Optical Melancholy: Mechanics of Vision in the Poetry, Painting, and Photography of José María Eguren

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ABSTRACT

This essay studies the poetry, painting, and photographic work of the Peruvian José María Eguren. It offers the first interdisciplinary analysis of Eguren’s varied works and poetics, understanding them as a whole; locates Eguren within a process of cosmopolitan cultural modernity wider than that presented by literary studies; and shows ways in which early twentieth-century artistic productions transition from romantic fin de siécle concerns into mass media and technology. Specifically, this study explores the role of the senses in Eguren’s literary and visual works, analyses his understanding of the phenomena of vision and visuality during a period in which visual technology and the avant-garde seemed to have left behind the nineteenth century, and discusses the subject of literary and visual melancholy from an early twentieth-century point of view. It addresses the concept of fantasy and argues that Eguren, instead of presenting fantasy and melancholy as fin de siècle decadent phenomena, treats and explains them as processes of human understanding and thought closely linked to both the dynamics of optics and contemporary visual technology.

RESUMEN

Este artículo es un estudio de la poesía, la pintura y el trabajo fotográfico del peruano José María Eguren. Ofrece el primer análisis interdisciplinario de la variada obra de Eguren y de su poética entendiéndolas como un todo; coloca a Eguren dentro de un proceso de modernidad cultural cosmopolita más amplio del aquel presentado por los estudios literarios; y muestra maneras por las que producciones de principios del siglo XX pasan de intereses finiseculares románticos a interesarse en los medios de comunicación de masas y la tecnología. Específicamente, este estudio explora el papel de los sentidos en el trabajo literario y visual de Eguren, analiza su entendimiento de los fenómenos de la visión y la visualidad durante un periodo en el cual la tecnología y la vanguardia artística parecen haber dejado atrás el siglo XIX, y discute el asunto de la melancolía literaria y visual desde un punto de vista de principios del siglo XX. El artículo aborda el concepto de la fantasía y arguye que Eguren, en lugar de presentar fantasía y melancolía como fenómenos finiseculares
decadentes, los trata y explica como procesos de entendimiento humano y los piensa cercanamente vinculados tanto a dinámicas ópticas como a la tecnología visual contemporánea.

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From the beginning of a literary career that started with a handful of poems in 1899, the prestige of José María Eguren (Perú, 1874–1942) has not ceased to grow. Together with César Vallejo (1892–1938), he is considered one of the two founders of Peruvian modern poetry. The attention given to his poetic work has been abundant and has dominated the study of his artistic production. His essays on art, culture, and aesthetics published between January of 1930 and December of 1931, collected later under the title of Motivos (1959), have had considerably less critical success. His poems are compact verbal and sensorial artefacts in which vision and sound play a key role. His essays, on the other hand, are as condensed and rigorous as his poetry. They present different challenges for his readers. But, unlike the poems, these rich texts allow access to multiple connections with Eguren’s cultural and historical contexts; in particular, with the phenomenon of fin de siècle cultural modernity in Peru and Spanish America. They are also a window onto his other practices: painting and photography. If the studies of his prose are very few, those on his visual work can be counted on one hand.

My general objectives in this essay are: to offer the first interdisciplinary analysis of Eguren’s varied works and poetics understanding them as a whole; to locate Eguren within a process of cosmopolitan cultural modernity wider than that presented by literary studies; to show ways in which early twentieth century artistic productions transition from romantic fin de siècle concerns into mass media and technology; and, lastly, to offer an effective methodological set of instruments applicable to other multifaceted modern authors and oeuvres. Specifically, this study explores the role of the senses in Eguren’s literary and visual works, analyses his understanding of the phenomena of vision and visuality during a period in which visual technology and the avant-garde seemed to have left behind the nineteenth century, and discusses the subject of literary and visual melancholy from an early twentieth century point of view. I will address the concept of fantasy and argue that Eguren, instead of presenting fantasy and melancholy as fin de siècle’s decadent phenomena, treats and explains them as processes of human understanding and thought closely linked to both the dynamics of optics and contemporary visual technology. I will focus on the role played in the construction of Eguren’s poetics by both his conception of the biomechanics of optics, and the manner in which the culture of his time took part in how one saw, interpreted and gave form to what was seen.

**Pictorial Visuality in Eguren’s Poetry**

The first poems published by Eguren in the twentieth century initiate in 1909 what would later become two clear trends in his poetry: texts that unfold settings swarming
with multiple characters and minute events, and very concise ambient texts closely affiliated to nineteenth-century French Symbolism. The following lines from “Marcha fúnebre de una marionette,” based on Charles Gounod’s musical piece *Marche funèbre d’une marionette* (1872), are a good example of the first trend:

Suena trompa del infante con aguda melodía…
la farándula ha llegado de la reina Fantasía;
y en las luces otoñales se levanta plañidera
la carroza delantera.

Pasan luego, a la sordina, peregrinos y lacayos
y con sus caparazones los acéfalos caballos;
va en azul melancolía
la muñeca. ¡No hagáis ruido!

se dirá, se dirá
que la pobre se ha dormido.

Vienen tímidos y erguidos palaciegos borgoñones
y los siguen arlequines con estrechos pantalones.

Ya monótona en litera
va la reina de madera

Of similar style are the “Las bodas vienesas,” “Marcha noble,” and “Syhna la blanca”; these texts unfold a sensorial imagery of European sources in which sound and the visual take precedence, and many of them are linked to infancy and childhood. In this essay I will refer very little to sound in order to give emphasis to what is virtually and manifestly placed before the eyes. The type of pictorial visuality unfolded by Eguren in these 1909 poems is related to images reminiscent of the evocation of a fictional past produced by fin de siècle artists like the French Gustave Doré in watercolours such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1870) and *The Fairies* (1873)—both based on William Shakespeare’s writings—or in others such as his *Fairy Land* (1881) and *The Fairy Festival* (1900), produced to illustrate Charles Perrault’s *Fairy Tales*. This type of visuality can be also found in paintings such as Joseph Noel Paton’s *The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania* (1849–50) and Edwin Landseer’s *Titania and Bottom* (1848–51), also based on Shakespeare’s texts. But original oil and watercolour paintings are not the media that made this type of image well known; they were reproduced in abundance through woodblock prints and lithographs such as those designed by Amédée Varin for *Les Papillons, métamorphoses terrestres des peuples de l’air* (1862), or those drawn by Warwick Goble, a contemporary of Eguren, for Charles Kingsley’s *The Water Babies* (1909). On 14 February 1920, for example, the Peruvian magazine *Variedades* reproduced images by the Danish Kay Nielsen accompanying Bernardo G. Barros’s article “De arte: Pequeñas exposiciones” figuring miniature illustrations. One could argue that

José María Eguren, *Obras completas*, ed. Ricardo Silva-Santisteban (Lima: Banco de Crédito del Perú, 1997), 9–10.
watercolours such as Juventud-Vejez and Sueño (Figure 1), painted by Eguren, show a modern popular visuality that is kindred to contemporary miniature commercial decorative illustrations, to the phyto- and zoomorphic aesthetics of the Art Nouveau, and to the de Neo-Gothic historiated narratives. He paid particular attention to the prints modern illustrators produced to accompany short stories yearning for a past that never was, images that joined in what Eguren, in his essay “La lámpara de la mente,” published
in March of 1931, called “una harmonía de fealdades [que hace] belleza”;\(^2\) the latter being a catalogue of works formed by “pagodas historiadas,” “relieves locos,” “sillerías,” and the “figurerías taraceadas” found, as he pointed out in “Paisaje mínimo,” an essay published in June of the same year, in the miniature crafting of artists of the Middle Ages such as the Limbourg brothers, or Jean Fouquet.\(^3\)

The miniature commercial decorative illustration occupies a special place in Eguren’s works—similar to the role played by infancy—and both appear together as the primordial source of melancholy. “En ese tiempo de gracia,” writes Eguren in “Eufonía y canción” (1930), “miraba las viñetas preciosas de la fosforera, las porcelanas y el confitero […] Veía los dibujos de las piezas de música con indecible placer. […] Recuerdo un paisaje en rosa que me ensombraba con suave tristeza.”\(^4\) In his poems and essays Eguren evokes melancholic Art Nouveau imagery, but Art Deco, as a December 1928 cover of Mundial magazine by A. González and Eguren’s watercolour Cubista show, was also present in Perú’s popular media (Figure 2). The ways in which Eguren visualizes melancholy through images of a chimerical past in his miniature illustrated poetry include pictorial as well as graphic and, as I will argue below, photographic sources. All of these sources also appear in his symbolist poems.

\(^2\)Eguren, Obras completas, 198.
\(^3\)Eguren, Obras completas, 232.
\(^4\)Eguren, Obras completas, 196.
In his 1921 review “Undiscovered Perú,” dedicated to Eguren’s first two collections, John Brand Trend calls him:

One of those poets for whom a word represents more than a single idea, more than a single association; it takes a new value from the sound, the associations of that sound and the rhymes it suggests. Some of his verses have the effect of nursery rhymes which have descended from incantations, and thus may truly be said to have something magical about them, as in “Las Candelas” [The Flames], in which the fair ladies with their candles begin to dance tarantellas because, and only because, candela rhymes with tarantela.

The sensorial and mental impacts to which Trend is referring are of the same kind as those that, three decades later, in 1949, T. S. Eliot pointed out in his essay “From Poe to Valéry” when referring to Edgar Allan Poe’s poetry: “It has the effect of an incantation which, because of its very crudity, stirs the feelings at a deep and almost primitive level. But, in his choice of the word which has the right sound, Poe is by no means careful that it should have also the right sense.” These comments put emphasis on a perceived link between some sort of supernatural quality and the primordial abilities that can be found in infancy and in the beginnings of humanity. Eguren’s rhythmic combinations link infancy and enchantment, but they also rely on a deep knowledge of classical and contemporary music. Eliot’s essay, entitled “From Poe to Valéry,” places these qualities and abilities within what he calls a fading poetics. This was a trend that, beginning with Poe, was followed consecutively by the French poets Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Valéry. Eguren is a contemporary of Valéry (1871–1945). And, as happens with Valéry, Eguren can also be considered an heir of the symbolist tradition initiated by Baudelaire, and a follower of Poe’s poetics.

Eguren’s symbolist poetic work is extremely condensed and precise. His vocabulary draws on different historical periods and even languages. Among the symbolist poems he published in 1909, “Réverie,” for example, does not include many actions or characters, but rather a concise narrative of a sole protagonist:

Y soñé, de un templete bajaban
dos dulces bellezas matinales;
y oí melancólicas hablaban
de las nobles dichas forestales.
Las vi en el blasón de la poterna
azulinás y casi borradas
despierto años después, la cisterna
las mecía medio retratadas.
Y al fin las divisé lastimosas
por los caminos y por las abras;
y hablaban las bellas melódias;

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5John Brand Trend, “Undiscovered Peru,” The Times Literary Supplement, August 25, 1921, 546.
6T. S. Eliot, “From Poe to Valéry,” The Hudson Review 3 (1949): 331–32.
The poem is divided in three stages with their corresponding settings constructed with a handful of physical components. In each of them, only a few imprecise actions take place: a man dreams; he vaguely catches a glimpse of two female figures; he, later on, sees them descending in the distance from an architectonic structure, as well as turning into heraldic images, and wandering off in the periphery. This minimal anecdotal axis does not bear, however, much weight; the actions are displaced from the foreground by the elements offering visual and phonic perception. Visually, each stage unfolds a distinctive scenery marked by very precise architectural and orographic references. The first one presents a cupola; the second, a postern, a blazon, and a cistern; and, the third, mountain trails and crossings. Verbally, the actions are described as placid events; visually, otherwise, the poem seems to represent a drama of increasing tension as well as a corresponding progressive movement that begins in the courtyard of a fortress, goes through an exterior wall’s hidden door, and fades away in the surroundings. The mindset from where the events are told, and, are seen—or visualized—is that of the melancholic evocation; we are confronted with the narrative of a sort of escape that is, at the same time, a return to the realm of nature from where one has been long separated. What seems to be, for the dreamed female figures, a nostalgic whispering regarding an arcane nature, is for the male viewer a reflection on what could have been of a life, probably his, the end of which is now approaching. In addition to this, there is an aspect that needs to be highlighted. As much in the visual elements as in the sound ones, the predominance lies in what is undetermined. The leading role is assumed, for example, by the sound produced by the words uttered by the female figures; but whatever is said by them is unintelligible, as is the music that can be heard at the back. J. B. Trend noticed this auditory focus on the imprecise and blurred in Eguren’s text “El andarín de la noche,” in which, “the thing is presented as if it were heard going outside, from behind the shutters.” In “Rêverie,” what remains clear in the narrator-spectator’s memory is that which is attainable by the eyes: the distant image of female faces discoursing with each other about the loss of that which never came to be.

Melancholy, verbally and visually, is a period subject. The ways in which Eguren addresses it go back to Romanticism, move across the fin de siècle, and reach the first decades of the twentieth century. Several writers who were contemporaries of Eguren treated the subject of melancholy in a similar manner. In his illustrations for Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1878), for example, artists like Gustave Doré—discussed by the Peruvian in “Paisaje mínimo”—also gave form to the type of sceneries outlined by Eguren. In my analysis, I am not seeking to establish a net of influences or

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7 Eguren, *Obras completas*, 12.
8 Trend, “Undiscovered Peru,” 546.
9 Eguren, *Obras completas*, 1931.
aesthetic appropriations; rather, I wish to underline the structures texts and images have in common when depicting melancholy as a dynamic of slow metabolism and minimal agency. Thus, I will continue with an analysis of these structures focusing on Eguren’s 1911 poem “La dama i,” and on Arnold Böcklin’s symbolist pictorial series Isle of the Death, produced between 1880 and 1886:

La dama i, vagarosa
en la niebla del lago,
canta las finas trovas.
Va en su góndola encantada
de papel a la misa
verde de la mañana.
Y en su ruta va cogiendo
las dormidas umbelas
y los papiros muertos.
Los sueños rubios de aroma
despiertan blandamente
su sardana en las hojas.
Y parte dulce, adormida,
a la borrosa iglesia
de la luz amarilla.

Eguren’s poem unfolds a space that reveals a lake, a gondola, aquatic sedges, and a building in which one can distinguish a light. Its narrative scope is minimal: the gondola carries a woman who sings and picks up withering flowers as she sails early in the morning towards a church. The poem’s narrative relies on a few actions without clear causality: to sing, to go through, to pick up, to depart. What takes precedence is, rather, the contiguous sequence created by the elements that take part in the visual unfolding: a lady, fog, a lake, papyri, a church and a source of light. Visually, as happens auditorily with the words uttered by the female figures of the poem discussed before, this scenery is also imprecise owing to a series of reasons: its chromatic palette is limited, there is fog over the lake, the movement is vagarious, and one can barely discern a blurred construction in the background. The feeling of imminence created by the direction and the destination pointed out by the boat are not determinants, the attention of whoever reads or observes should rather follow a chain of staging panels delimited by corresponding objects. As in the previous case, the centre of attention is marked by imprecision and ambiguity: the fog; whatever is vague and blurry stands up. The painting of Böcklin—an artist briefly commented on both by Eguren and the painter Teófilo Castillo while interviewing him in 1911—makes use of similar visual strategies. In this picture, the

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10Eguren, Obras completas, 19.
11Eguren, Obras completas, 254; Teófilo Castillo, “Semblanzas de artistas: José María Eguren,” in Eguren, Obras completas, 359–63 (360).
predominance of identifiable objects (two figures, a boat, an embankment, stone steps, columns, lintels, and a semi-circular cliff) over the imprecise areas (the top of the stairs, a grove, archways) has being debated; I would like to argue, however, that the importance granted by Böcklin to the ambiguous is reflected in the variations of the subject of this painting, and in his other works of similarly imprecise imagery. Overall, the elements of “La dama i” can be found in paintings such as John William Waterhouse’s The Lady of Shalott (1888), John Atkinson Grimshaw’s Elaine (1877), and also in Doré’s Idylls, and in Eguren’s watercolour El toque de ánimas (Figure 3).

Poetically, a similar contemporary visual unfolding of minimal elements can be found in the work of fin de siècle Spanish American writers such as the Cuban Julián del Casal, for example, in his 1892 poem “Una maja”:

Muerden su pelo negro, sedoso y rizo,
Los dientes nacarados de alta peineta,
Y surge de sus dedos la castaña,
Cual mariposa negra de entre el granizo;
Pañolón de Manila, fondo pajizo,
Que a su talle ondulante firme sujeta
Echa reflejos de ámbar, rosa y violeta,
Moldeando de sus carnes todo hechizo.
Cual tímidas palomas por el follaje,
Asoman sus chapines bajo su traje
Hecho de blondas negras y verde raso,
Y al choque de las copas de manzanilla
Riman con los tacones la seguidilla,
Perfumes enervantes dejando el paso.\textsuperscript{12}

More clearly than in Eguren’s text, del Casal introduces four pairs of identifiable objects in a sequence that guides the reader’s gaze through a top to bottom path: hair/back comb, fingers/castanets, shawl/waist, and chapins/dress; based on these areas charged with information, he outlines a dramatic environment. Its visual equivalent is not that of Goya’s paintings, as one could expect, but rather contemporary illustrations and photo engravings as well as their pictorial counterparts. Black and white images published in the Peruvian Mundial magazine—as part of the notes “Tramoyas y bambalinas: Tórtola Valencia,” on 16 September 1921, and “Tórtola Valencia,” on October 2, 1925—as well as Juan Manuel Cárdenas Castro’s cartoon and Leopoldo Morey’s colour cover—published in Variedades, on May 1, 1920, and March 20, 1929, respectively—are good examples of such types of contemporary visuality. On the other hand, Le Danseur, an oil painting by French artists André Louis Maxime Humbert (1879–?), Eguren’s contemporary, matches most of del Casal’s visually represented elements. What might have

\textsuperscript{12}Julián del Casal, “Una maja,” in Julián del Casal: Estudio biográfico, ed. Ramón Meza (La Habana: Imp. Avisador comercial, 1910), 15.
been in the Cuban’s poem the verbal equivalent of a bidimensional representation—of a poster, a photograph, or a painting such as Humbert’s—becomes a three-dimensional environment determined by the movement involved in multidirectional expansive occurrences and the emphasis on sounds (the clinking of glasses and heels) and smells (the aroma of perfume), since they imply spatial dispersion. Unlike del Casal, and closer to Böcklin’s vein, Eguren choses not only to draw the reader’s attention visually towards

Figure 3. Top: Arnold Böcklin, *Isle of the Dead* (1884). Bottom left: Gustave Doré, illustration for Lord Tennyson’s *The Idylls of the King* (1870). Bottom right: *Fantasmagoria (El toque de ánimas)* (n.d.) by José María Eguren.
concrete and identifiable elements, but, above all, to draw it mostly towards those elements whose position and contours remain undefined.

**Optics and Haptics**

One could say that Eguren does not merely draw our attention towards objects or areas in a given space, but rather that he guides it towards our own imperceptible actions in the process of capturing visual information; that is to say, we end up perceiving the biomechanics of our vision. Technically speaking, he draws our attention towards that which Claude Gandelman, in his 1991 book *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts*, calls “two fundamental categories of vision:” **optics** and **haptics**. Optics involves the “scanning of objects according to their outlines,” while haptics (a Greek term that means “capable of touching”) “focuses on surfaces and emphasizes the value of superficials of objects.” “The optical eye,” explains Gandelman, “merely brushes the surface of things. The haptic, or tactile, eye penetrates in depth, finding its pleasure in texture and grain.”

Vision and touch seem to be intrinsically related. With regard to an eighteenth century model of vision developed by George Berkeley, Gandelman adds:

> The locating of the objects in the world and their identification—what today is called pattern recognition—and even more so the evaluation of the distance between the observing eye and the points of his focusing on the surface of these objects are synesthetic operations. The purely optical (without synesthesia) is only capable of apprehending points on a plane surface. “Visual appearances are altogether flat,” Berkeley wrote. It is only through a transference of the sense of touch to the eye that one is able to locate and identify things and evaluate one’s position in relation to them.

What Gandelman discusses in this text is a model of vision in which the fovea (a tiny depression in the retina’s macula densely populated by specific light-sensitive photoreceptor cells) inspects the details of elements captured within our visual field while the other specialized cells surrounding the fovea carry out an unfocused apperception of shapes; in other words, it is the process of locating points in space and projecting depth in relation to the position of the viewer. Gandelman goes even further in his understanding of this model, by attributing to optics a metaphorical type of apperception—inasmuch as it jumps from one point to another seeking patterns over surfaces—and attributing to haptics a metonymical one inasmuch as it conjectures entireties from the presentment of parts.

These two types of vision can be found interacting in the series of eye movements involved in the binocular gaze. The eyes do not apprehend simultaneously all the stimuli, rather they scan images lineally. Technically speaking, the biomechanics of human vision consist of a quick dynamic process that selects **information-loaded** points on which the fovea focuses while it moves through a series of fast zigzag movements called saccades. These operations are part of a sensorial cognitive process that, as Ernest Gombrich puts it, “tentatively anticipate” environments assessing a developing...

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13Claude Gandelman, *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 5.
14Gandelman, *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts*, 6.
15Gandelman, *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts*, 9–12.
situation.16 We humans, therefore, react to stimuli making predictions and hypothesis about objects in space. According to Gombrich, we carry out these processes due to the “prognosis character” of our perception.17 Gandelman, on the other hand, in his 1989 essay, entitled “‘Scan-Paths’ in the Paintings of José María Velasco: a Semiotic Approach,” has applied these principles to the study of what he calls the aesthetics of reception and production in late-nineteenth-century art. Gandelman focuses on both the ways in which the fin de siècle’s Mexican public observed—or, even, “read”—Velasco’s paintings, and on what he considers the “pragmatics” of this artist.

In accordance with the principles I have presented, the spectators of the late-nineteenth century, as well as us, in the twenty-first century, see the world binocularly by locating and joining dots in order to identify shapes and measure volumes and distances. This seems to be confirmed by the experiments carried out by Alfred L. Yarbus in his study Eye Movements and Vision of 1965. Yarbus uses reproductions of Ilia Repin’s 1880s naturalist painting An Unexpected Visitor in order to trace and register the eye movements of a number of individuals. Repin is also the author of symbolist images such as Sadko in the Underwater Kingdom (1876). These experiments showed the appearance of consistent visual patterns when the viewers observed freely the image as well as when they were given specific tasks to complete. According to Gandelman, the pragmatics of a fin de siècle’s painter such as Velasco, consisted of “his intentional manipulation of the spectator of his times” through the compositional construction of “a ‘built-in’ trace or pattern which the eye follows […] left there for us to scan the object in a specific manner.”18 Gandelman states: “There are precise guidelines, or rather, in our terminology ‘scanpaths’ inscribed in all Velasco’s landscapes.”19 He believes that Velasco’s contemporaries probably read his paintings following these intentionally constructed scanpaths. One could argue that Velasco guided those trajectories by painting certain areas in great detail (thus attracting a foveal detention) while leaving around them blurred areas.20

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16Ernst Gombrich, “Illusion and Art,” in Illusion in Nature and Art, ed. R. L. Gregory and E. H. Gombrich (London: Duckworth, 1980), 193–243 (211).
17Gombrich, “Illusion and Art,” 218.
18Gandelman, Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts, 91.
19Gandelman, Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts, 93.
20For scientific studies conducted in the last decade and a half on the relationship between vision and artistic production, that explore aspects such as figure and pattern recognition, image composition, gaze’s scan path direction, artists’ perceptual skills, artworks’ attributed quality, and viewers’ expertise, see, for example: Benjamin W. Tatler, Nicholas J. Wade, and Kathrin Kaulard, “Examining Art: Dissociating Pattern and Perceptual Influences on Oculomotor Behaviour,” Spatial Vision 1–2 (2007): 165–84; Paul Locher, Elizabeth Krupinski, Claudia Mello-Thoms, and Calvin F. Nodine, “Visual Interest in Pictorial Art during an Aesthetic Experience,” Spatial Vision 1–2 (2007): 55–77; Rodrigo Quian Quiroga and Carlos Pedreira, “How Do We See Art: An Eye-Tracker Study,” Frontiers in Human Neuroscience 5 (2011): 98; Federica Massaro Davide, Savazia, Cinzia Di Dio, David Freedberg, Vittorio Gallese, Gabriella Gilli, and Antonella Marchetti, “When Art Moves the Eyes: A Behavioural and Eye-Tracking Study,” PLoS One 5 (2012): 1–16; Florian Perdreau and Patrick Cavanagh, “Is Artist’s Perception more Veridical?” Frontiers in Human Neuroscience 7 (2013): 6; Piotr Francuz, Ivo Zaniewski, Pawel Augustynowicz, Natalia Kopis, and Tomasz Jankowski, “Eye Movement Correlates of Expertise in Visual Arts,” Frontiers in Human Neuroscience 12 (2018): 87; Matthew Pelowski, Helmut Leder, Vanessa Mitschke, Eva Specker, Gernot Gerger, Pablo Tinio; Elena Vaportova, Till Bieg, and Agnes Husslein-Arco, “Capturing Aesthetic Experiences with Installation Art: An Empirical Assessment of Emotion, Evaluations and Mobile Eye Tracking in Olafur Eliasson’s ‘Baroque, Baroque!’” Frontiers in Psychology 9 (2018): 1255. For studies on images created by a specific artist, with a specific visual technology, under particular production criteria for a certain type of consumer, and within specific historical and cultural contexts, see Clare Kirtley, “How Images Draw the Eye: An Eye-Tracking Study of Composition,” Empirical Studies of the Arts 1 (2018): 41–70. For a discussion on cognitive functions in relation to the importance of central versus peripheral vision for the recognition of natural scene-gist, see Hans Strasburger, Ingo Rentschler, and Martin Jüttner, “Peripheral Vision and Pattern Recognition: A Review,” Journal of Vision 3 (2011): 1–82.
Applying these principles to José María Eguren’s work, one could also argue that his poems outline a similar visual phenomenon. He draws the reader’s attention towards representations of optic and haptic vision while guiding the direction to be followed by virtual saccadic movements. The presence of a limited number of identifiable elements makes it possible to trace the scan paths clearly. The movements that take place appear almost as lingering states. Besides the identification of objects and the recognition of contours (the foveal vision), Eguren’s visual strategies are dominated by scanning across the areas of peripheral vision, giving emphasis to the blurred and tactile in pursuit of suggestions of depth and the mystery of anticipation. These visual strategies show Eguren’s level of consciousness with regard to optical phenomena and the role they have in his own poetry. His understanding of his poetics of visuality is linked to the concept of “fantasy.”

Painting and Poetry via Edgar Allan Poe

In his essay “La lámpara de la mente,” published in March of 1931, Eguren defines both painting and poetry as externalizations of mental properties, not of emotions. As happens with vision, a process in which the mind creates perceptual images, in the artistic process, the mind creates physical representations. Paintings and poems are products of what Eguren calls “la fantasía de la mente”; and fantasy is defined by him as an impulse “en principio, sensorial” able of producing “formas intangibles.”

The supporting sensorial frame of this conception of painting and poetry as perceptual expressions of mind-monitored subjectivity seems to be a predominant exercise of peripheral vision the result of which are predominantly volumes and not shapes. “Como toda emoción estética,” Eguren writes, “[la fantasía] es imprecisa; es un anhelo involuntario como toda expansión anímica; es un vagar a un mundo de quimeras, donde bullen arquetipos ignotos.”

Three key concepts are transferred from his definition of fantasy to that of poetry: sensoriality, imprecision, and what he calls “anhelo expansivo,” which resembles what Gombrich understands as a tentative anticipation of environments. In other words, Eguren seems to understand by fantasy a process of mid-way creation that, departing from the realm of what is already known, produces unconfirmed forms based on what the senses have captured from their perception of surroundings composed of peripheral imprecision. This understanding of fantasy based on the sensorially haptic, and, particularly, on the haptic vision, also seems to be very close to what has been called the phenomenon of “the fantastic,” which in its literary form is a genre mastered by Edgar Allan Poe. One of Poe’s short stories is a good example for a discussion of the role of vision in relation to the fantastic. In “The Oval Portrait,” published in 1842, a wounded traveller and his valet, at nightfall, find refuge in an abandoned castle. Inside, he is left alone, surrounded by a considerable number of tapestries, trophies, and paintings; among the latter, there is a portrait of a young lady. According to Poe, the portrait of his story follows the style of Thomas Sully. Most of Sully’s portraits are conventionally naturalistic and fairly illusionistic; one in particular, however, that of his daughter

21Eguren, Obras completas, 199.
22Eguren, Obras completas, 198.
Rosalie Kemble Sully, entitled *The Student* (1848), fulfils Poe’s description of a portrait in which the sitter melts “imperceptibly into the vague yet deep shadow which formed the back-ground of the whole.”

In his story, the picture attracts the attention of the solitary protagonist when, suddenly illuminated by a candelabrum’s light, it makes him fall into the illusion of being in the presence of what he describes as “an absolute *life-likeliness* of expression.”

What has not been underlined by Poe’s critics is the illusionistic nature of the oval portrait as a genre in which, by representing a sitter that seems to invade the space of reality, seventeenth-century Dutch painters, such as Frans Hals, sought, in Facundo Tomás’s words, “la victoria sobre la muerte física.”

Hals’s *Portrait of a Man [holding a medallion on his right hand within an oval frame]* (1614–15) and also Bartolomé Esteban Murillo’s *Autorretrato* (1668–70) are clear examples of the type of illusionistic image Poe depicts. The illusion the image provokes in Poe’s character lasts barely an instant: “I glanced at the painting hurriedly, and then closed my eyes.”

The dominant sense is sight, binocular vision. Optically, the character would be able, first, to identify the contour of a human figure, that of a woman, and its attributes; and, second, to perceive volume, depth and, complementing them, corporality. To make a prognosis of the latter would only require the quick scanning of a minimum number of elements. More than a dependence on the “clarity” of a primarily foveal vision, what is predominant here is the peripherical vision, and the imprecision of this vision allows the ambiguity that provokes the reaction. What the narrator’s mind has done, Gombrich would say, is “tentatively anticipate” an encounter with a live human being; in other words, to acknowledge certainties without the need to confirm each physical encounter, or to have voluntarily suspended disbelief.

As I argued above, Eguren uses a different terminology to describe this process. He would probably say that an “expansive longing” has taken place; although one could argue that such a process of tentative anticipation actually takes place in each act of vision; in his story, Poe chooses to underline what indicates a flaw in the tentative anticipation of his protagonist: the doubt that emerges in the viewer not from the possible existence of afterlife but from the unconfirming nature of the imperceptible saccadic path. Eguren, on the other hand, invites us to embrace the unconfirmed and to keep one’s perception within the realm of the peripheral vision throughout our gaze’s saccadic path. In the physical world, a gaze with both eyes is followed by many other gazes, and all of them are accompanied by different kinds of perceptual movements, ocular and corporal, which allow the confirmation or rectification of chains of hypothetical perceptions. And this is what happens to Poe’s narrator. “[Closing my eyes],” he says, “was an impulsive movement to gain time for thought—to make sure that my vision had not deceived me—to calm and subdue my fancy for a more sober and more certain gaze”; and, soon after, prepared to confirm or dismiss his hypothesis, he adds: “In a very few moments I again looked fixedly at the painting.”

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23 Edgar Allan Poe, “The Oval Portrait,” in *The Portable Poe*, ed. Philip van Doren Stern (Bulmer: The Viking Press, 1964), 104.
24 Poe, “The Oval Portrait,” 105.
25 Facundo Tomás, *Escrito, pintado* (*Dialéctica entre escritura e imágenes en la conformación del pensamiento europeo*) (Madrid: Visor, 1998), 194.
26 Poe, “The Oval Portrait,” 104.
27 Poe, “The Oval Portrait,” 104.
portraits and he also photographed sitters. The paintings are not illusionistic; what counts for this discussion is their relationship with photography and optics since most of these images are miniatures.

As Eguren understands it, fantasy does not seem to be a process that seeks to eliminate hypothesis, but it is rather one that leans towards the haptic, towards a continuous expansion of tentativeness. Optically, the aim of fantasy is not to fix the gaze on what is seen, but on the edges of the flow that is intrinsic to the act of seeing. If, in accordance with the model I have described, our vision works identifying information-loaded areas and projecting depth while moving between them, Eguren’s sensorial fantasy seeks to bring within the field of vision the perceptual depth that surrounds each foveal area potentially projecting the scan path’s trajectory to the infinite. This could explain why what prevails in the poems already discussed is not the causality of a lineal narration, but rather a promise of fulfilment that grows exponentially throughout a sequence guided by contiguity. This type of visual projection through open space, or spatial projection through imprecise visual perception, this type of ever-finished evaluation of the distant, of a non-confirmed hypothesis that is the source of other non-confirmed hypotheses, are at the core of what Eguren calls “expansión anímica,” and “dilatación fantástica” in his essay “La lámpara de la mente” or “idea extensiva” in his essay “Ideas extensivas.”

His most evident model seems to lie in certain artists’ visions of the landscape, as he points out in his essay “Paisaje mínimo” (1931): “Linbourg de Chantilly y [Jean] Fouquet,” states Eguren, “pintaron sus caseríos de fondo y [Hans] Memling sus torreones distantes abandonados. […] En los tiempos modernos […] Doré y Neuville han cultivado el paisaje con original factura, en su arte histórico.”

In 1921, J. B. Trend noticed in Eguren’s treatment of the landscape the stylistic features that Eguren would later call an “expansive longing.” Trend writes: “It is always the still and the quiet which fascinate Eguren. One of his poems is called ‘The Towers.’ There are two distances, lejanías, always changing colour; and the towers which seem at first to be fighting; then ‘mingled in the flames of their fury’; then wounded, purple; then ashen, faded, dead.”

As Trend skilfully notices, the supposed object of the text, the towers, end up merged with the colourful distances; that is to say, with the celajes [cloudscapes] on which Eguren reflects in other essays written ten years later. In “La emoción del celaje” (1931), Eguren states: “El don primero del celaje es la melancolía, el celaje es la melancolía manifiesta en colores; siempre es canción lejana; siempre es calada y tenue la sucesión de sus estampas. […] El celaje de la tarde es rezo y remembranza; el de la noche es un sueno. Su primer valor es la melancolía; suprema introspección. El celaje como toda distancia es un movimiento llamativo.”

**The Scanpath of Fantasy**

Eguren visually presents fantasy as a gaze, the saccadic trajectory of which goes across an infinite sequence of distances. The following passage from “La lámpara de la mente”

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28Eguren, Obras completas, 198.
29Eguren, Obras completas, 254.
30Eguren, Obras completas, 232.
31Trend, “Undiscovered Peru,” 546.
32Eguren, Obras completas, 215–16.
is a good example of the ways in which such a gaze is represented. Its sequence seems to fade away in the horizon, but its extension runs into the mirroring depths of a pair of eyes that, instead of offering a point of arrival, return the gaze offering a specular trajectory that potentially has no end:

Instead of beginning in a foveal point, Eguren’s scanpath departs from an area charged with the imprecision of what is distant. His interest is focused on what Gombrich defined as the prognosis-oriented character of our perception or, to put it differently, on the mind’s inability to register a new presence without resorting to information already known. This is a faculty able to uphold, nevertheless, the spell of uncertainty displayed by the “Oval Portrait” as an intrinsic and permanent condition of all our senses. In his essay “Ideas extensivas” (1931), Eguren explains the process of constructing meaning through his process of vision:

The compass in Eguren’s visual perception points, first of all, towards the inaccessible distance in any natural landscape. This is not because we are unable to see it due to our biological limitations, but because we are usually unwilling to go beyond clarity seeking out for imprecision as our objective. The physical effect of imprecision turns into a concrete manner of perceiving the “ideal”; a latent presence defined by Eguren, in his essay “El ideal de la vida” (1931), in a variety of ways, as the “primer motivo,” or as “esperanza intuyente,” or as “pensamiento determinado por un sentimiento,” or as “emoción de alcance ignoto,” or as “conciencia infirme,” or as a “curiosidad instintiva” that constitutes the “línea elemental” of longing.

It could be said that Eguren’s visuality consists of a perpetual process of producing a hypothesis that results from the voluntary renunciation of the foveal gaze’s certainty, which could be possible thanks to a continuous succession of peripheral trajectories. Some of the landscapes painted by Eguren show this sense of expansion. Árboles and Paisaje are images close to some of his optical and pictorial models; in particular, the
work of Lépine. In his essay “La impression lejana” (n.d.), he writes: “Un paisaje sin lejos, es limitado y prisionero, caricatura de paisaje. Raffet con sus visiones de distancia a modo de campanarios, nos llama con voz imperceptible, Lépine en su Paris pinta árboles frondones de primer término, y en el fondo se desvanece la ciudad maravilla, una figura de claridad.”36 Such an idea of landscape is intrinsic to Eguren’s conception of fantasy as it is also the sequence of a scanpath converging towards the horizon. He does not use the latter term; he uses instead the “straight line,” which he defines in his essay “Línea. Forma. Creacionismo” (1930): “La [línea] recta es una liberación, una senda al infinito. Siempre ignoraremos su punto de llegada y el significado de la forma en que se resuelve. La forma filosófica, la mística; siempre igual misterio.”37 Later, he adds: “La línea en fuga es un constante milagro.”38 The trajectory of the expansive straight line also offers him a way to connect with photographic technology. The representation of distances his painting could not achieve were possible through his photography. Eguren was an amateur photographer who used self-made cameras of minimal dimensions (of approximately, three centimeters in diameter, and between four to five centimeters long), and obtained minute photographs from his contact prints. His critics have included this device within his interest in miniaturization; but the camera is not properly a miniature, but rather a minimalist apparatus. If one takes away the space needed by the film bobbins and their supporting frame from a contemporary modern portable camera, one would end up with a cylinder the depth of which is no larger than that of as the “Kodak autográfica miniatura” advertised on July 19, 1919, in Variedades. Eguren’s amateurism and the minimalist machine have contributed to the links his critics have established between his photographic practice and the realm of toys and infancy that is part of his poetic and pictorial imagery.

The Uncontaminated Perception of Infancy

The presence of infancy in his work, that I addressed at the beginning of this essay, can also be explained as Eguren’s model of uncontaminated perception, which is based on his model of primordial vision, a concept that lies behind his interest in infancy. In his 1930 essay “Eufonia y canción,” Eguren explains the former as follows: “La infancia sueña en la cuna de los principios y cree oír la celestial sonata. […] Rememoro que de niño la oí en mi sueño […] su acento me pintaba paisajes en violeta y azul.”39 Within the essays collected in Motivos, Eguren has offered a comprehensive theory of perception and, particularly, of vision, that coincides with a number of empirical findings obtained by scientific research during the first half of the twentieth century. Some of his theories coincide with recent findings.

If we apply Gandelman’s explanation to what I have called Eguren’s model of primordial vision, the process of gazing from the cradle would appear metonymic and having priority over the metaphoric field, in spite of the existence of an optic mechanics that prompts the infant to trace scanpaths from one point to another of his or her visual

36Eguren, Obras completas, 274.
37Eguren, Obras completas, 200.
38Eguren, Obras completas, 203.
39Eguren, Obras completas, 196.
field. The dominance of the haptic has been scientifically confirmed by a recent publication; in *Development of Perception in Infancy: The Cradle of Knowledge Revisited*, Martha Arterberry and Phillip Kellman state: “Our discussion of visual acuity has characterized acuity presumably involving foveal vision. [...] For adults, acuity drops off steeply going from fovea to periphery. For the infant, however, the fovea at birth is less mature than the peripheral areas of the retina.” They also confirm what they call the hardwired ability of infants to see via the perception of depth:

The experimental evidence is clear in showing that human beings live in a three-dimensional perceptual world from birth. Not only newborns perceive visually in three dimensions but also their perceptual systems appear organized to combine distance information with other information to determine important object attributes, such as size, shape, and motion.

Eguren’s model of the original gaze is presented as the result of a living organism that, in its own process of development, is able to perceive, mostly, in a peripheral or haptic manner (Eguren does not describe primordial vision in terms of foveal focusing but in terms of dreamlike perception). For him, the volume and the distance of that which is physically close and of that which is distant would be perceived by the infant as imprecise depths. As any gaze, the primordial gaze would entail more than one imperceptible instant through which one accumulates perceptions and formulates prognosis; faced with the mobility limitations of a young infant, to confirm perceptual hypothesis would be an immediate impossible task. Other senses, however, would provide complementary information. The process Eguren calls “imitación creativa” in his essay “La lámpara de la mente” lies beneath the accumulation of prognosis that this gaze implies; it is a process in which images and meaning are constructed from the variations and modifications of the previously captured but not yet corroborated perceptual information. Observers beyond early infancy could only get closer to this primordial gaze if they willingly maintain a gaze, the saccadic path of which is guided by imprecision when perceiving the horizon’s vanishing point as well as when perceiving the miniature. Eguren happens to work visually at the edges of what Arterberry and Kellman consider elements of human perceptual concerns relevant for guiding behaviors which “lie primarily between approximately one-tenth of a millimetre and 10,000 meters.”

By following Eguren’s invitation to achieve a perception similar to the primordial gaze, an observer would be carrying out an exercise of fantasy. In principle, this process would allow for Eguren’s painting *Paisaje* to be a possible variation of his *Hombres árboles*, which seems to hypothesize anthropomorphizations without confirmation. This argument is supported by comments made in “Línea. Forma. Creacionismo”: “Emerson decía que las figuras de los árboles y de los montes siempre fijas, como una afirmación, podrían ser signos ocultos, palabras inolvidables para nuestra mirada terrena.”

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40 Martha E. Arterberry and Phillip J. Kellman, *Development of Perception in Infancy: The Cradle of Knowledge Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 32.
41 Arterberry and Kellman, *Development of Perception in Infancy*, 24.
42 Arterberry and Kellman, *Development of Perception in Infancy*, 90.
43 Eguren, *Obras completas*, 197.
44 Arterberry and Kellman, *Development of Perception in Infancy*, 5.
45 Eguren, *Obras completas*, 200.
Eguren did not see photography as a major act of creation, but merely a reproduction of the external world. He did, however, consider the process of photographic development as an artistic instrument; he compared it to the brush and to the blending stump. In agreement with him in his 1919 interview “Semblanzas de artistas: José María Eguren,” the painter Teófilo Castillo also considered photography in the same terms. Decades later, the poet Emilio Adolfo Westphalen, in his 1986 essay “Pinturas y fotografías de Eguren: El poeta,” and the art historian Luis Eduardo Wuffarden, in his 1997 “Eguren artista visual,” point out Eguren’s inclination for pictorialist photography. In early 1920s Peru, not only simple instructions for the creation of pictorial monochrome pictures appeared in popular illustrated magazines such as Variedades, for example “Nuevos procedimientos en fotografía,” on November 19, 1921, but Lima’s 1910s magazines also included examples of contemporary pictorialism, as is evident from the notes “El arte fotográfico en provincias” and “La fotografía y el paisaje en el Perú,” published in Variedades on October 2, 1915, and April 20, 1918, respectively. Images published by Enrique Campbell in Mundial, on July 28, 1924, under the title “El

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**Eguren, Art, and Photography**

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46 Eguren, Obras completas, 211.
47 Eguren, Obras completas, 236.
48 Eguren, Obras completas, 361.
49 Eguren, Obras completas, 321.
50 Eguren, Obras completas, 528.
Callao pintoresco,” clearly show that Eguren’s pictures followed similar styles and themes (Figure 4); his photographic practice and technological knowledge, however, reach beyond the aesthetics of the represented image. His painting Playa de la Herradura clearly shows Eguren understanding that the gaze is the result of imperceptible quick movements and a kind of apprehension that is both sharp and imprecise; and that vision is, above all, a complex mind-guided process.

Moreover, to Eguren, the photographic process is an instrument that allows an approach to the “distance” found in the detail. One can argue that a series of his miniature photographs have served as representations of saccadic stops to be integrated within the larger pictorial image of La Herradura. Photography, in particular the shutter operation, offers him a mechanics for the visual construction of the instant. The contact print of an open landscape captured by the small-format camera obscura offers Eguren a concrete representation of what he calls the “straight line,” as well as a representation of the metonymic and imprecise saccadic path, and, also, of the miniaturization of images of the world (Figure 5). As a chosen saccadic stop, the small photography of a landscape becomes simultaneously the tiny one-tenth of a millimeter miniature and the 10,000-meter away lejanía at the borders of perceptual relevance. Photography, as a discipline, allows Eguren to achieve a couple of key goals: on the one hand, to make something concrete out of the mechanics involved in the perception of miniatures, as well as to apply this mechanics to the planetary vastness. In “Paisaje mínimo,” he points out: “La miniatura como dimensión es relativa, contiene lo grande y es una intensidad artística acorde con la celeridad moderna.” On the other hand, photography allows him to obtain an optical instrument that materializes the dynamics of fantasy. In his essay “Tropical,” Eguren writes: “Lo grande es siempre visible, lo pequeño es superior a los sentidos.” The depths of the miniature (Eguren makes reference to Johannes Vermeer’s small-format painting The Lacemaker [1669–71]), and those of the small-format photograph (he also makes reference to Paul Citroën’s photographic collage Metropolis [1923]) encounter each other in what is called the stenopaic camera, or camera obscura, or pinhole camera. This particular instrument does not include a lens; that is to say, its potential to capture depth is infinite. The shorter the distance is between the light sensitive surface and the pinhole from where the light enters the camera, the shorter the exposure time is. Aside from its toy-like appearance, Eguren’s camera has a specific optic function. Stenopaic photography allows Eguren to come mechanically closer to both, the biomechanics of visual perception (even though, monocular) as well as to his concept of “expansive thought.” The action of the shutter—potentially, a detention within the saccadic path—becomes the physical manifestation of the instant as he defines it in the essay “La realidad del instante”: an “emoción latente” that will linger until it is photographically developed, or until—in one’s perceptual experience—the instant “se revela a la conciencia por movimiento sucesivo.”

Photography also allowed Eguren to isolate and intensify a more accurate representation of peripherical vision, and to render through it an equivalent to the new-born’s

51Eguren, Obras completas, 233.
52Eguren, Obras completas, 222.
53Eguren, Obras completas, 232.
54Eguren, Obras completas, 222.
original gaze. This is an experience that one loses as our organism develops further and our mind becomes trained to a different visuality by its physical, historic, and cultural context. There is no proper technical name for what Eguren does; so, I will call it “fantasy visualization.” It consists of a particular attempt to activate what is understood as original vision and visuality, something that is, without a doubt, an impossible task. As Eguren understood it, the processes involved in the mechanics of this imprecise and expansive gaze lead to fantasy, and fantasy allows the configuration of mind-monitored memories of things and events the apprehension of which was never achieved. To activate indefinitely shimmers of that imprecise original gaze could be theoretically possible, as it would be possible to lose our grip on that perception as quickly as it took place.

Figure 5. Top: José María Eguren’s Playa de la Herradura (n.d.) placed side by side with his miniature stenopaeic photos of the same beach. Bottom: one of Eguren’s miniature landscapes (n.d.) graphically presented as a “lejanía,” the unlimited vanishing point of his “straight line.”
The complete disappearance of the original optic imprecision, the cessation of its potential memories or its possible latent images (in other words, the loss of the potential depths of its possible expansions which were never accessible to us) produce a feeling of having lost what one never had. It consists of a grief that the fin de siècle thought of as melancholia, which in Spanish is virtually the same term used for melancholy. Resorting to his own methodology and terminology, Eguren left aside the realm of the Romantics’ fall from Paradise, the Decadents’ mal du siècle and the clinical approach, addressed contemporaneously by Sigmund Freud in his study “Mourning and Melancholia,” and, visually and optically, presented melancholy as part of the human condition and, even, of our whole, as Arterberry and Kellman have called it, “hardwiring.”

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55 Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), 243–58.
56 Arterberry and Kellman, Development of Perception in Infancy, 24.