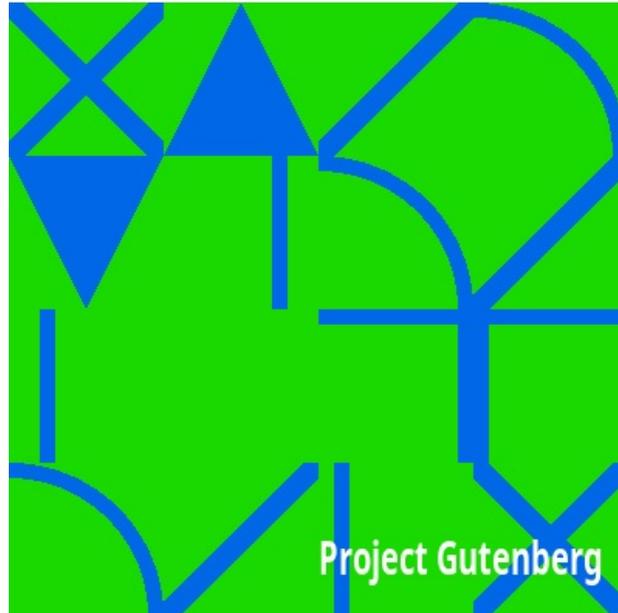


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# Vanishing Point

C. C. Beck



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# VANISHING POINT

## BY C. C. BECK

***In perspective, theoretically the vanishing point is at infinity, and therefore unattainable. But reality is different; vanishment occurs a lot sooner than theory suggests ...***

Illustrated by Martinez

T

HAT? Oh, that's a perspective machine. Well, not exactly, but that's what I call it. No, I don't know how it works. Too complicated for me. Carter could make it go, but after he made it he never used it. Too bad; he thought he'd make a lot of money with it there for awhile, while he was working it out. Almost had me convinced, but I told him, "Get it to working first, Carter, and then show me what you can do with it better than I can do without it. I'm doing pretty well as is ... pictures selling good, even if I do make 'em all by guesswork, as you call it." That's what I told him.

Y'see, Carter was one a them artists that think they can work everything out by formulas and stuff. Me, I just paint things as I see 'em. Never worry about perspective and all that kinda mechanical aids. Never even went to Art School. But I do all right. Carter, now, was a different sorta artist. Well, he wasn't really an artist—more of a draftsman.

I first got him in to help me with a series of real estate paintings I'd got an order for. Big aerial views of land developments, and drawings of buildings, roads and causeways, that kinda stuff. Was a little too much for me to handle alone, 'cause I never studied that kinda things, ya know. I thought he'd do the mechanical drawings, which shoulda been simple for anybody trained that way, and I'd throw in the colors, figures and trees and so on. He did fine. Job came out good; client was real happy. We made a pretty good amount on the job, enough to keep us for a coupla months without working afterwards. I took it easy, fishing and so on, but Carter stayed here in the studio working on his own stuff. I let him keep an eye on things for me around the place, and just dropped in now and then to check up.

The guy was nuts on the subject of perspective. I thought he knew all there was to know about it already, but he claimed *nobody* knew anything about it, really. Said he'd been studying it for years, and the more he learned about it the more there was to learn. He used to cover big sheets of paper with complicated diagrams trying to prove something or other to himself. I'd come into the studio and find him with thumb tacks and strings and stuff all over the place. He'd get big long rulers and draw lines to various points all over the room, and end up with a little drawing of a cube about an inch square that anybody coulda made in a half a minute without all the apparatus. Seemed pretty silly to me.

Then he brought in some books on mathematics and physics and other things, and a bunch of slide rules, calculators, and junk. He musta been a pretty smart guy to know how to handle all those things, even if he was kinda dopey about other things. You know ... women and fishing and sports and drinking; he was lousy at everything except working those perspective problems. Personally, I couldn't see much sense to what he was doing. The guy could draw all right already, so I asked him what more did he want? Lemme see if I can remember what he said.

"I'm trying to get at things as they really are, not as they appear," he said. I think those were his words. "Art is an illusion, a bag of tricks. Reality is something else, not what we *think* it is. Drawings are two-dimensional projections of a world that is not merely three- but four-dimensional, if not more," he said.

Yeh, kind of a crackpot, Carter was. Just on that one subject, though; nice enough guy otherwise. Here, look at some of the drawings he made, working out his formulas. Nice designs, huh? Might make good wall paper or fabric patterns. Real abstract ... that's what people seem to like. See all those little letters scattered around among the lines? Different kinds of vanishing points, they are. Carter claimed the whole world was full of vanishing points. You don't know what a vanishing point is? Lemme see if I can explain. Come over to the window here.

Ya see how that road out there gets smaller and smaller in the distance? Of course the road doesn't really get smaller—it just looks that way. That's what we call a vanishing point in drawing. Simple,

isn't it? Never could understand why Carter went to so much trouble working out all those ways to locate vanishing points. Me, I just throw 'em in wherever I need 'em. But Carter claimed that was wrong. Said they were all connected together some way, and he was gonna work out a method to prove it.

Here ... here's a little gadget he made up to help his calculations. Bunch of disks all pivoted together at the center; you're supposed to turn 'em around so the arrows point to the different figures and things. Here's the square root sign, I remember Carter telling me that. This one is the Tangent Function, whatever that means. Log, there, is short for logarithm. Oh, he had a bunch of that scientific stuff in his head all the time; dunno whether he understood it all himself. He built this thing just before he put together the perspective machine there.

Silly-looking gadget, huh? All them pipes and wires and that little cube in the center ... don't try to touch it, it ain't really there. You just think it is. It's what Carter called a teteract, or a cataract ... no, that ain't the right word. Somepin' like that—tesser something or other. There's a picture like it in one of Carter's books. Hurts your eyes to look at it, don't it?

That's what Carter thought was going to make him a lot of fame and money, that perspective machine. I told him nobody'd ever made a drawing machine yet that worked, but he said it wasn't supposed to make drawings. It was just supposed to give people a view of what reality really is, instead of what they think it is. I dunno whether he expected to charge money to look through it, or whether he was gonna look through it himself and make some new kinda drawings and sell 'em.

No, I can't tell you how it works—I said before I don't know. Carter only used it once himself. I came in here the day he finished it, just as he was ready to turn it on. He was just putting the finishing touches on it.

"In a few minutes," he told me, "I'll have the answer to a question that may never have been answered before: what is reality? Is the world a thing by itself, and all we know illusion? Why do things grow smaller the farther away from us they appear? Why can't we see more than one side of anything at a time? What happens to the far side of an object; does it cease to exist just because we can't see it? Are objects not present nonexistent? Because artists draw things vanishing to points, does that mean that they really vanish?"

A wack, that's what he was. Nice guy, but sorta screwy. He kept saying more goofy things while he was finishing up the machine, about how he'd figured out that all we knew about vision and drawing and so on must be wrong, and that once he got a look at the real world he'd prove it.

"How about cameras?" I asked him. "Take a picture with a camera and it looks just about the same as a drawing, don't it?"

"That's because cameras are built to take pictures like we're used to seeing them," he said. "Flat, two-dimensional slices of reality, without depth or motion."

"Even 3-D moving pictures?" I asked.

"They're closer to reality," he admitted. "But they are still only cross sections of it. The shutter of a movie camera is closed as much of the time as it is open. What happens in between the times it's open?"

"You know," he went on, "people used to think matter and motion were continuous, but scientists have proved that they are discontinuous. Now some of them think time may be, too. Maybe everything is just imaginary, and appears to our senses in whatever way we want it to appear. We are so well-trained that we see everything just as we are taught to see it by generations of artists, writers, and other symbol-makers. If we could see things as they really are, what might happen?"

"We'd probably all go nuts!" I told him. He just smiled.

"Well, here goes," he said. "It's finished. Now to find out who is right, the scientists and philosophers who say reality is forever unreachable, or the artists who say there isn't any reality—that we make the whole thing up to suit ourselves."

He moved one of those pointers you see there, and squinted around at the different scales and dials, and then stepped back. That little tussy-thing appeared, real small at first. Just a point; you could hardly see it. I couldn't see anything else happening, and thought he was gonna do somepin' else to the machine. I turned to look at Carter, and saw his face was white as a sheet.

"Good Gawd!" he says, just like that: "Good Gawd!" That's all.

"Well," I says to him, "who was right, the scientists or the artists?"

"The artists!" he sorta screeches. "The artists were right all the time ... there *is* no reality! It's all a fabric of illusion we've created ourselves! And now I've ripped a hole in that!"

He gives a strangled hoot and goes hightailin' outta here like somepin' was after him. Jumps in his car and roars off down the road and disappears.

Naw, I don't mean he really disappeared—are you nuts? Just roared on down the road till he got so small I couldn't see him no more. You know—the way things do when they go farther and farther away. Happens every day; that's what us artists mean by perspective.

The machine? Well, I dunno what to do with it. If Carter ever comes back he might not like my getting rid of it. I was thinking mebbe I'd put it in the hobby show at the county fair next week, though. Ya notice how that funny-looking cube inside there gets bigger every time you look at it? There ... it just doubled its size again, see? People at the fair oughtta get a big kick outta that. No telling how big it'll get with all those people looking at it.

But come on, let's go fishing. We'd better hurry or it'll be too late.

## THE END

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