

An abstract painting featuring vibrant colors like blue, yellow, red, and white, layered and textured. The colors are applied in broad, expressive strokes, creating a sense of movement and depth. The background is a mix of these colors, with some areas appearing more saturated than others.

Contemporary Discussions In Art History

Sociohistorical
And
Psychological
Observations

Bruna Bejarano

 EDITORA
ARTEMIS
2020



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PRESENTATION

Art History is a vast field of study which, loosely explained, deals with the effort to understand how, historically, different groups and people represented their artistic talents. Philosophical and religious beliefs, economic conditions, psychological constructions — all the elements that play a role in the development of human beings — influence stylistic choices of artists, whether they are manifested in painting, sculpture, ceramics, architecture, or any other form of artistic efforts. An interdisciplinary field *par excellence*, Art History looks at art from a holistic perspective, trying to understand artistic manifestations in their relation to the time periods and social context in which they are produced. Cultural influences — such as religion, social arrangements, institutions and gender constructions — all have a direct impact on every human intellectual manifestation, including the arts.

This book, entitled “**Contemporary discussions in Art History: sociohistorical and psychological observations**” is a collection of six articles that point to some ways in which specific art works are either (or both) a revelation of a sociohistorical moment or a subversive attempt to transform their context by denouncing operating power structures. In one way or another, all artists studied in this book used their craft to affirm what they perceive as an agenda worth advancing.

I hope you enjoy reading it!

Bruna Bejarano

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RENE MAGRITTE: A TENTATIVE PSYCHOANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT: Considered a main contributor to the Surrealist movement, Rene Magritte explored ordinary objects to revise our standard definition of reality. Heavily influenced by the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, surrealist artists attempted to tap into that portion of mental experience that may not be available to the conscious mind. The purpose of this article is to analyze the influence of psychoanalytical thought in Rene Magritte's paintings, in an attempt to offer explanations for the recurrent use of faceless women in his works and the possible relation between this choice of subject to the tragic death of the artist's mother. It is known that Magritte himself denied any connection of his work to his past. However, it is improbable that his depiction of coffins and the choice of faceless and cloth-covered women in many of his paintings are mere coincidences dissociated from his life experiences.

KEYWORDS: Rene Magritte; Surrealism; psychoanalysis and art.

1. INTRODUCTION

The most celebrated Belgian artist of the 20th century was born in Brussels, Belgium,

in 1898, and died in 1967, in his hometown. Despite the fact that his father was a wealthy manufacturer, at the beginning of his career he worked a series of jobs including commercial artist, advertising and book designing in order to support himself and his wife. Although he refused the title of "artist," preferring to think of himself as a man of thought who communicated through his paintings, Magritte is a recognized Surrealist painter who achieved great popular acclaim for his work, which revolutionized our sense of the familiar. In spite of his success, he led a mostly quiet and anonymous existence avoiding the ostentatious lifestyle of his Surrealist peers.

While Magritte maintained a degree of separation from his Parisian surrealist colleagues – even renouncing the title of Surrealist as well – he is considered a main contributor to the Surrealist movement by art historians. The hallmark of Magritte's style undeniably connects him to Surrealism as he would arrange subjects and depict the state of mind in ways that revise our standard definition of reality.

The inner mind as inspiration was at the core of the Surrealist movement, heavily influenced by the study of psychoanalyst

Sigmund Freud, who employed the word unconscious to describe the portion of mental experience that may not be available to our conscious minds. It is the purpose of this essay to advance a possible psychoanalytical study of Rene Magritte's paintings, and more specifically, the recurrent subject of faceless women and its probable connection to the tragic death of the artist's mother, Regina, who committed suicide when Magritte was 14 years old.

2. FREUD AND PSYCHOANALYSIS¹

The theory of the mind proposed by Sigmund Freud highlighted the fact that part of our mental activity may be unconscious or subconscious (although the terms are often used interchangeably in other fields, in Psychoanalysis the term unconscious is preferred): that is, not readily available to our rational and conscious mind. While other thinkers had addressed the idea of the unconscious, Freud is credited with making it scientifically respected and recognized by psychologists and psychiatrists in the Western world. His theories greatly influenced both Psychology and Psychiatry and today most clinical psychologists and psychiatrists use variants of psychoanalysis in their practice.

Freud also greatly influenced other areas of thought, including the arts. Despite criticism of the science behind his theories, many of his ideas became mainstream throughout the 20th century: the tripartite model of the human mind (id, ego, superego); the Oedipus and Electra Complex; defense mechanisms, and especially, the clinical method of psychoanalysis – based on free association (method of interpretation of the patient's free flow of thoughts, expressed as they occur), on the interpretation of dreams, slips of the tongue; faulty acts, etc. – all of which constitute forms of unveiling the unconscious mind.

Defense mechanisms, in turn, are ways in which the mind operates to protect one's ego from hurtful or undesirable thoughts or feelings and, in general, are well-known to the public, although the way they operate may not always be clear to most people who use these terms: denial, rationalization, repression, projection, acting out and even altruism were defined by Freud as defense mechanisms.

It is not the purpose of this article to deeply analyze all mechanisms, but a few will be pointed out in the analysis of some of Magritte's paintings and briefly explained as they serve as a possible insight into his art.

1. Psychoanalysis – or the analysis of the psyche – is both a field of study and a method of treatment which arose in the 1890s, developed by the physician Sigmund Freud to deal with psychic disorders by investigation of the unconscious. Since Freud, psychoanalysis has developed in many ways, and today there are several schools –founded by his various disciples and their disciples.

3. THE UNCONSCIOUS IN SURREALISM AND IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

In the first “Manifesto of Surrealism,” Breton identified “automatism,” which means to perform an action unconsciously, as one of its key elements. Magritte, on the other hand, renounced automatism, according to his friend Suzi Gablik because of its inauthenticity, as “would-be spontaneity of automatism, in that it seemed to him to be contrived, ultimately the result of too mechanical and mediumistic a process” (Gablik *apud* ALLMER, 2009, p. 93).

Magritte’s rejection of automatism voiced the criticism of many art historians including that of writer George Bataille, who believed that the unconscious effort put forth by Surrealists was all too conscious. As Eugene Tériade described in 1930, “the return to instinct undertaken by the Surrealist is self-defeating for the very reason that everything in this effort was conscious, highly conscious, calculated and premeditated” (LOMAS, 2000, p. 3).

The very decision of Magritte to distance himself from the Surrealists acknowledges that he may well have been one of the few of them who understood the paradoxical state of the art they produced. However it may be, and whether Magritte and other critics were right or not about the possibility of artists to consciously tap into the unconscious, there is no doubt that in all other respects Magritte’s art adjusts to the definitions of Surrealist art, and had psychoanalysis as its muse and the unconscious mind as a constant subject.

In fact, one of his hallmarks was to play with the constraints of the rational mind, creating art pieces which were provocative to the viewers and posed the idea that something was hidden from them. Even though he declared often that his paintings hid nothing, and that it was not his intention for them to “have a meaning,” he famously also stated that “*Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see.*”

Interestingly, Freud seemed to have shared Magritte’s doubts about the Surrealist claim that one could access the creativity repressed in the unconscious, as he personally refused an invitation by Andre Breton to work on a Collection of Dreams, citing the following reason:

that which I call the ‘manifest dream’ is not of interest to me, I dealt with the search for the ‘latent dream’ content which one can extract from the manifest dream by analytical interpretation. A collection of dreams without enclosed associations, without knowledge of the dreaming circumstances says nothing to me and I could hardly imagine that it could say to others. (Freud *apud* LOMAS, 2000, p.5)

In other words, Freud believed that a dream – and, by analogy, all other forms of tapping into the unconscious – could be interpreted only in its context: the same dream could mean different things in different circumstances. To psychoanalysts, the dream is but a tool, a means to an end used for psychoanalytical interpretation.

To Surrealists, however, to depict a dream was the main purpose, an end in itself: Salvador Dali openly voiced his reservations at the possibility of interpreting the products of the unconscious declaring that rational interpretation dissipates its complexity (LOMAS, 2000, p. 6).

4. A POSSIBLE PSYCHOANALYSIS OF MAGRITTE'S ART

It is the major premise of this research that although Magritte denied any connection of his work to his past, it is practically impossible, even for a non-Freudian, to miss the coincidences between his paintings and his life experiences; especially in relation to death and even more so his mother's suicide and how his art seem to take a high interest in coffins, the faceless and cloth-covered people.

The two paintings below highlight the presence of coffins and coffin-like containers in Magritte's artworks:

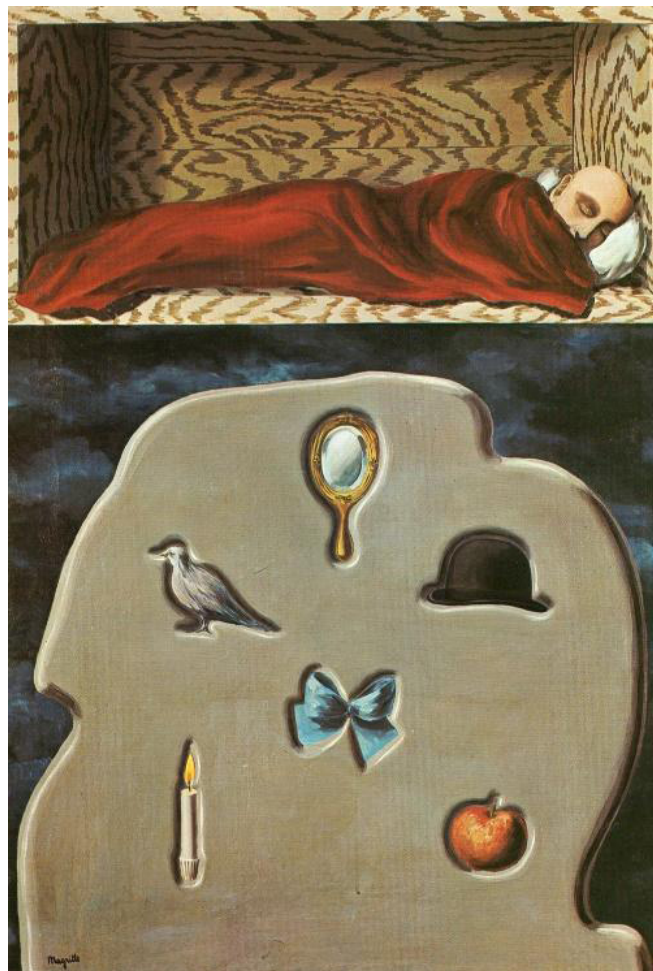


Figure 1. The Reckless Sleeper, 1928.



Figure 2. *The Vulture's Park*, 1926.

As Patricia Allmer noted, the sleeper in Figure 1 seems unaware that his peaceful resting place is a coffin; while the structure in *The Vulture's Park* (Figure 2) contains the only living object of the painting, representing a state between life and death.

Below, in *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (Figure 3), the body of a woman is covered by nightgown hanging in a cupboard, establishing ghostliness in different dimensions (ALLMER, 2009, p. 173-174):

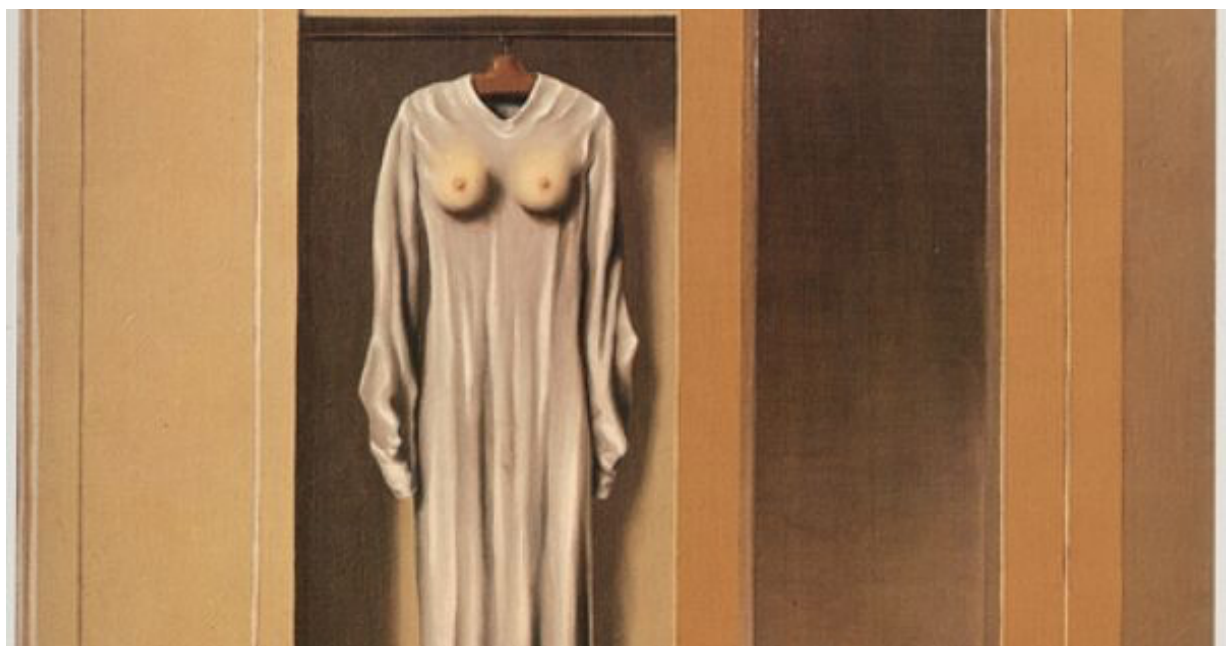


Figure 3. *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, 1936.

Judging by the intense interest in lifeless objects (or death) that his art

demonstrates, it doesn't seem to be a far-fetched idea to believe that from an early age Magritte might have censored feelings and thoughts about some of his life experiences (censorship is a defense mechanism consisting of selectively creating a barrier between the conscious and the unconscious mind, which leads to repression, or the "pushing back" of unpleasant or traumatic events into the unconscious). As it seems to be the case, repression could be at work in Magritte's art expression: it is possible that events he refused to acknowledge explicitly played an important role in his development as a Surrealist and some of his art's unique characteristics may give us a glimpse of what occupied his mind.

One such characteristic is that of painting hidden faces – which were a recurring theme in Magritte's art, as can be observed, for example, in the painting *The Lovers II* (1928):



Figure 4. *The Lovers II*, 1928.

The most interesting element of the painting is, undoubtedly, the fact that the lovers' faces are covered with veils. The couple is depicted kissing through veils tightly covering their heads, in a room with a low ceiling, between two walls: one psychological impact being that of a suffocating atmosphere. An alternative explanation is that this might also have been a true manifestation of Magritte's repressed memories, and may have served as a way of coping with his mother's drowning in 1912. When he was only 14 years old (his mother was found lifeless, by her children and husband, with her nightgown wrapped around her face in the

Sambre river, the same night she died).

According to Suzi Gablik, who was a close friend of the artist, Magritte claimed to recollect very little about the passing of his mother, and one of his only memories was that of becoming the center of attention and developing an enlarged sense of identity – and a certain pride – from being the son of the “dead woman”.

If Magritte was truthful when saying he did not remember much about the evening his mother passed away, and also in saying that his paintings were not a reflection of his life, his work can be seen as either a Freudian experience of suppression, and later release, through art, of memories pushed into the unconscious, or an uncanny coincidence, since Magritte chose to paint faceless figures all throughout his life.

As it is explained in Psychoanalytic Theory, defense mechanisms are also unconscious – and it could be argued that not for any other reason but denial, Magritte always refused to acknowledge the influence of his past on his artworks or any hidden meaning behind them:

“One often asks oneself, what does my painting hide. Nothing!” (ALLMER, 2009, p. 1)

“Inspiration is the moment when one knows what is happening. In general, we do not know what is happening.” (GABLIK, 1985, p. 14)

“I detest my past and anyone else's.” (GABLIK, 2185, p. 17)

Magritte's *The Central Story* (1927) seems to also offer a glimpse on a past perhaps the painter remembered more than he would allow himself to admit, as even the title chosen for the painting is suggestive: who's “central story” could be closer to the art than his own?



Figure 5. *The Central Story*, 1927.

Mary Ann Caws, an accomplished academic on Surrealism and Modernist art and literature, discusses Magritte's *The Central Story*:

Magritte's painting mysteriously juxtaposes a veiled woman, a tuba and an attaché case: three recurring motifs in his work of the late 1920s. According to David Sylvester, the artist first referred to this work as *The Veiled Woman*, and both his provisional title and the final one have been read as having highly personal significance for Magritte. From biological information passed on by the artist to Louis Scutenaire, it is known that the image of the veiled woman relates to his mother's apparent suicide by drowning (CAWS, 2004, p. 87)

More disturbing than the veiled faces, the painting below reveals a half-human, half-fish figure stranded on a beach:



Figure 6. *The Collective Invention*, 1934.

The figure's upper body is that of a fish and, judging by the way it lays on the sand, it is either already dead or drowning. Even though the depiction is often interpreted as a mockery of the figure of a mermaid (a collective invention, as the title suggests), it may also be seen as related to the unconscious subject matter of death by drowning.

According to Gablik (1985), Magritte profoundly disliked to have his art analyzed, and recounted to her one such circumstance in which someone tried to discuss his paintings with him: “He had me cornered for an hour telling me sublime and incomprehensible things about my painting. What a pain in the neck!”

Gablik noted, however, that when Magritte encountered people uninterested in his art, he also found it “a pain in the neck!” – which indicates he was not at all insensitive to social acceptance and public recognition.

In fact, it may be that Magritte’s art unconsciously served him two purposes, which can be appreciated better through the understanding of the concept of sublimation, advanced by Freud and later reinterpreted by his followers to amplify the concept. Understood today as a higher order defense mechanism, sublimation occurs when socially unacceptable impulses are unconsciously channeled into acceptable or even valuable social activities, such as the redirection (displacement) of energy into sports, literature, cultural endeavors, creative invention or artistic expression. Sublimation serves to protect the mind as it guarantees that instincts that could be violent or aggressive (therefore met with social resistance and result in frustration to the ego) are shifted into activities that are both a form of release

of these instincts and a satisfaction to the ego – as in Magritte's case, a channel through which he could release the anger and sadness his mother's suicide certainly generated and also a satisfying profession as a recognized artist.

5. CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that Magritte denied any influence of his life experiences in his work, it is highly unlikely that anyone's artistic expression may be analyzed without any reference to the creator. Freud's idea that a dream is only a tool for accessing the mind if in connection with a person's entire context can also be applied to the tentative understanding of the forces behind creativity in the artistic field.

The paintings of lifeless or faceless subjects, coffin-like structures and faces covered with a cloth certainly reveal more about the inner contents of Magritte's mind than he desired to discuss or was perhaps aware of himself.

It is almost unlikely, however, that his mother's suicide by drowning and especially the form in which her body was recovered – with her face covered by part of her dress – is disconnected to Magritte's art.

If it is true that our inner monsters can be controlled by the satisfaction of instincts from the id (a large portion of our unconscious), or the release of repressed traumas there contained, it is possible that Magritte found peace of mind through his own "psychoanalysis" in the form of painting.

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