules of perspective while violating global consistency. They are **world models you can almost inhabit**—until your eye completes the loop and coherence snaps. In Volume 3’s vocabulary, they are stress tests: what happens when a representation is pushed until its hidden contradictions surface?

II. Epistemic function of the impossible

Impossible figures are not merely jokes; they train visual intelligence. They show that the brain **fills in** beyond the evidence, extrapolating 3D structure from 2D cues. Escher makes that extrapolation visible, turning the viewer into a metacognitive agent who watches their own inference misfire.

III. Relation to machine vision

Contemporary classifiers likewise “complete” scenes from partial cues—and sometimes hallucinate impossible geometry. Escher’s prints are therefore not only art history but **pedagogy for interpretability**: when should a system abstain rather than force a globally consistent mesh?

IV. Ethics of seduction

Escher seduces with clarity. Designers of interfaces and illusions wield similar power. The essay asks where seduction serves insight versus where it **weaponizes certainty** about what cannot coherently exist.

V. Conclusion

Impossible worlds are laboratories for the ethics and psychology of modeling: they prove that beauty and coherence can diverge—and that noticing the divergence is the beginning of better maps.

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