



The Mystery of Magritte's Creativity

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Abstract: This paper will provide an overview of Magritte's life and analyze three justifications for his concealed faces in art: aesthetic (derived from his engagement with this history of art), philosophical (derived from his epistemological concerns), and psychological (derived from both his personal history- and critics' belief of his Freudian interest).

1. THE HIDDEN FACES OF MAGRITTE

A notable feature throughout René Magritte's artwork is his tendency to hide or obscure faces, and a cursory glance at his body of work reveals a fascination with this device. While Magritte's early cubist works deploy other artistic paradigms, most of his well-known pieces share this phenomenon, such as *Man in a Bowler Hat*, *Son of Man*, and *The Lovers*. When it does appear in his craft, the hidden faces arise from multiple concerns. This paper will analyze three justifications for the concealed faces: aesthetic (derived from his engagement with this history of art), philosophical (derived from his epistemological concerns), and psychological (derived from both his personal history- and critics' belief of his Freudian interest).

René-François-Ghislain Magritte or René Magritte was a Belgian surrealist painter who repurposed familiar objects and images, such as the bowler hat, the apple, the flower, and parts of the human face, into grotesque compositions evoking uncanniness and ambiguity. Born in Lessines, Belgium, Magritte was son to Léopold and Régina on November 21, 1898. Magritte met tragedy at an early age, as his mother suffered severe depression and made several attempts to commit suicide, until ultimately found dead in River Sambre, France, on March 12, 1912. Fleeing his tragic past, Magritte left home to study at Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels for two years, getting exposed to emerging styles such as cubism and futurism, which occupied his earlier efforts. When Magritte was introduced to Giorgio de Chirico's *Song of Love* (1914), he was fascinated by its odd composition and learned of the Surrealist movement that was emerging in the 1920s. Later in 1927, he purposely moved to Paris to engage with other prominent surrealists, such as painters Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, and De Chirico as well as poets André Robert Breton and Paul Éluard, which Magritte credited as inspirations to his craft.

Surrealism is an artistic movement that emerged in the 1920s, defined and initially coined by poet André Breton¹. Besides poetry and painting, Surrealism was developed in various fields, such as filmmaking, writing, and sculpture, all capturing the elements of the subconscious and dreamlike thoughts. Not tied down to the physicality of real life, Surrealism focuses on the going-ons of the mind, which took inspiration from Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud. Freud was fascinated by subconscious thought and claimed it governed conscious behaviors more prominently than expected. In the making of Surrealism, André Breton encapsulated Freudian philosophy within the framework of Surrealism, deeming the movement a depiction of "psychic automatism in its pure state," or in-other-words subconscious thinking. Though Magritte embraced Surrealism, he was critical of Freudian philosophy and psychoanalysis. Despite the contradictory nature of Magritte's disdain towards Freudian philosophy and interest in Surrealism, Breton commented about Magritte's work in the context of his long

¹ For Breton's extensive writing on Surrealism, see Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, especially his 1928 essay of the same title (1-48).

engagement with surrealist artists, enshrining him in its canon.² Breton wrote that “Surrealism owes to [Magritte] one of its most essential - and most recent - dimensions,” acclaiming Magritte's significance in the world of artistry. Magritte's version of surrealism layers upon the movement's complexity, thoroughly questioning and pushing boundaries of the dreamlike reality.

Although other surrealists worked more directly from dreams, or spur of the moment paintings, Magritte's Surrealism manifested in the defiance of logic, delving into unusual and curious circumstances. Overtime, Magritte's works repeats the obscuring of the face, however, replaces the objects covering the face. Take one of Magritte's most famous pieces, *Son of Man*, which displays Magritte's use of this compositional tactic.³ Completed in 1946, the oil painting depicts a man in an overcoat and a bowler hat, standing upright, while facing the viewer, however indirectly as his face is obstructed by a floating green apple. Though Magritte was a major contributor to Surrealism, he wasn't able to access creativity through consciousness. Magritte's usage of the hidden faces will be ventured further across three significant categories-- Aesthetic, Philosophical, and Psychological.

2. AESTHETIC

At times, Magritte's work seems to reject the everyday world. While he paints recognizable scenes and arranges commonplace forms and figures, his paintings often create impossible tableaux that immediately reveal their fictionality. Far from being a mere chimera of the imagination, his arrangement of forms derives deeply from the history of painting. While he employs several compositional techniques, perhaps most central to his entire body is the use of perspective, which--since its emergence in the 15th century--has remained one of the defining characteristics of Western painting. Contrary to simply submitting to its organizing limits, Magritte's work effectively employs perspective, to create fantastical and surrealist effects. *Man in a Bowler Hat* was the first that shared this phenomenon, including *Son of Man* and *The Great War*, which showcased common objects obscuring a person's face. The first of these three showcases a dove that flies directly in front of a suited man with a black bowler hat. Similarly, *The Son of Man* depicts possibly the same man, with an apple covering his face. In the final installment, *The Great War* a purple flower obscures the face of a woman dressed in white. The figure, rather than the object that asserts itself in the foreground, is the ostensible site of attention. And yet, access to that site, to the figure we are being positioned to observe, is denied by the intrusion of an object, a dove, an apple, a flower, that is placed at the precise location to create the eclipse. Famous surrealists, such as Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, Giorgio de Chirico, and Frida Kahlo, typically draw dreamlike scenes of scattered objects or fusions of various objects. Their works are dreamlike and gather their power through relation and juxtaposition. In contrast, Magritte's brand of surrealism gains its surreal reality by subverting the tradition of perspective.

Before modern technology, one of the earliest versions of motion pictures took the form of a box with a peephole bored into it. People were positioned in the proper place and, looking through the hole, could see captured motion on a 2D plane. The contraption rapidly switched the photos to imitate motion. This early trick of the eye is a good example of how artists used perspective to their advantage. Because of the limited perspective, all viewers saw the animation from a predetermined perspective that the artist wanted their work to be viewed in. This notion of fixing the viewer and standardizing his or her view is part of the strategy of perspective. It is also part of its ideological context, since perspective renders each viewer essentially equivalent, disciplining the viewer to see in an authorized way. In art, perspective visually proposes how the artist wants the image to be perceived, in that case. Instead of using perspective to grant the viewer a privileged view of the object, Magritte uses it to deny the viewer access to what he or she wants to see. He creates uncertainty and wonder by securing the central focus of our desire outside of our field of vision.

Perspective is not the only painterly technique that Magritte engages in those works that deliberately obscure the face. While perspective creates the problem by placing the intruding object directly in front of the face, the act of obstruction represents a radical rethinking of the category of portraiture. In traditional portraits, the subject is seated directly in front of the painter. Sometimes, the gaze is off to the side; at other times, the figure is face on. Although they have different purposes, the former

² André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, with an introduction by Mark Polizzotti, (Boston: MFA publications, 2002), 269-271; 401-403.

³ Rene Magritte, *The Son of Man*, 1964

suggesting vision and the latter suggesting openness, the purpose of the portrait is to record the likeness of the individual, to memorialize, and simultaneously to represent the affective qualities of that person. *The Son of Man* toys with this convention only to subvert it. The man, whose identity (to the extent that it is possible to imagine one for Magritte himself) is unknown. Although he stands in the traditional pose of someone being memorialized, knowingly offering his likeness to the painter, the interceding apple derails the intent. Additionally, the apple itself is full of artistic symbolism, to say nothing of its biblical reference. In the aesthetic sense, the apple, like many of the objects Magritte places in front of the face, is a mainstay of still life, the second mode of traditional composition that Magritte engages with and undercuts.

A third mode Magritte expresses his perspective in, most aptly represented in *The Human Condition* 1933 and 1935, is the landscape. Although these paintings do not contain an obscured face, they reveal how Magritte challenges and redefines the genres of painting to create a mystery that subverts the will of the viewer. *The Human Condition* (1933), showcases a landscape bordered by a window, however, a visible rectangle in the middle reveals a painted canvas replicating the surrounding scenery. Similarly, *The Human Condition* (1935), displays a beach view under an arched entrance, however the canvas cuts through the middle of the doorway and wall to reveal an obscured portion of the coast which would not be visible without the canvas. Both renditions of *The Human Condition* appear to be similar, in the sense of the canvas revealing a hidden scene that could not be accessed unless the perspective of the view shifts. The two year gap showcases Magritte's transition from canvas evoking, the canvas hiding the reality essentially, replacing it and imposing a new or perhaps same image, whereas the later *The Human Condition* (1935), canvas showing something that cannot otherwise be seen, however, the scene is still implied with clues from what's under the archway. This transition feeds into how Magritte

3. PHILOSOPHICAL

According to Eric Wargo's "Infinite Recess, a study on Rene Magritte's Paintings," "Rene Magritte thought of himself not so much as a painter as a philosopher" (Wargo 2002, 1).⁴ Various critics also claimed that Magritte paintings appeared to overlap, in their underlying assumptions and questions, with the philosophical writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's philosophy centered around the study of communication and how language can define any event of the universe. According to Wittgenstein, we fail to know the world adequately because we cannot effectively communicate our ideas. When we fail to communicate, it is often because we do not recognize the rules of the "language game" we are playing. In other words, we use language that is appropriate for one type of speaking (i.e. "game") in another setting. The philosophy centers around the idea that anything in the universe can be defined, but on most occasions, the unknown isn't conveyed properly. The centrality of this problem, Wittgenstein thought, accounted for all philosophical "problems." Which is to say, from his point of view, there were no philosophical problems, only the imprecise use of language. Similarly, with the hidden faces, Magritte creates the effect of the unknown. Covered faces leave no method of inspecting the identity of the person; however, with the use of the object that obscures the face, Magritte can communicate some elements of identity or emotion or at least suggest them. The lack of knowledge forces viewers to use what is given to further comprehend the unknown and perhaps erase the feelings of loss, the uncertainty that comes from the dread of the unknown.

Unlike *Man in a Bowler Hat*, *The Son of Man* and *The Great War* employ images that are common to still-life, rather than moving creatures. Removed from the context provided by the series, *Man in a Bowler Hat* does not read as a typical surrealist painting. The Surrealist movement is defined as a period when artists and writers attempted to evade the restrictions of reason and logic. Part of the movement beneath reality took place through juxtaposing un/common imagery. It is plausible that a dove might fly between the subject of the painting (i.e. the *Man in a Bowler Hat*) and plausible for the person who is painting the image, in the sense that this type of natural intrusion happens in life. The obvious implausibility of the image is that it is a painting, not a photograph, and so the passage of the bird would not be memorialized in the image without the intentional placement of it by the artist. However, it is highly unlikely an apple or a flower could be somehow suspended perfectly in front of a face. Without prior knowledge of Magritte's background as a distinguished surrealist painter, coupled with knowledge of *The Son of Man* and *The Great War*, *Man in a Bowler Hat* possibly might not be immediately

⁴ Eric Wargo, "Infinite Recess: perspective and play in Magritte's *La Condition Humaine*," February 2002.

perceived as a surrealist piece. These three sources of knowledge associate predetermined information with the unknown. This phenomenon doesn't just occur with the visuals of the three separate paintings but also from the individual subject of each painting.

The face is the most defining feature that people prioritize. From identity to facial expression, the face of a person conveys their background and emotions. By covering each face with a different object, the audience is propelled to come to conclusions about the characteristics of the subject. Strangely, *The Great War* is titled with something as gruesome as a war but seems peaceful and calm, since an elegant woman dressed in white is hidden behind a flower. Lots of objects have their connotation given by society. The color of clothing is one cultural object that gathers semiotic meaning. A clean white dress, for instance, signifies purity and cleanliness. Flowers convey emotions of peace, bliss, and love. By covering the woman's face with a flower, the idea of the woman is somehow reduced to the symbolism that we ascribe to the remaining elements of her. From those conclusions, we also go back to form thoughts about the Man in the Bowler Hat and refer to the image as something peaceful, since doves connect to peace. In these paintings, we can see that Magritte is not just playing with images; he is playing with ideas. By denying the face, he is exposing both our longing for unknown knowledge and our propensity to create meaning through symbolic association.

The Lovers is another painting in which Magritte develops the same theme. The painting depicts a man and a woman kissing with a white sheet wrapped tightly around their heads. The sheet wrapped tightly around the head conjures the image of corpses with their faces covered. The disabled and the disfigured also tend to wrap their faces to avoid public scrutiny. Two lovers kissing should signify romance, but instead, the wrapping of the heads tightly within a white sheet creates an eerie effect. The added effect of the unknown is unnerving. [explain why it creates an unnerving effect.] The illogical nature of the image creates a partial narrative, begging the reader to ask what has led to this moment. In stoking this curiosity, Magritte engages one of the central philosophical ideas that sustains his work: the relationship between the need to know and the inability to find meaning.

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL

Austrian neurologist and founding father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, was an outstanding intellectual of his time. In addition to other contributions, one of the main developments of his work was the elevation of the unconscious mind. His psychoanalytic theories revolved around understanding how the mind functioned to manipulate our behavior, even when we are not aware of the mind's involvement. For example, when one accidentally says something that they did not mean to say, truthfully they are revealing the contents of their unconscious thoughts and desires. Likewise, Freud perceived dreams were a central vehicle for the unconscious to engage with its contents. That during rest, the mind manipulates the contents of our memories and rearranges the elements to tell us stories about ourselves. Once these dreams are decoded, our unconscious fears and desires can be understood. In our day-to-day life, Freud believed that our actions were often controlled by traumas of various kinds that we have not fully recognized. The point of psychoanalysis, his method of talking the patient through experience to a cure, was designed to uncover hidden traumas that were controlling the individual. This idea that the mind worked independently of consciousness became an important idea for many artists in the 20th century because it appeared to promise a way to access creativity. The Surrealist movement was founded around this set of ideas based on the subconscious. In the *Manifesto of Surrealism*, André Breton credited Sigmund Freud for "part of our mental world" that "has been brought back to light" (Breton 2).

However, unlike those who took part in the Surrealist movement, Magritte rejected most of Freudian ideology and did not claim Freud as an influence. Despite this opposition, his works contradict this position and in fact, are still psychoanalyzed today.

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