

# Thinking with Your Own Eyes: Magritte and the Logical Metafunction

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## Abstract

*Specialists in multimodality are sometimes asked whether the notion of “logical relations” is required for the study of non-verbal texts. If the answer is in the affirmative, do such relations as Projection, Elaboration, Extension and Enhancement contribute to our understanding of the art of painting and to our reading of an individual work, or are the logical relations between elements in a visual array different in nature?*

*Rene Magritte’s painting has been described as bringing about “a crisis of the object” – what the Russian Formalists called “making strange” – and through a close study of some of his key works I hope to propose some of the devices whereby his apparently innocent objects are made strange. These include modifications of scale, changes in category, hybridization, isolation, paradox and conceptual bipolarity.*

*Just as the logical function is closely related to the experiential function in language, it relates closely to the representational function in a painting. However, it frequently involves interplay with the modal and compositional functions, so we must take these into account as we practise thinking with our own eyes. We will also need to consider whether Magritte’s obsession with congruence to produce incongruities amounts merely to the creation of visual metaphors.*

*Multimodal analyses of works of art – particularly my own – tend to downplay the preoccupation of much art history with the life of the artist or his/her relation to past and contemporary movements. In the case of Magritte both of these elements may prove semiotically significant for our reading of his play with logic.*

## 1. Introduction

I have chosen the rather provocative title “Thinking With Your Own Eyes” because my attempts to adapt the Systemic-Functional linguistic model for the study of visual texts like paintings have aimed to empower ordinary art lovers, like you and me, to read and interpret works of art for ourselves rather than depending on the expertise of art historians, gallery curators and mass media presenters, who generally tell us what we are looking at in terms of its overt subject matter, the artist’s biography, the history of its commissioning and ownership, or its present market value – all of which are relevant to those authority figures, but tend to get in the way of our personal perceptions and understandings. Also, I believe that when we look at pictures we think with our eyes, and that there is a visual logic at work. As Richard Gregory wrote in *The Intelligent Eye* (a

significant title): “Perceiving is a kind of thinking” (Gregory 1970: 59). Moreover, Rene Magritte himself consistently refused to offer, or even accept, interpretations of his paintings:

My painting is visible images which conceal nothing: they evoke mystery and, indeed, when one sees one of my pictures, one asks oneself this simple question “What does that mean?” It does not mean anything, because mystery means nothing either, it is unknowable.” (Rene Magritte, www. *The Magritte Site*, 2007).

A few years ago I was giving a paper at Glendon College in Toronto based on Chapter 5 of my book, *The Language of Displayed Art*, where I compare the visual structures of Bruegel’s painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1558) (Plate 1) with the lexico-grammatical structures in W.H.Auden’s poem *Musée des Beaux-Arts* (1939), which is his response to Bruegel’s paintings, the last eight lines specifically to the Icarus one in the Brussels gallery. My purpose was to explore whether the systemic choices Bruegel had made in the three functions – Representational, Modal and Compositional – were comparable to, or even isomorphic with, the systemic lexicogrammatical choices Auden had made from English as described by Halliday’s three functions – Ideational, Interpersonal and Textual – on which, of course, my visual semiotic model is based.



Plate 1: Pieter Bruegel the Elder: *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*



(Michael Halliday in his analysis of Yeats' poem *Leda and the Swan* noted a strong correlation between semantically powerful moments in the poem and their "weak" or downranked or rankshifted status in the poem's grammar (Halliday 1964: 272)). I felt that much the same paradox was at work in Auden's poem.

I also noted the visual and grammatical scale relations and orientation of the ploughman, the shepherd and the fisherman to the disaster; the marked thematization of adjuncts; and the interplay of Latinate and Anglo-Saxon lexical items in the poem – which seemed to capture the contrast between Bruegel's delicate Italianate cities in the background and the robust Flemish style of his foreground figures.

rank \ function	IDEATIONAL		INTERPERSONAL	TEXTUAL
	Experiential	Logical		
CLAUSE	TRANSITIVITY types of process participants and circumstances (identity clauses) (things, facts & reports)	condition addition report  POLARITY	MOOD types of speech function modality (the WH-function)	THEME types of message (identity as text relation) (identification, predication, reference, substitution)
Verbal GROUP	TENSE (verb classes)	catenation secondary tense	PERSON (‘marked’ options)	VOICE (‘contrastive’ options)
Nominal GROUP	MODIFICATION epithet function enumeration (noun classes) (adjective classes)	classification sub- modification	ATTITUDE attitudinal modifiers intensifiers	DEIXIS determiners ‘phoric’ elements (qualifiers) (definite article)
Adverbial (incl. prepositional) GROUP	‘MINOR PROCESSES’ prepositional relations (classes of circumstantial adjunct)	narrowing sub- modification	COMMENT (classes of comment adjunct)	CONJUNCTION (classes of discourse adjunct)
WORD (incl. lexical item)	LEXICAL ‘CONTENT’ (taxonomic organization of vocabulary)	compounding deviation	LEXICAL ‘REGISTER’ (expressive words) (stylistic organization of vocabulary)	COLLOCATION (collocational organization of vocabulary)
INFORMATION UNIT			TONE intonation systems	INFORMATION distribution and focus

PARATACTIC COMPLEXES (all ranks)  
co-ordination  
apposition

HYPOTACTIC COMPLEXES OF CLAUSE, GROUP & WORD

COHESION (‘above the sentence’: non-structural relations)  
reference; substitution and ellipsis; conjunction; lexical cohesion

Figure 2: Functions and systems in Language (Halliday, 1973: 141.)

Among the many useful questions raised by my audience of linguists I was most taken aback when asked if I thought there was a Logical function in visual texts like the one we were studying. My chart of functions and systems for painting, based on Halliday's one for language, had assumed that Representational was equivalent to Ideational and did not require a specifically

Logical subdivision. On the spur of the moment I suggested that perhaps the Icarus segment of the painting was a “projection” of the Mental Process: Perception of the ploughman, shepherd and fisherman, though, as Auden notes, none of them are looking at Icarus: “everything turns away” and “it was not an important failure”, so this is a negative projection, and I was, perhaps, trying too readily to impose a logic that we need for the sequential relations in language on the simultaneous relations we perceive in visual media like painting.

I decided that Magritte was the painter who most radically interrogates the rules of visual logic and his painting *The Human Condition* is a good example of the way he breaks the rules of visual perception in order to find out what they are, rather like the revolutionary students and the ethnomethodologists of the 1960s who discovered implicit rules of social and political discourses and behaviours by breaking them.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1 *The Human Condition* (1933) **La condition humaine**



For instance, is a painting contained in a painting an example of Projection? Is a view through a window also a kind of Projection? These might be comparable to the workings of Projection in Halliday’s Logical function. But a painting that replicates and continues the scale and perspective of its landscape model is anti-Projection, i.e. an overturning of visual logic – a bit like not putting verbs in the past and pronouns in the third person in indirect speech, as happens when novelists sharpen our engagement with a character’s experience through “free indirect discourse”. The logical issue seems to involve the positioning and perceptions of the viewer (i.e. a Modal or Interpersonal function as much as a pure matter of Representation). Modally, we would also note the slanting parallels of lines of the floor at the bottom and the cornice at the top (so pedantically precise, as we will always find with Magritte), which position the viewer to the right of the window and easel. And then, in the Compositional function, there is the precision with which the painter has shown the right-hand edge of the canvas and its top edge, marked by an intrusive clip against the clear sky outside (which is also inside, *on* the canvas. The Russian Formalist literary theorists of the 1920s would have seen this as a clear case of “laying bare the device” or “making strange”

(*ostranenie*), another Modal issue. It begins to seem as if Magritte's play with visual logic relates to all three functions, as shown in my semantic chart for painting, Figure 1.

### **2.2 *The Door to Freedom* (1936) *La clef des champs***



This painting also seems to involve a kind of “anti-projection”. While the landscape outside framed by the window is straightforward Projection, the fragments of the same view, and on the same scale, imprinted on the shards of broken glass and jumbled into a different order, break the rules of projection as well as of verisimilitude. We have an additional Modal element here: the viewer is asked to infer that the window has been broken by some human agent and, moreover, that some agent, different or the same, has stood some of the larger shards of glass on end while leaving the smaller fragments scattered on the sill and floor. Even the shine on the broken edges in the window pane frame that part of the view and position us more precisely.

### **2.3 *The Bather between Light and Darkness* (1935) *La baigneuse du clair au sombre***



We cannot be sure whether the projected representation of the sea is a painting, a view through a window, or a dream. Any of these would be a kind of Projection in the linguistic sense. But the large black ball between us and the bather appears to be “real” (casting a shadow). Is it a projection of our sexual desire for the female nude, linking up with the dark walls of the room which envelope the image of the sea (“La mer”, frequently enough an image for female sexuality)? Modally, there seems to be a contrast between the focussed light on the nude and the diffused light on the sea; we seem to have a paradox between the source of “real” light on the bather from above and behind us, or is the dream of the sea the “light”? Meanwhile, in the Compositional function, the black ball seems to mimic her curves (breast and hip), while the centrally placed rectangle of the sea image has its centre above her pubic triangle and its left edge in line with her nipple and the centre of the ball.

## 2.4 *The Eternal Evidence* (1930) *L'évidence éternelle*



Are the five areas of a woman's body isolated and framed here projections of male fetishes, capturing some of Sigmund Freud's immense influence on Magritte as well as on the French Surrealists? The Compositional tightness of the frames and their shifting dimensions seem to have the Modal effect of accentuating the fetishized parts. On the other hand, the "evidence" need not be psychoanalytical at all, but a Marxist (or general human) comment on our propensity for a "division of labour": each frame could be the target for a branch of medicine: ENT/cardiology/gynaecology/osteopathy/pedicure – or for the way we divide up linguistics into (almost) discrete specialisms rather than looking at the whole of language in a social context!

## 2.5 *Not to be Reproduced* (1937) *La reproduction interdite*



One's reflection in a mirror is a kind of Projection, but a genuine mirror reverses and reduces the image of the subject. Here it is reduced proportionate to the distance of the subject, but not reversed. Modally, we are confronted by no reflected gaze (anti-Gaze in that system of options).

This modality of the viewer's position is accentuated by the Modal elements of light (on his hair) and Perspective (our positioning to the right of the subject). As with so many of Magritte's games with visual logic, the Representational function involves a precise – indeed, pedantic – detailing of the mirror frame, the mantleshelf and his hair. (It is almost as if Magritte was anticipating the poet in Jean Cocteau's film "Orphée" (1949) who intones: "Les miroirs feraient bien de réfléchir d'avantage: "Mirrors would do well to be a bit more reflective.").

I take it that self-reflexivity in art – what the Russian Formalists called "laying bare the device" – is the game that Magritte is playing with his depiction of the book resting on the mantleshelf and with its print *correctly* reversed in the reflection. This is a French paperback edition of Edgar Allen Poe's novella *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* translated here as *AVENTURES de Arthur GORDON PYM*.

Here I will digress from my visual semiotics to take account of the literary semiotics of that work and the "multimodal semiotics" of Magritte's appropriation of it in his play with visual

logic. The most obvious *visual* reason why this book is included is to show a correctly reversed image of the printed cover in the mirror where the man's image is not reversed. A *historical* reason might be that the well-worn paperback was a popular centennial edition of Poe's classic, which was first published in 1837, exactly one hundred years before Magritte's painting. A *literary* (and literal!) reason proposed by the authors of *The Mystery of Magritte* (CD ROM, 1999), the only critics, apparently, to have noticed the presence of the book in the painting) is that a key scene near the end of the novella depicts the chief (Too-wit – not an accidental choice of name!) of a wild tribe who have boarded Pym's ship somewhere in the South Seas:

There were two large mirrors in the cabin, and here was the acme of their amazement. Too-wit was the first to approach them, and he had got in the middle of the cabin, with his face to one and his back to the other, before he fairly perceived them. Upon raising his eyes and seeing his reflected self in the glass, I thought the savage would go mad, but upon turning short round to make a retreat, and beholding himself a second time in the opposite direction, I was afraid he would expire on the spot. No persuasion could prevail upon him to take another look; but, throwing himself upon the floor, with his face buried in his hands, he remained thus until we were obliged to drag him upon deck. (Poe 1837: 337)

The visual logic in Poe's episode, however, would require Too-wit to see the reflected image of his face (not the back of his head) whichever way he turned his eyes.

A *multimodal* meaning (which I, naturally, favour) is that the whole structure of Pym's – or Poe's – *Narrative* involves a pair of parallel receding mirrors it is the ultimate self-reflexive narrative.

In his two-page Preface the narrator tells us how he came to write it down:

Upon my return to the United States a few months ago, after the extraordinary series of adventures in the South Seas and elsewhere, of which an account is given in the following pages, accident threw me into the society of several gentlemen in Richmond, Va., who felt a deep interest in all matters relating to the regions I had visited, and who were constantly urging it upon me, as a duty, to give my narrative to the public... One consideration that deterred me was... that I should not be able to write, from mere memory, a statement so minute and connected as to have the *appearance* of that truth it would really possess... Another reason was, that the incidents to be narrated were of a nature so positively marvellous... the probability [was] that the public at large would regard what I put forth as merely an impudent and ingenious fiction... A distrust in my own abilities as a writer was, nevertheless, one of the principal causes which prevented me from complying with the suggestions of my advisers.

Among those gentlemen in Virginia who expressed the greatest interest in my statement, more particularly in regard to that portion of it which related to the Antarctic Ocean, was Mr. Poe, lately editor of the Southern Literary Messenger, a monthly magazine, published

by Mr. Thomas W. White, in the city of Richmond. He strongly advised me, among others, to prepare at once a full account of what I had seen and undergone, and trust to the shrewdness and common sense of the public –= insisting, with great plausibility, that however roughly, as regards mere authorship, my book should be got up, its very uncouthness, if there were any, would give it the better chance of being received as truth. Notwithstanding this representation, I did not make up my mind to do as he suggested. He afterward proposed (finding that I would not stir in the matter) that I should allow him to draw up, in his own words, a narrative of the early portion of my adventures, from facts afforded by myself, publishing it in the Southern Messenger *under the garb of fiction*. To this, perceiving no objection, I consented, stipulating only that my real name should be retained. Two numbers of the pretended fiction appeared, consequently, in the Messenger for January and February (1837), and, in order that it might certainly be regarded as fiction, the name of Mr. Poe was affixed to the articles in the table of contents of the magazine. (Poe 1837: 200-201)

Thus, the real Mr. Poe has created a mirror image of himself as a literary editor for his fictional narrator, Mr. Pym (and the similarity of their three names – EAP and AGP – is no accident), but an editor who must not be confused by the readers with the supposedly real narrator of the supposedly real adventures, because the early part of the (fictional) story would be published *under the garb of fiction* (Poe's narrator's italics).

Not that Poe is going to be satisfied with this degree of imposture. He goes on to claim that some readers actually read his account, retold by “Mr. Poe”, as fiction:

The manner in which this *ruse* was received has induced me at length to undertake a regular compilation and publication of the adventures in question; for I found that, in spite of the air of fable which had been so ingeniously thrown around that portion of my statement which appeared in the Messenger (without altering or distorting a single fact), the public were still not at all disposed to receive it as fable, and several letters were sent to Mr. P's address, distinctly expressing a conviction to the contrary...

This *exposé* being made, it will be seen at once how much of what follows I claim to be my own writing; and it will also be understood that no fact is misrepresented in the first few pages which were written by Mr. Poe. Even to those readers who have not seen the Messenger [and that, of course, means *all* readers of the *Narrative*, since none of it ever “really” appeared in the magazine, (M.O'T)], it will be unnecessary to point out where his portion ends and my own commences; the differences in point of style will be readily perceived. (A.G.Pym, New York, July 1838).” (Poe 1837: 201-202)

No wonder that Dostoevsky regarded Poe as his teacher in the exploration of psychological states like that of the hero of his own masterpiece *The Double*. The schizophrenic's mind, and even style, has been taken over by his own *alter ego*. The author Poe has allowed his fictional narrator

Pym to set him up as a sort of reflecting narrator, persuasive, yet not entirely trustworthy. Apart from the later part of Pym's story being presented as a daily journal (and therefore more "authentic"?) rather than a continuous narrative, there is no way that we can distinguish the "fictional" Poe in the melodramatic narration of an extremely unbelievable series of adventures on the high seas.

When we learn in the final journal entry that Pym, its author, is faced with certain death in the icy wastes of Antarctica, we realise that the journal could never have been recovered, let alone Pym living in New York and negotiating with any gentlemen in Virginia about its publication. Arthur Gordon Pym is as faceless as the reflection of the young man in Magritte's painting. Edgar Allen Poe, the real author, lays bare his device in a "Note" at the end of the *Narrative* :

The circumstances connected with the late sudden and distressing death of Mr. Pym are already well known to the public through the medium of the daily press. It is feared that the few remaining chapters which were to have completed his narrative, and which were retained by him, while the above were in type, for the purpose of revision, have been irrecoverably lost through the accident by which he perished himself. This, however, may prove not to be the case, and the papers, if ultimately found, will be given to the public. No means have been left untried to remedy the deficiency. The gentleman whose name is mentioned in the preface [Poe, of course], and who, from the statement there made, might be supposed able to fill the vacuum, has declined the task – this for satisfactory reasons connected with the general inaccuracy of the details afforded him, and his disbelief in the entire truth of the latter portions of the narration. (Poe 1837: 379-380)

A disbelief which we have by now been sharing for some time... The author of the Note [Poe, of course] then wanders off into a far-fetched quasi-multimodal disquisition about the shapes of the chasms in which Pym perished resembling hieroglyphic words and word-roots in Ethiopian, Arabic and Egyptian – "facts which have, beyond doubt, escaped the attention of Mr. Poe."

I have not found any literary critics who have paid much attention to Poe's elaborate masquerade in this work, but I believe that Magritte understood it and deliberately included the correct reflection of Poe's volume in his painting that sets out to question the veracity of mirror images. There are plenty of self-reflective/reflexive frame narratives in literature from *1001 Nights*, *The Canterbury Tales* and *Don Quixote* to the modern fictions of Borges, and even such films as Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, and I believe Magritte's mind worked in the same kind of way as the authors of these works. It may be, then, that the visual logic we are discussing

here is as much the logical skewing through rhetorical devices that we take for granted in fiction and poetry as the basic logic of vision being studied by important contemporary thinkers such as Edward R. Tufte (1997). Just as linguistic study in many discursive genres needs to be enriched by an awareness of literary figures of rhetoric – indeed, we are always on the lookout for irony – , multimodal studies too must take account of the tricks of irony, hyperbole, metaphor and so on in visual texts.

In the late 1920s Magritte was much preoccupied with the relationship between words and images. An object can either be denoted by a name or represented by a picture resembling the object. But neither, of course, actually *is* the object: as Saussure reminded us, the relation between the name and the thing named is arbitrary, depending on a culturally determined semantic convention. Like his philosopher contemporary, Wittgenstein, who considered his whole philosophy as a “battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language”. [I am indebted to Suzi Gablik, of whom more later, for this connection (Gablik 1970: 126-7)], Magritte wanted to remind us that images, too, are not to be confused with the objects they represent. Representation – however casually art critics, photographers and multimodal analysts, like myself, use the word – is always RE-presentation. For instance, in Magritte’s most famous image, to the discussion of which Michel Foucault devoted a whole book,

## 2.6 *The Betrayal of Images* (1929) *La trahison des images*



Neither painted image nor words are their designated object: both visual logic and verbal logic *and* the relations between them are deliberately “made strange”. As Richard Gregory put it:

Pictures have a double reality. Drawings, paintings and photographs are objects in their own right – patterns on a flat sheet – and at the same time entirely different objects to the eye. Pictures are unique among objects; for they are seen both as themselves and as some other thing, entirely different from the paper or canvas of the picture. Pictures are paradoxes. (Gregory 1970: 32)

## 2.7 *This is not a Pipe* (1930) *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*



In another of the many other pictures Magritte painted on the same theme, he teases us even further by having the free-floating image of the pipe in one corner, but the verbal message combined with a smaller pipe image on a blackboard on an easel in the other.

The process and paraphernalia of teaching only underlines the logical fault-line: normally you put the names of things on blackboards to tell pupils what they are (thereby perpetuating the word/image paradox). The optimistic blue of the wall behind the blackboard (primary colours for primary schools?) seems like a Modal “appraisal” to accentuate the naivety of the pedagogical enterprise.

Meanwhile, an important aspect of the Compositional grammar of this painting is the parallel positioning of the two pipes, one about a quarter the size of the other, centred in their diagonals. As far as details of the Representational function are concerned, we note with pleasure Magritte’s pedantic precision in his depiction of the floorboards (complete with wood-grain, the easel and the frame around the blackboard – mocking once more our credulity about our images of reality.

## 2.8 *The Empty Mask* (1928) *Le masque vide*



Once again we have here a pedantic precision in the representation of floorboards and, in the Modal function, the artistic convention of light shining down from upper left. However, frames, especially crooked ones) do not make a picture, and the labelling of their contents as “sky”, “human body or fruit”, “curtain” and “house façade” continue the logical play between words (which do not normally need frames around them, unless they are announcing something) and the images which we can only imagine.

Modally, there is an intertextual reference to key recurrent depictions in Magritte’s paintings, together with a bending and varying in size and shape of the frames.

### 2.9 *A Courtesan's Palace* (1928) *Le palais d'une courtisane*



With this intriguing painting we seem to be back in the world of mirror reflections – but where is the subject in front of the mirror and being reflected? Or does the frame contain a poster advertisement. for courtesans?

In either case these would be examples of Projection. In the context of the title (though we have to remember that Magritte rarely gave his paintings titles, preferring to challenge his friends to choose suitable titles for the newest works), it is hard not to see the secret passage leading into shadows on the right as a visual *pun* on a vagina. Meanwhile, the conical shell, casually parked outside the courtesan's palace and pointing up in line with the vagina of the mirror image resembles only one of those penis sheaths worn by the men in the wilder parts of Papua New Guinea, becoming here a *metonym*, and *hyperbole*, for the real thing).

Modally, we once more have the classic device of lighting coming from the left and a strong perspective line from the right which leads our eye into the passage. In terms of Compositional texture, the heavily grained boarding is on the walls, not on the floor.

### 2.10 *On the Threshold of Freedom* (1930) *Au seuil de la liberté*



Now another phallic object, a toy cannon, points at a nude female torso, almost identical to the one in *The Courtesan's Palace*. The walls of this rather claustrophobic room consist of framed representations (Projections) of eight key visual motifs of Magritte's world: a female nude, grained boarding, harness bells, fire, forest, sky, an urban façade, and a paper cut-out.

The only complete image (not subject to visual synecdoche) presents a Modal enigma: the sky could be an opening, not a painting (as in *Personal Values* (1951)), which we will look at shortly.

### 2.11 *Discovery* (1927) *Découverte*



A favourite game of Magritte's with visual logic involves hybridity: both female flesh and woodgrain have a visible and tangible texture – so he combines them. To make the pun complete, he has positioned the knots in the woodgrain at the joints of hip and shoulder! Compositionally, the model's finger and thumb point along the board edges. Modally she is gazing at us and posing seductively.

The Australian poet Les Murray made some remarks about art, which are relevant to this painting, in a recent newspaper interview:

Poetry gets a lot said in short measure. It can say more things than prose. You see, poetry models how humans really think. We think with our logical forebrain, the daylight consciousness. But we think with our dreams as well. And we think with our body. Any of the arts tends to involve all of these three at once... Humans are naturally poetic.” (Interview with Les Murray in *The West Australian Weekend Extra*, Sat. Feb. 10, 2007: 5)

We think with our dreams... we think with our body... Perhaps our search for a “logical” function in painting is misguided after all...?

### 2.12 *Titanic days* (1928) *Les jours gigantesques*



Hybridity now combines both the rapist and his victim: we have a faceless force (incomplete, yet stable) +/-vs a violent anguish (almost complete, but off-balance). Despite the horror of the sexual attack, compositionally, the painting is very “cool”: the dominant figures are trapped in a corner of a room; their arms are parallel; and the pubic hair, the man’s target, is at the dead centre of the canvas.

### 2.13 *The Rape* (1934) *Le viol*



This visual pun is the ultimate hybrid: a female torso which is also a face. Magritte is exploiting the visual logic of the symmetry of eyes and nipples, the singularity and centrality of nose and navel and of mouth and pubis. There may be a Surrealist reference here to Freud’s hypotheses about the male horror of the “vagina dentata”, but we have no evidence that Magritte had Freud’s theory in mind. For that matter we

might postulate – again without evidence – that Magritte had encountered images in the misericord carvings of Belgian or French cathedrals of “Blemyae”, described by Pliny as an Indian race of headless creatures, six feet tall and having their eyes and mouths in their stomachs (see below).

In any case, as some commentators have pointed out, the coarse, unruly hair in *The Rape* is more akin to pubic hair, so that the head on a long rearing neck which penetrates it becomes

the head of a penis. This complex visual pun became a sort of logo for the Surrealists during Magritte's association with them, 1927-31).



Plate 2: *Blemyae* from misericord carvings under the seats of the choir stalls in Ripon Cathedral

### 2.14 *Collective Invention* (1935) *L'invention collective*



In one of Magritte's most famous paintings an ancient mythical hybrid (like centaurs and griffins), the mermaid, gets reversed through a logical metathesis), laying bare its absurdity and vulnerability. Modally, the eye gazes helplessly at us and the light from above exposes the female nakedness: one cruel art critic called this "a practical man's mermaid"!). Compositionally, the subject is centred and the horizontal bands of beach, sea and sky are precisely proportioned.

### 2.15 *Attempting the Impossible* (1928)



The traditional theme of "the artist and his model", going back to the myth of Pygmalion in Ancient Greece is here defamiliarized: there is no canvas or easel — the model is also the painting: logically, this enacts a "conceptual bipolarity" (see Gablik, below). Despite the extreme logical daring of the image, we are struck by the typical (for Magritte) ordinariness of artist, model and setting

(Representational function); the negation of gaze and the strong light from the upper left (a convention of the Modal function); the equal horizontal bands of wall, dado and floor and the symmetry of floorboards and dado panels (in the Compositional function). Viktor Shklovsky's observations on *ostraneniye*, the function of art in "defamiliarizing" an over-familiar world are germane here:

As they become habitual, actions are automatized... this is the process ideally typified by algebra, where objects are replaced by symbols... Through the algebraic mode of thinking we grasp things by counting them and measuring them; we do not see them, but merely recognize them by their primary features. The thing rushes past us, prepacked as it were; we know that it is there by the space it takes up, but we only see its surface. This kind of perception shrivels a thing up, first of all in the way we perceive it, but later this affects the way we handle it too... Life goes to waste as it is turned into nothingness. Automatization corrodes things, clothing, furniture, one's wife and one's fear of war... And so that a sense of life may be restored, that things may be felt, so that stones may be made stony, there exists what we call art. (Shklovsky 1917).

### 2.16 *Time Transfixed* (1939) *La durée poignardée*



A toy train is suspended in time and space; its wheels are not revolving, but the smoke coming out of its funnel almost horizontally suggests high speed. The smoke comes out of the funnel of the locomotive, but goes up the chimney – as smoke in other contexts does. Time is transfixed with the clock frozen at 12.43, but train timetables also freeze time so the train is already forming two visual puns. Is it also a visual pun for an erect penis, spouting smoke/semen between the “legs” of the mantelpiece? Perhaps an orgasm is our most common experience of “time transfixed”.

Compositionally, at Element rank, there are the matching rectangles of mirror/mantle/clock/dado, and the matching circles of clockface/loco-front/wheels. Modally, the light is (unusually) from high *right*; perspective lines position the viewer as kneeling on the floor? However, the reflections of the clock and the candle in the mirror are normal. Magritte seems to want to make this highly fanciful image as “normal” in its bourgeois setting as possible.

### 2.17 *The Sorcerer* (1951) *Le sorcier*



Here Magritte has found another way of both transfixing time and attempting the impossible. Modally, we are confronted by the direct gaze of the self-portrait subject. Representationally we are struck by the contrast between the “busyness” of all four hands engaged in the active processes of eating, pouring and cutting and the stasis of the objects of the consumption, the glass, the plate and the chunk of bread.

### 2.18 *Carte Blanche* (1965) *Le blanc-seing*



Modally, what price perspective, when parts of the horse are simultaneously in front of and behind trees? This trick with visual logic – clearly plotted on Magritte’s draft diagrams for the painting – requires the misrepresentation of only two parallel strips on either side of the rider. In visual terms it produces a logic of simultaneous parataxis and hypotaxis, which was a favourite device of Escher, the Dutch artist.

### 2.19 *Personal Values* (1951-2) *Les valeurs personnelles*



One form of visual logic that Magritte often plays with is that of scale. Intimate (“personal”) objects, such as comb, shaving brush, wine glass and cake of soap, are magnified (hyperbole) to the scale of the furnishings like the bed, rug and wardrobe. As so often, the mirror of the wardrobe poses a problem: where is the original of the reflected window, which should, according to where we are positioned, be in the middle of the wall on our right? More unsettling still, are the walls of this lofty bedroom walls, or sky?

The only clue to the left-hand corner of a wall is the leaning point of the comb and the cornice of the ceiling above: we have to work quite hard to establish these basic orientations. And is the sky reflected in the mirror part of a wall behind us, without our reflection, or is it continuous with the rear wall, so that the wardrobe is transparent? The charm, among all these visual enigmas, is in the precision of all the represented details.

### 2.20 *Golconda* (1953)



A favourite image of Magritte's is a man in a bowler hat. Here, in a bipolar image, he is part of the rain. This extraordinary metaphor is enhanced by the normality of the urban facades. However, modally the lower roof near the centre draws our gaze – and this Modality is intensified by the perspective created by the nearby wall on the right which positions us quite precisely even without a window frame between

us and the view.

### 2.21 *Perspective II: Manet's Balcony* (1950)



Typical of Magritte's mixing of categories is the ambiguity between the Things represented and the ideas governing them: Manet's original painting "Le Balcon" has three female figures in white dresses. When questioned on this by Michel Foucault, Magritte said simply:

For me the setting of *The Balcony* offered a suitable place to put coffins. The "mechanism" at work here might form the object of a learned explanation, which I am unable to provide. The explanation would be valid, indeed beyond question, but that would not make it any less mysterious. (Meuris 1994).

He points out his verbal pun on "perspective", which in French can also mean "outlook" or "prospect": the fate that awaits us all. "This word", continues the artist, "like others, has a precise meaning in a context, but the context – as you show better than anyone in "Words and Things" – may say that nothing is confused save the mind that imagines an imaginary world".

### 2.22 *Hegel's Holiday* (1958) *Les vacances de Hegel*



Magritte was delighted to have discovered this image uniting two opposites: a container of water/a repeller of water, which makes manifest Hegel's dialectic without requiring his lengthy verbal explanation.

### 2.23 *The Red Model* (1937) *Le modèle rouge*



And so with another fusion of container with contained. The mystery of this metonymy is intensified by the representational precision of the knots in the wood, the laces, the toenails, and the pebbles on the ground. At a micro-level we have a

cigarette butt, a match and a scrap of paper from a girlie magazine; a whole human drama is waiting to be inferred.

### 2.24 *The Companions of Fear* (1961)



A pure visual pun here identifies the fleshy leaves and the owls. Modally, the owls' direct gaze and the thundery clouds overhead are as threatening as the coffins on Manet's balcony. Compositionally, as in "Collective Invention", the subject is centered between proportional horizontal bands.

### 2.25 *The Threatened Assassin* (1927) *L'assassin menacé*



While imaginary threats from a world gone topsy-turvy are full of menace, in this scene of extreme violence the ordinary-looking assassin listens to a gramophone while his bloody and naked victim lies on a chaise-longue behind him. But his hat and coat on the back of the chair and his attaché case show that he is ready to leave. As often happens in Magritte's paintings, a scarf or strip of cloth reveals rather than covers the naked body.

So where is the threat? Is it the policemen in bowler hats hiding in the foreground (who are visually intermediaries for us)? Or is it the three faces behind the balcony railing outside the window, who are watching the scene and gazing directly *at us*?

In the late 1920s Magritte is known to have been very fascinated by the extension of visual language through movie films, and the Composition here, with its very precise geometry of receding planes, from close-ups of the police in the foreground, through the mid-length shot of the murderer and his victim, past the figures outside the window to the long-shot of the distant mountains is a nice reconstruction of a long-lens camera shot.

The lighting is classically high-left, as we see from the deep shadows, but compositionally, the precision of the centering floorboards and the perspective lines suggests that Magritte is responding to – and even satirising – the frontality of the film image.

## 3. Conclusion

I want to finish by pulling together some of my observations about Magritte's visual logic, and to do this I will quote at some length from Suzi Gablik's magnificent book on the artist (Gablik

1970), with my own suggestions (in italics) about the paintings included in this paper which exemplify her categories. Gablik knew Magritte personally and gives a very good account of his life, but, unlike most biographers of artists, she does not let the biographical detail obscure the very cogent theories she has about his unique representation of the world (Gablik 1970: 124-5)<sup>1</sup>:

For Magritte, painting was not an end in itself; it was the means of formulating an awaited response so that objects could exist with maximum impact. *I believe this is part of the explanation for his pedantic attention to ordinary domestic detail which I have pointed to in several of my commentaries.*

A crisis of the object could be brought about in any of the following ways:

- (1) Isolation. An object, once situated outside the field of its own power and removed to a paradoxically energetic field, will be freed of its expected role. *The Bather between Light and Darkness; The Eternal Evidence; This is Not a Pipe; On the Threshold of Freedom; Time Transfixed; Golconda; Hegel's Holiday; The Threatened Assassin; Perspective II: Manet's Balcony.*
- (2) Modification. Some aspect of the object is altered. A property not normally associated with a particular object is introduced (human flesh turned to wood or stone) or, conversely, a property normally associated with an object is withdrawn (gravity from a rock). *A Courtesan's Palace; Discovery; Hegel's Holiday.*
- (3) Hybridization. Two familiar objects are combined to produce a third, 'bewildering' one. *Titanic Days; The Rape; Collective Invention; Time Transfixed; The Red Model; The Companions of Fear.*
- (4) A change in scale, position or substance creates an incongruity (an enormous champagne glass in a mountain landscape or an apple which fills the room). *The Bather Between Light and Darkness; The Eternal Evidence; The Betrayal of Images; On the Threshold of Freedom; Time Transfixed; The Companions of Fear; Personal Values; Golconda.*
- (5) The provocation of accidental encounters (a rock and a cloud meet in the sky). *Hegel's Holiday; Personal Values; Golconda.*
- (6) The double image as a form of visual pun (a mountain in the form of a bird or the sea in the form of a ship). *Titanic Days; The Rape; Collective Invention; Time Transfixed; The Red Model; The Companions of Fear.*
- (7) Paradox. The use of intellectual antitheses as in the delicately balanced contradictions of the glass and the umbrella. *Not to be Reproduced; The Betrayal of Images; The Empty Mask; A Courtesan's Palace; Attempting the Impossible; The*

*Sorcerer; Hegel's Holiday; The Red Model; The Threatened Assassin; Carte Blanche; Golconda; Perspective II.*

(8) Conceptual bipolarity. The use of interpenetrating images where two situations (a landscape outside and a bowl of flowers inside) are observed from a single viewpoint, modifying spatio-temporal experience. *The Human Condition; The Door to Freedom;; Not to be Reproduced; This is not a Pipe; Titanic Days; The Rape; Attempting the Impossible; The Sorcerer.*

Even Gablik's excellent attempt to account for Magritte's games with visual logic does not cover all the issues I have raised in my discussions of the paintings.

One issue has to do with fear: why are we so fascinated with the terror that so many of his paintings induce – and that makes us come back for more? And what is the fear that induces Magritte to play logical games with our visual perceptions, hiding his response to his own images, even to the point of refusing to label his paintings with his own titles?

I think we have a hint in *The Threatened Assassin*, where a strip of cloth can be seen around the neck of the naked murder victim, and in the many paintings where human subjects have their faces partly or wholly covered. For instance, in *The Lovers* we have a terrifying paradox: that most intimate moment of contact between two human beings, a kiss, is thwarted: their faces are totally shrouded, invisible and untouchable. And yet there is something almost casual, or accidental, about the way the loose ends of the scarves are slung across their shoulders. One should beware of facile Freudian explanations – even with a Surrealist artist of the 1920s – but an event in Magritte's life of which he never spoke was the suicide of his mother. A family friend recounts that the artist was only a boy of thirteen when his mother drowned herself one night in the canal near their home and he had to identify her body, naked apart from her nightdress which had got pulled up to cover her face. Why would logic be important after this?

### **The Lovers (1928) Les amants - Magritte's post-script**

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<sup>1</sup> In this section I have quoted from Gablik's book in plain font, but added in italics my own comments and examples of her categories from paintings discussed in this paper.

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