

A Discussion of Representation as Applied to Selected Paintings of Rene Magritte

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Abstract:

A discussion of selected imagery in the work of Renee Magritte is examined for semiotic precursors and as a way to construct social meaning through visual language.

Pipes, boulder hats, and apples are some of the imagery that fills the paintings of Rene Magritte. Magritte's everyday sort of subject matter is obviously emphasized so that the viewer is immediately confronted by the very *ordinariness* of it all. Why call so much attention to these common objects? Men wearing suits and boulder hats raining down from the sky; pipes floating in the air.... Why present everyday objects in such bizarre and impossible ways? Because surrealist imagery (of which Magritte was a practitioner) involves the use of recognizable objects, as opposed to non-representational artistic styles that were popular in that time, it is a prime art movement to use in a discussion of cultural representation. The art of Rene Magritte is simple to decipher – plainly he depicts subject matter such as apples or his men wearing boulder hats... yet his simplicity is blatantly misleading. There is more here than meets the eye. A distinct link to philosophical content connects his representations to social theory.

Magritte examined the very idea of representation. What is representation, really? And how does it work? Somehow we human beings arrive at meaning for representation through language, text, customs and rituals in society. We do not all agree on how we do this. Stuart Hall points writes about three different theories or accounts, which are 1) the reflective, 2) the intentional, and 3) the constructionist (Stuart Hall. Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, 1997:15). The reflective approach asks if language merely reflects meaning that already exists in the world. The intentional approach seeks to find if the meaning expresses only what the originator (the speaker, writer, and painter...) personally intends to say. The constructionist approach asks if meaning is made in and through language. It is this third theory, which includes semiotics and discursiveness, that interests me most as an art historian.

Hall references two relevant meanings for the word representation as defined by the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary:

1. To represent something is to describe or depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination: to place a likeness of it before us in our mind or in the senses; as, for example, in the sentence, 'This picture represents the murder of Abel by Cain.'

2. To represent also means to symbolize, stand for, to be a specimen of, or to substitute for; as in the sentence, 'In Christianity, the cross represents the suffering and crucifixion of Christ.' (Hall, 16)

For example, the figures in a painting of Cain killing Able stand for the characters of Cain and Able as well as the story and the moral that it teaches. Likewise, any two boards nailed together, crossing at right angles can be understood as a cross, but when viewed within the Christian context it becomes a symbol of the crucifixion of the Son of God. (Hall, 16)

Stuart Hall reminds us that if we consider the actual process we use to decipher representation we will better understand how we construct meaning to sign. When we look at a familiar object it becomes immediately recognizable to us, yet why? How is it that we know what it is? If one sees a regular tobacco store pipe sitting on the desk, how does one know what it is? You know what it is because your mind associates its shape and form with its function. Thus you see the familiar s-curve of the pipe, a mouthpiece in which to inhale at the top, and a well to hold the tobacco at the bottom. It is probably made of a commonly used material such as wood, and thus you associate it immediately in your mind as an ordinary smoking pipe. Perhaps the pipe is placed inside a pipe holder and there is smoke emitting from the bottom end. The smoke indicates fire to you because, due to your past experiences, you associate fire with smoke. You immediately reason this is an ordinary smoking pipe that is in use.

We have now associated a concept of meaning with the image we see on the retinas of our eyes. We carry this concept in our heads and if we leave the room we can still think about the image because we have the concept in our minds. We know what the concept means and may even be able to picture it in our mind. In fact we may even be able to associate smells with the pipe. Now, for us to communicate the concept of pipe to someone else we need a process in which the other person will understand. If I were to tell you, "It is a pipe", I would be using language to convey this representation to you. The concept of the pipe has passed from my mind to you by a word that represents "pipe." You understand the concept because you share a common understanding of not only the word, but also the function of the pipe.

Magritte's *Treachery of Images*, painted in 1948, confronts the process of making meaning. Upon first viewing the painting, the viewer sees a common smoking pipe expertly rendered against a solid, brown background. The pipe appears to be made of brown-colored wood. The mouth piece is made of black wood. The pipe is skillfully modeled through light and shade. Beneath the pipe are the words, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. The words are written in cursive handwriting so as to be perfectly executed, as was the pipe.

Rene' Magritte. *The Treachery of Images*. 1948.



Upon sight the viewer's mind goes through the process of decoding representation as discussed previously. The eyes linger on the graceful curve of the pipe and for an instant the mind may recall the aroma of tobacco, the smoothness of polished wood, and even perhaps associate it with a certain person who smokes a pipe. The representation of a pipe is clearly communicated, all in a fraction of a second. Next the eyes notice the writing centered under the pipe. The French words declare, in their perfectly executed handwriting, that this is not a pipe. At once we are confused by this conflicting message. Who wrote these words? Has this painting been vandalized? We conclude it was the artist and not some delinquent. The fact is that the words are too well thought out as an integral part of the overall design to be anything but a part of the original picture. Why is this artist giving us conflicting information? He has rendered a representation of a perfect pipe, yet his language denies coding it as such. Is it really not a pipe? The viewer looks again at the pipe for clues that may reveal a cleverly hidden answer, but to no avail. The representation definitely conveys "pipe." The viewer returns to the words underneath. Again, the conflict still remains. Perplexed, we read the title card for some hope of instruction. The title is labeled as *The Treachery of Images*. The typical viewer may turn away in confusion and look for another piece of art to contemplate. But the viewer who has been exposed to semiotics smiles and enjoys the artist's comment.

Magritte wanted his viewers to stop and spend significant time in front of art. His idea was that *seeing* was all important. The typical viewer spends only six seconds in front of a work of art. One cannot truly see a work of art in a short amount of time. This is why Magritte wanted people to take time to really *see* art – to look and think more deeply about what they see. People have been commonly educated in a world where verbal and written language is dominant. People deal with images hastily and carelessly, leaving visual imagery neglected. Magritte boldly calls attention to the visual image. Even though the written text – as lovely as

it is – denies it is a pipe, the drawn image remains what it is – a pipe. We wonder is that it, or could the drawing represent more than a pipe?

Rene Magritte was a surrealist and their manifesto declared that they would deal with the world in terms of the bizarre, the world of dreams and the fantastic. Influenced by Sigmund Freud, their imagery did not always represent what it appeared to be. According to Freud, a dream image could represent something else – some repressed desire, memory, fear or other emotion. Therefore, according to this notion, the pipe can be interpreted as a dream image and, therefore, as representative of something else. In this case the handwriting is deemed true – this is not a pipe, or at least it does not represent a pipe. Yet, Magritte represented himself with common, easy to understand imagery. This was unlike the works of other surrealists who sought to be obscure. Magritte sought to be understood through common objects with which we are all familiar. Let us explore another theory of interpretation.

By concentrating on one object, the surrealists emphasized an object's shape and form and suggested that this object may now be seen as extraordinary (Celia Rabinovitch. Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros and the Occult in Modern Art, 2002:168). Magritte takes away the frame of reference for the pipe through isolation which requires the viewer to spend time in heightened concentration about the object. By framing it, isolating it within boundaries, he imbues it with a new power of representation. Our perception may be opened up to new meanings and possibilities. In effect, the ordinary object has the possibility of becoming extraordinary – even a fetish. It seems that the theories of semiotics may offer us a way to interpret this painting.

What is semiotics? Quite simply put, it is the study of signs and their representation in society. It can include actual signs (such as the obvious road signs, storefront signs, and labels) as well as drawings, paintings, photographs and even objects, words, sounds and body language (Daniel Chandler. Semiotics: The Basics, 2002:2). Semiotics examines what makes meaning in many forms, most noticeably these are in the forms of texts and media. Daniel Chandler discusses the idea of text and media,

For the semiotician, a 'text' can exist in any medium and may be verbal, nonverbal, or both, despite the logocentric bias of this distinction. The term *text* usually refers to a message which has been recorded in some way (e.g. writing, audio- and video-recording) so that it is physically independent of its sender or receiver. A text is an assemblage of signs (such as words, images, sounds and/or gestures) constructed (and interpreted) with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication.

The term 'medium' is used in a variety of ways by different theorists, and may include such broad categories as speech and writing or print and broadcasting, or relate to specific technical forms within the mass media (radio, television, newspapers, magazines, books, photographs, films and records) or the media of personal

communication (telephone, letter, fax, email, video-conferencing, computer based chat systems). [Chandler, 2-3.]

Magritte clearly uses two media in his *Treachery of Images* – the visual image and written language. The two media are juxtaposed in such a way as to produce conflict about the text, or message. This conflict of text brings about confusion for the viewer which has been **intentionally constructed** by the artist to cause the viewer to ponder over the text. He confronts **reflected meaning** in that he denies it is the common pipe we all know. The confusion experienced by the viewer serves as an impetus to cause one to ponder other possible texts for the painting. Further, Magritte provides a personal comment about semiotics when he entitles the work. Magritte painted *The Treachery of Images* (also known as *The Treason of Images*) several times, giving each just minimal differences. The word (or ‘sign’) ‘images’ here can represent more than just visual imagery – it can represent signs (as studied in the semiotic sense) in general. The whole field of semiotics questions and studies the use of signs and their meaning. What is known may necessarily not be what is. What we may think of as a pipe may betray us and turn out to be quite something else. It could be reasoned that if Magritte had taken an actual pipe and glued it to the canvas it still would not be a pipe, because it would have changed its purpose to the sign of a pipe.

In further consideration that Magritte was depicting semiotics with his *Treachery* painting, he has written the words in French. Could this be seen as something more than his chosen mode of written language? Could this be seen as an indication of the school of semiotics that was forming in France?

Rene Magritte’s oeuvre suggests that the world might not be as rational and ordered as we like to think. His painting entitled *False Mirror* depicts a human eye, drawn so that it fills the picture plane. The painting includes the immediate surrounding area of the eyelid. It is important to note this inclusion, because it creates coherence. The viewer is aware that this is an eye as part of a human face. It is not some bizarre eyeball, floating off in space some where as in a dream. It does not belong to a wild animal. It is wholly human – attached to the thinking agent, the head. Yet, the eye contains something strange and unfamiliar – the iris of the eye is depicted as blue sky with white, puffy clouds. This is not just any human eye, or is it?



Renee Magritte. False Mirror. 1928.

Once again Magritte startles the viewer into contemplation about meaning and how it is made. Is this a human eye? Yes. Why is there a surrealist sky in the iris? Here Magritte calls to attention that the eye is the primary agent with which we deduce signs. Perhaps the view of sky is what the eye is seeing. Or perhaps the iris has become clear, like a window, producing a view into the eye/mind of the person.

Roland Barthes stresses, for semiotic interpretation of images, there must be a state of coherence. To attain coherence the elements of an image must be relative to each other. There should be relativity in color, style, design and, in the instance of representational art, sensibility to the congruence of a scene. Scenic congruence for representational art means that objects must be realistic, or reminiscent of objects with realistic properties. Illustrated properties of objects must be in agreement. For example, all objects have a common shared source of light, etc. In the case of Magritte's *False Mirror*, all the elements of the painting signal the viewer that the eye is indeed located on a human face.

According to Barthes, there are three types of coherence. 1.) Representational coherence is when objects resemble realistic objects, or correspond to a visual perception of realistic texture. 2.) Meaningful coherence is when objects in a scene cumulatively describe an environment that is helpful to our understanding of realistic environments. 3.) Design coherence is when objects correspond to aesthetic standards. The image must demonstrate framing and composition as opposed to unplanned or thoughtless properties.

Complex meanings can be derived from artistic coherence if the sum-total of the image's elements establish a predictable, environmental status quo, such as closure. This also can occur if the sum-total of the image's elements create a determinable narrative, meta-narrative or narrative quality.

The Swiss linguist, Saussure, did a great deal of work that fills out the constructionist view of language and representation in a wide variety of cultural fields. Saussure expresses similar views to Barthes about coherence when he taught that, according to Hall, “Language is a system of signs. Sounds, images, written words, paintings, photographs, etc function as signs within language only when they serve to communicate ideas...To communicate ideas, they must be part of a system of conventions”(Hall,31). Saussure broke the sign down into two elements: the form, or the actual word, image, photo, etc., and the idea or concept in one’s mind with which the form is associated. Saussure termed the form as the signifier and the concept as the signified. Saussure taught that it is the relationship between these two that creates and sustains meaning in a culture. Let’s examine Barthes and Saussure in relation to Magritte.

Magritte’s painting entitled, *Son of Man*, depicts a man wearing a dark gray business suit and a bowler hat. A green apple floats in the air, positioned so that it conceals all the facial characteristics of the man. The image of the man is large and fills most of the picture plane. Behind the man there is a low, gray stone-block wall and behind that a light blue sea. The sky is a muted pink with gray clouds. The light from the sky is somewhat reflected on the wall and minimally reflected on the man.



Rene Magritte. *Son of Man*. 1964.

Barthes’ ideas of coherence come into play here. We have a man, dressed in business attire, located in a recognizable setting. The lighting gives us a sense of time of day, which can be guessed to be daybreak by the color of the sky, light and shadows. There is only one odd thing that does not fit, which is the floating, green apple. Why does the apple float? Why does it obstruct the man’s face? Why does not the man hold the apple, or eat from it? The man’s

arms and hands hang straight beside his body. His hands are loosely clinched, as in Egyptian, or early Greek stance. The man is presented frontally and stands erect. This is possibly another Egyptian / early Greek reference, but we can not see the legs. The man's body is cut off by the frame just below his hands. The Egyptians and early Greeks constructed their statues with one leg forward to indict life and movement. The fact that the legs are not depicted does not seem so important. The man is still rigid. We are not concerned that this faceless man has no legs because the coherence of the painting tells us it is just not included in the picture – not within the boundary of the frame. But because we do not see the bottom of the stone-block wall, or the ground we can logically conclude that this man does have legs and feet, and that they are probably dressed to match the rest of his attire that is depicted. No, we are not questioning what is outside of the framed boundary. The deliberate issue is the floating apple in front of his face. Why is the apple there? Why does it float? What does his face look like? Who is the man?

To continue in our process of making meaning from this piece of art we are forced to confront the apple. The apple is evidently more than just an apple. Its unusual placement designates it as a sign. A widely understood convention associated with the apple is the Christian association with it as the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden. The apple is often portrayed as the fruit of which Eve and Adam were tempted to partake, thus directly disobeying God. Eating the fruit made them able to think and know right from wrong, which ultimately led to the symbolic fall of humankind.

So far we have gathered that we have a man with an apple in front of his face. We have associated the apple by convention to the Christian idea of the fall of humankind. Another association for the apple is of health, yet it does not seem applicable here. We make the distinction that the man is wearing a suit of modern clothing and thus can not be Adam, who would not be wearing clothing. The clothing denotes that the painting is set in modern times. Next we examine the title for meaning. *The Son of Man* is associated with the Christian biblical term which refers to Christ. Could this representation be Christ? We reject the notion in that there is nothing more than an ambiguous title to suggest he is Christ. We have a visual clue to suggest that he is Adam and a written text that suggests he is Christ. Once again, Magritte constructs mental conflict through the juxtaposition of representational signs.

What next? Viewers familiar with Magritte know some of his pictorial signs – his iconography that rounds out his visual vocabulary. They are able to converse with him through his art. Many of his images showed a dignified gentleman in a bowler hat. The bowler hat became a cultural sign in England. It became associated with professional servants such as butlers, or a “gentleman's gentleman.” In London in particular, it meant something different. A man on the street wearing a bowler hat in the city could safely be assumed to be a banker, lawyer, stock broker, or government official. It became a cultural icon particular to London city gents. This convention was understood throughout Europe as a hat belonging to the class of the well-to-do professionals. It also became associated with Magritte himself. It is commonly understood that Magritte painted this painting as a self-portrait.

Does the artist consider himself to be the Son of Man? There is no evidence that he was very religious, so it does not seem likely he meant it in the religious sense. Magritte was also rather humble, so he probably did not mean it in a self-righteous way. Yet, Magritte was aware that he was raising issues that confront reality as we know it. He was said to praise that pictorial experience that puts the real world on trial. After a thorough consideration of the coherence of the painting and the conventions the artist brings up himself, we can somewhat logically conclude that Magritte is the one depicted in the painting. Yet, we would not know this without studying art history because there is no clue to his identity besides the typical clothing and bowler hat of the professional. His purposeful obstruction of his facial features with an apple leads us to conclude that he represents the first man, yet perhaps all men. Perhaps Magritte's oeuvre is what he emphasizes – his effort to put the process of making meaning from the world on trial. In that respect, he is a product of this world (a son of man – a son of this world), and challenges the world and how we understand it at the same time.

Renee Magritte was a humble man. He often said that life obliged him to do something, so he painted. He did more than just paint. He brought up semantic issues before they had been formalized. His work influenced many other artists, including the pop artists who dealt with popular imagery as signifying practices. His work found new audiences in the 1960's and 70's and his work became widely disseminated in commercial advertising and posters. *The Son of Man* was used as a prop in the 1999 Hollywood movie *The Thomas Crown Affair* and in the 2004 short film *Ryan*. The Beatles Anthology lists the apple in *The Son of Man* as the model for the apple on their recording label, Apple Records.

While it is interesting to toy with Magritte with his *Treachery of Images* – it trivializes his work to assume the whole meaning is a joke on the viewer. A verbal conversation might go like this:

Magritte: Say, when is a pipe not a pipe?

Viewer: I do not know. When?

Magritte: When it is a picture of a pipe!

After all, are not many paintings pictures of the real thing? The challenge with semiotics is for the user to explain the theory on a deeper level. Most books admit the process is complicated and then try to explain semiotics as the study of signs. This over simplifies the process. The viewer must look longer and think more intently if one is to meet the challenge to actually construct social meaning from the imagery. The process is best understood when we examine signs and their understanding individually. When we contemplate on how it is that we make meaning for individual signs and the contexts in which we understand them it is then that we can begin to understand their place as language. This is one reason why the art world is such a fertile field for semiotics. In a world of images, especially those of Rene Magritte, the student of semiotics has much with which to work.

Biographical Sketch

Betsy Orr Fulmer received her BA in commercial art from Ouachita Baptist University in 1981. She received her teaching licensure from the State of Arkansas in 1983. She received a M.S.E. in art education from Henderson State University in 1997. She has taken post graduate coursework in art history at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and is presently involved in pursuing her Ph.D. through Union Institute and University. This is an interdisciplinary degree program in which she is combining the study of art history with creativity studies. She has taught art in the Gurdon and Arkadelphia Public School systems and began teaching at Henderson State University full time in 2003. She is a member of the Society of Layerists in Multimedia and the American Folklore Association.