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Pictorial Representation and Levels of Meaning in the Art of René Magritte

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Abstract

This article discusses two paintings by the great Belgian Surrealist, René Magritte (1898-1967). One painting directly confronts us with a startling, somewhat unsettling paradoxical scene. Imagine looking into a large mirror and, instead of seeing yourself, your face, the front of your body, you see instead the back of you, as if you were viewing yourself from behind yourself. That surreal image is what Magritte gave us in his portrait of Edward James, friend and benefactor, who commissioned the work, "La Reproduction Interdite" (Not to Be Reproduced, 1937). James does not see a reflection of himself: he sees a reproduction, the back of himself, exactly what the title of the painting prohibits. The work has philosophical implications and interpretations about self, self-knowledge, reflection and self-reflection, the importance of point-of-view, the importance of what is not seen. Magritte has also gone to great lengths to include subtle pictorial details, what I call "perceptual amplifiers", that serve to establish the presence of thick solid glass in front of James. The work can be seen as a commentary on portraiture and its limitations. The philosophical and psychological implications of the piece are induced in us by Magritte's masterful use of pictorial design and details that ignite such dimensions of experience in us. The second work, "Les Jours Gigantesques" (The Titanic Days, 1928), is also unsettling , deeply so, but for different, more psychological-emotional reasons. A male figure is seen emerging out of a nude woman's left flank, like a dark invading sheath. She fends him off, desperately pressing against his shoulders. But Magritte has not depicted the complete male figure: he appears as literal projection onto her body, part of him disappearing where his form extends beyond her body. Where his dark form overlaps hers, they are isomorphic. Magritte induces strong emotional impact of the scene by strategic implementation of figure-ground ambiguities that confuse "body ownership". Magritte adds to the emotional complexity of Les Jours by depicting different emotional tones in the male and female figures: her desperate countenance fights again a male figure that appears almost in repose. Thus, this painting deals with issues of violence, fear, sexual aggression, masculinity vs femininity, power, vulnerability, and point-of-view. The piece delivers all this via a pictorial design that itself interacts with all these psychological and emotional issues.

Introduction

The Belgian artist, René Magritte (1898-1967), was one of most important Surrealist painters of the 20th century. During his lifetime, Magritte painted almost 400 paintings, sometimes at the rate of one per day, featuring a plethora of surreal effects that excite the imagination and provoke, in many cases, deep philosophical fascination.

Magritte, in fact, thought of himself more as a philosopher than painter, and famously said: "…*the function of painting is to make poetry visible, to render thought visible*." (Magritte, 1938; Gablik, 1970). He was drawn to creating in his images "poetic shock": the representation and juxtaposition of familiar objects in wholly unexpected contexts.

Many of his works can be seen as studies in perception and cognition with deliberate dips into philosophical territory. His unique approach to art is evidenced in his frequent re-working of a theme, addressing perceptuo-philosophical "problems", such as "the problem of the window" as explored in his 7 versions of *La Condition Humaine* (1931, two in 1933, two in 1935, 1945, 1949) and in seven works with similar pictorial design (*La Belle Captive*, 1931,1947, 1948, 1949, 1950, 1960, 1965; see Hamer, 2024a,b).

The two works discussed in this article most assuredly had 'Magrittian' shock value: the first, "La Reproduction Interdite" ("Not to be Reproduced", 1937) directly challenges our everyday understanding of reflection, self-image, self-reflection, and even literal physical reflection, as in an everyday image in a mirror. The second painting shocks both pictorially (perceptually) and emotiono-philosophically: "Les Jours Gigantesques" (1928).

La Reproduction Interdite ("Not to Be Reproduced", 1937): A Portrait of Edward James - The mind's eye circles back

We see here a young man viewing, impossibly, the back of his own head and body appearing to be reflected in a mirror in front of him. The painting is a portrait of Edward James, friend and benefactor to both Magritte and Dali in the 1930s (Fig. 1). Magritte admired James because James was also a poet, and poetry was central to Magritte's approach to art:

***Figure 1**. LEFT. La Reproduction Interdite (1937). RIGHT: Photograph of Edward James posing in front of "On the Threshold of Liberty" (Magritte, 1937), also commissioned by James. Magritte used this photo to paint La Reproduction Interdite. Magritte's meticulous attention to detail is evident.*

James had commissioned Magritte to do this portrait for the ballroom of his London home. For this work, Magritte photographed James from behind while he was looking at Magritte's painting "On the threshold of Liberty" (1937; Fig. 1 RIGHT) which James had also commissioned. One can get a sense of Magritte's meticulous attention to detail by comparing James' hair, neck, shoulders and jacket in the photo with Magritte's rendition of it in *La Reproduction Interdite*. (Fig. 1, LEFT).

Magritte established the veracity of the mirror, and that the surreal depiction of the man in the mirror was intentional, by taking pains to depict a book on the mantel correctly reflection in the mirror – a kind of reproduction, a *reflection*, *not* prohibited. The book is a French edition of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (*Les aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym*).

Magritte was well versed in philosophy, and was familiar with Hegel, Heidegger, Foucault, Husserl, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Nietzsche, Plato and Lautreamont (Paquet, p. 40, 48, 2015). In fact, Magritte's illustrations to Lautreamont's *The Songs of Maldoror* are recognized as some of the finest examples of the surrealist genre (Paquet, p.48, 2015). But just to put Magritte's admiration for Poe into perspective, more than any of the thinkers cited here, it is Edgar Allan Poe, who Magritte viewed as a surrealistic writer, that had the most profound influence on Magritte's thinking and artwork (Paquet, p. 40, 2015)[1,2]

Poe also had a substantial influence on Magritte's friend and benefactor and subject *of La Reproduction Interdite*, Edward James. James felt a strong kinship with a character in Poe's novella "The Domain of Arnheim" (Poe, 1847), Mr. Ellison.

In the story, Mr. Ellison had come into an enormous inheritance (as had James). He had a poet's expansive, liberated vision and, in the novella, he creates a 3-dimensional, physical manifestation of a poetic image in the form of a fantastical landscape garden, the design of which could not have been achieved by Nature's hand alone. Thus, his garden was an entirely novel form of beauty that Ellison considered to be superior to literature, music and painting.

This vision in the novella so impressed James, that he decided to create his own version of Poe's magical garden, a *real-life garden* of surreal sculptures and architecture, *Las Pozas*, constructed in the Mexican rainforest in Xilitla, San Luis Potosi. The construction proceeded for over 25 years between 1949 and 1984, featuring scores of surreal concrete structures, some four stories high, 29,000 orchids, winding walkways, bridges, homes and niches for tropical plants and exotic birds and animals.

***Figure 2**. Images from Edward James' Las Pozas, Xilitla, San Luis Potosi, Mexico. Over a period of 25 years, James spent $5,000,000 on the design and construction of this surreally beautiful garden. Like Magritte, James was a great admirer of Poe's writing.*

Construction cost James over $5,000,000 which he paid for by selling his collection of surreal art. *Las Pozas* still stands today.

The connection with Magritte is in the title of Poe's novella: *The Domain of Arnheim*, which became the title of one of Magritte's famous works from 1938, and then again in 1962. As it turns out, "Arnheim" is a German word for "home of the eagle" (see Poe internet links).

In the 1962 painting (Fig. 3), Magritte depicts a stone mountain in the background that surrealistically takes the form of the head of an eagle. The arc of the eagle-head closely matches the arc of the crescent moon that Magritte placed directly above the eagle head. In the foreground, Magritte placed a large bird's nest with two eggs sitting atop a stone wall directly underneath the eagle-head and moon in the distance. This design was in the spirit of Magritte's attraction to "poetic shock", where distinct yet oddly related objects are placed in unexpected or unlikely juxtaposition.

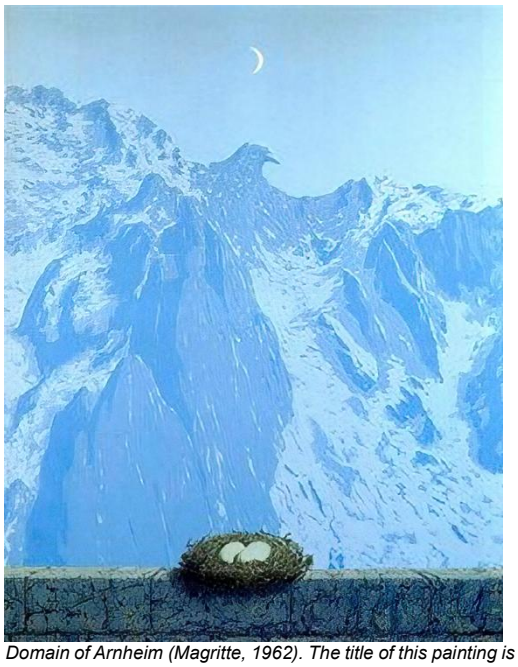

***Figure 3**. Domain of Arnheim (Magritte, 1962). The title of this painting is also the title of Edgar Allan Poe's 1847 novella.*

Thus, we have a conceptual-philosophical-artistic circle linking literature and pictorial art, linking René Magritte, Edward James, Edgar Allan Poe and Poe's inspirational novella character, Mr. Ellison.

Sensory-Perceptual Level

When we examine *La Reproduction Interdite* on a sensory-perceptual level, it is somewhat startling to realize how completely Magritte has 'convinced' our visual brain that there is a *material* in front of the man – a solid mirror. Of course, the reflections of the book, the beige shelf and the shadow on the shelf all guide us to understand this as a mirror. But other than those cues, Magritte has given us almost no visual cues to tell us that we are looking at a glass-surfaced mirror, and not merely an open space inside a golden frame that leads out to another open space with an identical man standing there. There are no obvious *direct sensory-perceptual cues* that imply a solid glass surface, no hints of dust or streaks or glare or other reflections. Yet, we are, of course, convinced that it's a mirror - a *weird* mirror, to be sure, that can both *reflect* and *reproduce*.

Consider what one's interpretation of the painting might be if the reflection of the book and mantle were not there. This could just be a man viewing the back of a (nearly) identical man inside the open space in front of him. It is the reflection of the book and mantle that confers the surreal punch to this work.

At least that is what I thought before I looked more carefully. Magritte has cleverly painted two features that usually go unnoticed that tell us that we are, indeed, looking at a material, a glass-surfaced mirror: he has gone to the trouble of simulating the prismatic effect of a bevel along the right vertical edge of the glass. He shows this to us by painting a tiny 'step' in the reflected image of the beige shelf at the far-right edge (top arrow, Fig. 4). Based on the geometry of the optical displacement, and placement of the vertical line, we can surmise that it is indeed a fairly thick glass. In fact, upon further inspection, we realize that he also included a wide bevel along the bottom edge of the glass. The upper edge of this bevel can be seen as a thin, light-beige line that runs parallel to the edge of the ledge, towards the top edge of the book's reflection. In Fig. 4, I have reproduced an expanded section of the painting showing the horizontal bevel joining with the vertical bevel at the right.

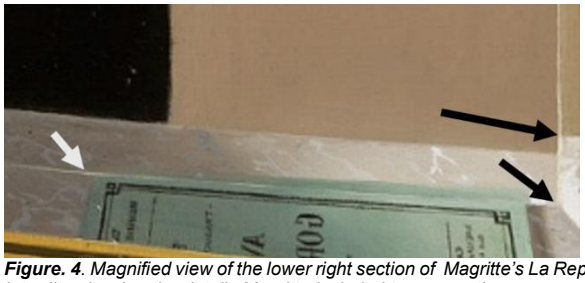

Figure. 4*. Magnified view of the lower right section of Magritte's La Reproduction Interdite showing the details Magritte included to convey the presence of bevels in the glass of the mirror. The bevel along the right vertical edge of the mirror induces a small vertical step in the reflection of the edge of the beige ledge (top black arrow). The intersection of the vertical bevel and a bevel along the horizontal, bottom portion of the mirror can be seen below as a diagonal line near the corner of the reflection of the book (bottom black arrow). The horizontal bevel continues along the horizontal trajectory of the ledge and appears as a thin white line (white arrow).*

If we assume a basic symmetry of design of the mirror, it is reasonable to suppose that the width of the vertical bevel we see on the right edge of the painting has been truncated. It would have been as wide as the horizontal bevel seen along the bottom edge of the mirror. But Magritte has cut off the right edge of the painting, eliminating entirely the golden frame on the right side and the adjacent area of mirror.

Details like the prismatic bending oof the images caused by the bevels are examples of what I have termed the 'power of subtle painterly gesture' - when small pictorial details can have enormous perceptual impact. perceptual amplifiers, if you will (Hamer, 2023, 2024a,b).

Philosophical Musings

What Magritte shows us in this painting is a deliberate violation of the title: the Man (James) *is reproduced*, not reflected like the Poe book on the shelf. The conflict between what we see and the title of the piece is in the same philosophical vein as the famous painting, "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" ("This is not a pipe"), whose original title was "*La Trahison des Images*" (The Treachery of Images) painted 12 years earlier. In it, a realistically rendered pipe is depicted above the contradictory phrase "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*". *La Reproduction Interdite* is, in fact, displaying for us a *bona fide* Treachery of Images.

A natural interpretation of the painting is that the man looking into the mirror – depicted here with soft delicate features, almost feminized, like the man partially depicted in *Les Jours Gigantesque* (discussed in the section "Bi-Stable Emotional Tone…" below) – is, perhaps, *imagining* himself looking into the mirror. Mirror of the imagination, if you will. Or imagining himself from the perspective of the artist.

Magritte's construction in this painting also leads to the obvious question: *if the man in front of the mirror is looking at the back of himself, what is the 'man in the mirror' looking at?* Out to emptiness? There is a kind of implied infinity here. Some 'spoofs' of this painting go right to the point (Fig. 5).

Figure 5*. Examples of some popular spoofs of La Reproduction Interdite. The image on the left draws us into reflection on our own viewing of the painting, and the fact that we are another viewer behind that man, dressed like James, gazing into the painting, with our backs also invisible to us. Who's looking at us? The right spoof is a direct "Hall-Of-Mirrors-esque" allusion to the implied infinity of the painting's design.*

Apart from the playful exaggerations of *La Reproduction Interdite*, Magritte has, indeed, created a conceptual 'hall-of-mirrors' – a third individual is implied here, i.e., the artist viewing the back of James, as well a fourth – *you*, the viewer.

Les Jours Gigantesques: "The Titanic Days", 1928): Inner Struggle, Outer Struggle, Imagination Embodied

In this emotionally disturbing work, Magritte confronts us with deeply unsettling, intimate violence. The artist himself describes it as a rape scene, a titanic struggle. Magritte shocks us, imbues the scene with an almost claustrophobic desperation heightened by a deliberate

confounding of figure and background. The painting, to be sure, has many fascinating visual-pictorial effects but all in the service of this emotionally disturbing scene.[3]

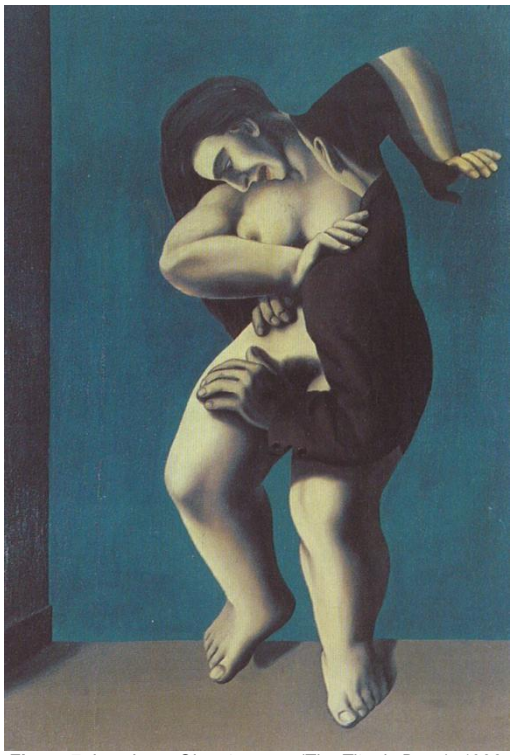

***Figure 7**. Les Jours Gigantesques (The Titanic Days), 1928.*

Let's take a closer look at what we are confronted with here. A male figure appears to emerge out of a 2D shadow on the woman's left side from her arm, as well as from the shadow that forms the boundary of her back, buttocks and thigh. The male figure's lower body is not there and the rest of him – torso head and arms - appears to emerge like an invading sheath from the left boundary of her torso and hips. The man's head transitions from a flat, 2-dimensional form at the top (where the border of head and her arm are one) to 3D as our gaze shifts to his ear and side of his head. The 2D-3D bi-stability is striking as we glance between the top of his head and the left side of a face implausibly buried and merging into her left armpit.

We indeed see a struggle - a titanic struggle based on Magritte's title. As we ponder the physical and emotional implications of Magritte's choices of images and details, we naturally are led to wonder about the nature of the struggle.

Magritte himself confirms it is a rape-attempt and draws our attention to the link between the pictorial and the emotional : "… I have treated this subject, this terror that grips the woman, by means of a subterfuge, a reversal of the laws of space…". [4]

Magritte's explication above is further elaborated by the artist: "…[*MAGRITTE*] [the]…reversal of the laws of space… serves to produce an effect quite different from what the subject usually affords. It's roughly like this: the man seizes the woman; necessarily therefore the man conceals parts of the woman, the part where he is in front of her, between her and our vision. But the discovery lies in the fact that the man does not overlap the outline of the woman.…" (Whitfield, cat. 36, 1992).

Magritte's explication here is not fully satisfying, however. What he does not spell out is that the male figure appears overlain onto the woman's body as if it were a projection (as in a modern slide show) onto her form. He clearly had thought of a kind of projection as evidenced by his sketches in preparation for the painting (see Fig. 8). By this analogy, the parts of the male form that would extend beyond her body are not visible, passing by her body into space, into that mysterious "blue unknown" space behind her, leaving only the outline of her left flank. We can thus understand the odd dark shadowing along her left arm and down to her hand as a 2D projection of the man's image (head, neck and an extension of his jacket onto her left hand) combined with, paradoxically, a shadow cast by his head and neck (now perceived as 3D) from a light source coming from the upper the left of the scene.

Interrupted Rotation

The design of the two figures also evokes implied motion: specifically, rotation of the male figure's form that is being opposed by the urgent resistance of the woman's right hand on his shoulder. The interrupted rotation thwarts an implied merging of the two bodies had the rotation completed.

Shadows As Objects

The entire left flank of the woman's torso is both figure and background. Shadow becomes object. The apparent shadow on her

left hand and wrist turns out to be an extension of the man's jacket. This can be seen clearly in a detail from a version of this work painted only 4 months earlier in 1938 (Fig. 7; personal communication, Fanny Paquet, Magritte Museum, Brussels, Belgium).[5] Once we understand that the shadow on her left hand is really the projection of, extension of his collar and jacket, we understand that what appeared before to be her desperately pushing against thin air is really her desperately pushing against his right shoulder. Or, rather, against the (phantom) projection of his right shoulder. As with her right hand, both hands are trying to pry him away from her, hold him at bay.

It is striking that Magritte uses this device – a confounding of figure and ground, solid object and shadow - to augment the emotional tone, the desperate defense being mounted by the woman.

***Figure 7**. Detail of a version of Les Jours Gigantesques painted 1 year earlier in 1927. In this version, one can see clearly that the brown shadow on the woman's left wrist and hand is actually an extension of the man's brown jacket that has 'jumped' the gap between his body and her arm. This detail is in harmony with the characterization of the design of the male figure as a projection onto the woman's form (illustrated by one of Magritte's sketches see below in Fig. 8).*

The 'projection' analogy is confirmed by Magritte's own drawings illustrating his design approach. He employed a 2-dimensional analog of *papier collé* ("pasted paper", as first used by Braque and Picasso), where physical shapes in paper or other materials are arranged to construct the elements that will form the figure, transcending the component parts.

Sarah Whitfield (1992) showed his design, and wrote: "And in three small sketches, he demonstrates the logic by which the two figures are brought together." (Whitfield, cat 36, 1992):

***Figure 8**. Reproduction of one of Magritte's sketches showing his concept for the design and final execution of Les Jours Gigantesques. Magritte shows the two figures apart (top), brings them together (middle) then eliminates the form that falls outside the boundaries of the woman's right flank (bottom). From Whitfield, 1992, cat. 36.*

The net result of Magritte's construction 'animated' in the above sketches was illustrated in the Paris journal *Distances* in April 1928 (MoMA Library, New York), reproduced on the MoMA website:

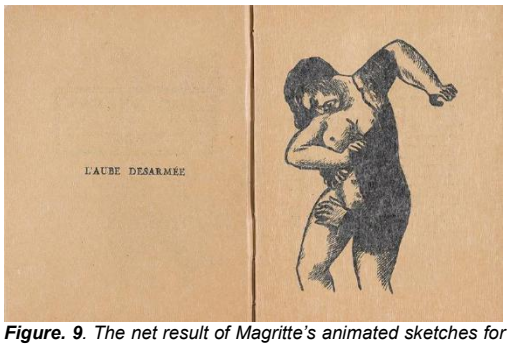

***Figure. 9**. The net result of Magritte's animated sketches for the design of what would eventually be titled Les Jours Gigantesques. That was not the original title which was "L'aube Desarmee" (The Dawn Disarmed) as shown in a 1928 illustration in the Paris journal Distances (reproduced on the MoMA website, MoMA Library, New York).*

The inscription in the sketch above, "*L'aube Desarmee*" (*The Dawn Disarmed*), stands in interesting emotional counterpoint to the literal interpretation of the scene as an attempted rape. And this title was not even Magritte's original title: "Fear of Love" (1928) was the original title.

Magritte was not satisfied with his original title and asked his friend, Paul Nouge, the Belgian philosopher and poet, to come up with a different title: hence, "L'Aube Desarmee" or "Defenceless Dawn" or "The Dawn Disarmed". Ultimately, Magritte settled on the current title, *Les Jours Gigantesques* suggested to him by the Belgian surrealist poet, Louis Scutenaire (Whitfield, 1992, cat. 36; Sylvester, 2009, p. 172).

The search for titles may reflect an evolution in Magritte's own poetic process, perhaps his own discovery of elements of poetic shock in this painting. The original title, 'Fear of Love', is not the same as an actual fear of rape and is even more divergent from the abstraction of "The Titanic Days". Thus, his original title suggests that Magritte's thoughts and emotional process in creating this work were perhaps in harmony with additional, nuanced interpretations of *Les Jours Gigantesques*; namely, that this powerful scene may also allude to an internal struggle (see "Psychological Nuances…" section below).

Conflicting Emotional Tones

The struggle depicted in *Les Jours Gigantesque* appears to have been captured at some sort of balance point. Note the almost relaxed demeanor of the male figure, the soft, almost resting, nestling of the face into the armpit of the desperate female. The hand on her right thigh shows no sign of force. In contrast with the forcefulness of her push on his left shoulder, his hand on her thigh appears to rest gently on it. Similarly, his other hand on her waist is not gripping desperately, as it would if he were fighting to hold on. The male figure's demeanor is almost an embrace, almost loving if you were to look at it without weighing the woman's desperate expression or Magritte's overt declaration of a violent event. Magritte has thus given us, in parallel with pictorial bi-stability (figure vs background, shadow *vs* object), a scene with powerful, and somewhat confusing bi-stability of emotional/psychological impact. If one takes the woman's point of view, we experience a palpable desperation. If we adopt the male figure's perspective, there is an odd calmness, in jarring contrast to her body language.

And more than this, the male figure himself has a soft, almost feminine character, with young skin and ears, a young person's clean hairstyle. Were it not for the jacket (and maybe the short hair) it could be a young woman (also with oddly masculinized hands). So, if the woman is fending off a rape, this is an unusual rape indeed, with an assailant depicted as soft, young, gentle, feminized, and the nature of the attack having been ambiguated by hints at embrace.

Though it may seem far-fetched, the male figure could be Magritte himself (intended or not). The visage of this male figure, including the shape of the head, hair, his neckline, ears and even the jacket color and cut, seem uncannily similar to his self-portraits (e.g., "*La Clairvoyance*", 1936). But it also is similar to other works, such as "*La Reproduction Interdite*" (1937), a portrait of his friend and patron, Edward James.

The Power of Subtle Painterly Gesture: Perceptual Amplifiers

One pictorial aspect of this work that sometimes goes unnoticed, but which has a powerful impact, is Magritte's use of shadows. The implied light source(s) and associated shadows are fascinating. The shadow next to the molding at the bottom left of the painting is cast along the gray-brown surface upon which she is standing, implying a light source at an angle to its left.

Two other shadows conspire to create a particularly jarring effect. The triangular shadow next to the instep of her right foot and the bend in her right leg tells us her right leg is elevated. Both the shadows behind her feet are truncated as if they extend past the edge of the ledge, out into the "blue unknown", a featureless space just past the ledge upon which she balances precariously on one foot (Fig. 10).

***Figure. 10**. Detail of Les Jours Gigantesque illustrating the shadows of her feet projected back onto the ledge beneath her. Her right foot is raised above the ledge. The shadows are truncated at the back indicating that the blue area behind her is open space. These details act a perceptual amplifiers, and, in this case, emotional amplifiers as well since they add to our experience of the precariousness of her situation.*

The perceptual and emotional effects of such details are striking. They amplify the physical precariousness of her situation, balanced on one foot at the edge of a ledge with blue open space behind her, and this augments the emotional impact of her desperate countenance. Thus, these shadows also act as emotional amplifiers in so far as they add to our awareness of, and resonance with, the precariousness of her situation, and the fear she is experiencing.

Psychological Nuances Evoked by Pictorial Design

Magritte's pictorial devices themselves draw us into an examination of the work on a psychological level. For example, the pictorial device of depicting the assailant as a 2D projection onto the woman's body (illustrated in Fig. 8), emerging into a robust perception of a 3D person being fought off by the woman, suggests an additional understanding of the scene: namely, that the male figure could also represent an embodiment of her terrified imagination.[6]

The woman's vulnerable state is also amplified by the fact that he is dressed and she is nude. Moreover, the overall emotional tone of the piece is made all the more resonant by the contrast between light (her) and dark (him). Light *vs* Shadow. Day *vs* Night. Good *vs* Evil.

The deliberate spatial ambiguities create the perception of two beings integrated, one emerging from the other, or projected one onto the other. Two creatures inhabiting one being. The very structure of the work, with deliberate confounding of visual figure and ground, the male figure emerging from the shadows on the female form, amplifies the visible desperation embodied in the woman's expression and her defensive posture (Whitfield, 1992, cat. 36).

We are induced to wonder, is she gripped by a fear of assault by a specific man? Or might we be witness to a more general, inchoate fear of male aggression experienced by women, at least as envisioned by a 30-year-old Magritte. At a minimum we witness here an image of the embodiment of her fearful imagination in addition to the literal violence depicted.

Beyond The Literal

Speculating a bit, this visage could also reflect the woman's internal struggle against, recognition of, elements of the masculine within, and/or competing gender or sexual identities. Is she attempting to evict or deny something from within? A masculinity, or sexual proclivity that discomfits her deeply? This possibility may seem to

project too modern or too far-fetched of an interpretation onto Magritte's vision. On the other hand, we know that female auto- and homoeroticism was on Magritte's mind as evidenced in three of his later works (Fig. 11).

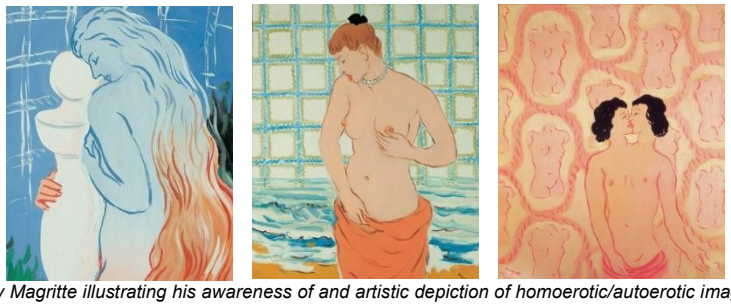

***Figure 11**. Three later works by Magritte illustrating his awareness of and artistic depiction of homoerotic/autoerotic images. (**Left**) Les Profondeurs Du Plaisir ("The Depths of Pleasure", 1948), (**Middle**) Le Galet ("The Pebble", 1948) and the auto-homoerotic work, (**Right**) Lola de Valence ("Lola From Valencia", 1948).*

Speculating a bit further. Regina, Magritte's mother, had suffered a long-standing battle with severe depression, and had attempted suicide many times. The situation was so drastic that, to protect Regina, René's father sometimes felt compelled to lock her in Magritte's brother's room, sometimes with Magritte and/or his brother Paul in the room. Regina managed to escape, however, and was finally successful, drowning herself in the river *Sambre*, on March 12, 1912.

When examining *Les Jours Gigantesques* with this rather alarming historical detail in mind, the scene depicted is readily experienced as quite claustrophobic. In an interview on CBS News, MOMA curator of the Magritte exhibition, The Mystery of The Ordinary (2013-2014), Ann Umland, told her interviewer (Serena Altschul) "… what probably had even greater impact on Magritte than his mother's death was being locked in a room with the depressed woman in the years prior. 'Look at the type of spaces Magritte is depicting, and think about how claustrophobic they are, 'she said." (https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/the-surrealism-of-magritte/3/).

What might 13-year-old René have imagined as the source of his mother's anguish? How does a child answer such a disturbing question – *why*? What might René have imagined about his mother's state of mind? Did he imagine that some horrific experience led her to seek refuge in death? Violence at the hands of some man?

One account of Regina's suicide had it that René was there at the river to witness his lifeless mother's body being lifted out of the river, her face covered by her white dress. Though scholars (e.g., Marcel Paquet, 2015) now believe this account to be apocryphal, nevertheless, a tour through Magritte's vast *oeuvre* finds, uncannily, numerous variations of an image of a white cloth or garment, or a head (or head and body) concealed by a white cloth, often contour-hugging.[7]

Whether or not the account is apocryphal would seem to be beside the point: one only needs a minimal imagination to suppose that Regina's white nightgown may have drifted up to cover her face. And Magritte was gifted with a boundless imagination.

One of Magritte's depictions of a female shrouded in a white cloth has features that are eerily reminiscent of the woman depicted in *Les Jours Gigantesques* as in his 1927 work entitled "The Central Story" (Fig. 12).

***Figure 12**. The Central Story, 1927. The white cloth over the woman's head, and her hand at her neck have led to speculation that this work is addressing the suicide of Regina, René's mother, when he was 13 years old.*

The left forearm and hand of the woman depicted here only one year before Magritte painted *Les Jours Gigantesques* are strikingly similar to those of the woman in *Les Jours*. David Sylvester (2009) proposes that this painting refers to the suicide of Magritte's mother, Regina. The white cloth over her head and her strong (masculinized) hand at her own throat, almost as if choking herself, are highlighted in support of this idea. (renémagritte.org).

Summary

Les Jours Gigantesques is most definitely a challenging work, one of Magritte's most overtly emotional paintings. It deals with issues of violence, fear, sexual aggression, masculinity *vs* femininity, power, vulnerability. The piece delivers all this *via* a pictorial design that itself interacts with all these psychological and emotional issues. The

figure-ground ambiguity. The male figure emerging from, or projected onto, the female figure like a phantom, or a nightmare emerging from her own form. And as if Magritte will not permit us to settle on a single story line, he pictorially depicts contradictory emotional tones for the male and female figures.

Conclusion

The content and pictorial design of both paintings raise psychological and philosophical questions. Reflections on self, and the general implications of point-of-view, are raised as in the quite literal and jarring discovery of the back of one's body when peering into a mirror in *Reproduction Interdite*. In Magritte's portrait, Edward James looks into the mirror and sees, not his reflection, but his reproduction – an impossible reproduction. Yet this view is completely permissible in the imagination. Magritte thus draws us into reflection (in both senses of the word) about self-awareness and our penchant to try to see ourselves as we imagine others may view us. The work is a philosophical, and fairly literal, study on self-reflection, and perhaps also on the inevitable limitations of "point-of-view" – i.e., we cannot know a thing from all points of view simultaneously, especially if that "thing" is ourselves. It is also a statement about what we can and cannot see, or what we wish we *could* see . Magritte is famously quoted as saying "visible things always hide other visible things" (Magritte, 1938).

La Reproduction Interdite can also be seen as a commentary on portraiture itself. Magritte famously often hid the faces of his subjects, as in the famous pieces The *Son of Man* (1946) and *The Man In The Bowler Hat* (1964), in which the subject's face was hidden behind a green apple and a white dove, respectively. In another portrait of Edward James, *Le Principe Du Plaisir* (1937), James' face and head were depicted as a luminescent bulb. Even in the 1935 painting entitled "The Portrait", what Magritte gave us was decidedly *not* a portrait since the subject was depicted merely as an eye staring at us from the center of a pancake.

On the other hand, point-of-view in the psychological-emotional sense is a redolent theme in *Les Jours Gigantesques*: the implied emotional tones of the two people captured mid-struggle in this scene are confusing at a minimum, and perhaps disturbingly divergent.

The impact of cleverly designed "perceptual amplifiers" – when small or subtle details exert outsized impact on our net perception and scene understanding - are noteworthy in both paintings. For example, in *Reproduction Interdite*, the inclusion of details implying the presence of bevels in glass consolidate our understanding of a man gazing into a solid object, a large mirror. The small shadows below the terrified woman's feet in *Les Jours Gigantesques* convey an almost vertiginous precariousness that compounds, amplifies her already terrified state.

In *Les Jours Gigantesque*, Magritte shows us how important figure-ground relationships are in scene-understanding. But in this painting, figure-ground ambiguities serve "double-duty": they confuse perceptual "ownership" of some features (does the a shadow falling on the woman's left flank belong to her or the emerging male figure emerging); but they also contribute to the emotional impact of the piece, amplifying the sense of dread of the female figure as she male figure seems to emerge from her own body like an invading sheath. Figure-ground ambiguity thus feeds into higher levels of interpretation, into cognitive, philosophical realms: desperation, emergence, invasion-entwinement, self-preservation; even imagination.

In both works, Magritte guides us to ponder the importance of what is *not* seen, what is hidden. In *Reproduction Interdite*, what is not seen is spectacularly absent – the front of the man viewing the mirror. But also, what is not seen is what we (the viewers) *expect* to see: violated expectation. We cannot see the face of this man: does it have an expression of Surprise? Shock? Confusion? Fear? Hilarity? Perhaps it is neutral, staring as if he were sleepwalking. The point is that design of this painting, this most unexpected pictorial device, is in harmony with Magritte's oft-quoted dictum: "visible things always hide other visible things", and with his stated desire to "render thought visible" in his paintings.

In *Les Jour Gigantesques*, what is not seen is also monumentally important: the rest of the male figure's body and legs, for example. The missing portion of the male figure's right shoulder, the right lower portion of his head, and his jacket all contribute to the perception of him as a projection onto the woman, almost as if her were an optical projection, kind of a "mirage" invading phantom. The face of the male figure, buried in the region of her left armpit, is not visible. What emotional tone would it convey? Finally, the mysterious, featureless blue space behind the struggling figures provokes our imagination to wonder what is out there, what is below.

These two paintings are vivid exemplars of Magritte's fascination with "poetic shock" and his masterful evocation of perceptual expectations only to violate these in the service of drawing us to appreciate with him "the mystery of the ordinary".

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Detail of Magritte's 1937 rendition of Les Jours Gigantesques shown in Fig. 7 is from https://www.christies.com/img/LotImages/2012/CKS/2012_CKS_05465_0056_000(René_magritte_les_jours_gigantesques).jpg

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Endnotes

[1] In fact, the French artist and central figure in Surrealism, Andre Breton, thought of Poe as one of the forefathers of Surrealism and referred to Poe as "a Surrealist in adventure" (from *Surreal Encounters: Collecting The Marvelous*, National Galleries of Scotland, 2016, p. 200)

[2] One must wonder how Magritte's admiration for, and creative awe of Poe might have swelled had he known about Poe's almost preternatural insights regarding cosmology. His thought on this deep topic were sophisticated and prescient. In his treatise/prose-poem "Eureka", published in 1848, Poe...describes a process that is now popularly known as the 'Big Bang' and the expanding universe. But it also contains ideas about the unity of space and time, the mathematical equality of matter and energy, the velocity of light, and a rudimentary concept of relativity, blackholes (including one at the center of our Milky Way), a "pulsating" universe that Renéws itself eternally, and other universes in other dimensions with different laws of nature." Poe was even explicit about the inverse square law that governed the attraction of elements of matter to each other (e.g., force of gravity decreasing with the square of the distance between the objects). (Cappi, 1994, 2009).

[3] I want to emphasize that discussion of the pictorial elements of this work and their perceptuo-cognitive impact in no way is intended to elide or minimize the obvious and disturbing depiction of violence against a woman.

[4] Josef Helfenstein (director of the Menil Collection at the time; now the Director at Kunstmuseum Basel) was the narrator of the audio description for this work. Discussion in text (quoted here) and audio can be found on the New York Museum of Modern Art website: https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/180/2377 . In my view, Helfenstein's description is not adequate to understand this painting deeply, or even on a simple pictorial basis, much less on the cognito-emotional level.

[5] A word about the jacket, and the visage of the neck, hair and head of the male figure. A cursory survey of Magritte's works leads one to suspect that the male figure is Magritte himself. This same jacket appears in at least one self-portrait (La Clairvoyance, 1936).

[6] Sarah Whitfield points out that "the simplicity of [Magritte's] solution, pasting one figure over the other,…magnifies the horror of the scene, for the man and woman have become indivisible, a grim parody of sexual union." (Whitfield, 1992, cat. 39).

[7] For example: *The Lovers* (1928): https://www.Renémagritte.org/images/paintings/the-lovers-1.jpg; *The Lovers II* (1928): https://www.Renémagritte.org/images/paintings/the-lovers-2.jpg ; *The Invention of Life* (1928): https://www.Renémagritte.org/images/paintings/the-invention-of-life.jpg ; *The Central Story* (1927) https://www.Renémagritte.org/images/paintings/the-central-story.jpg ; *The Garment of Adventure* (1926) https://theartstack.com/artist/René-magritte/garment-adventure ; *The Symmetrical Trick* (1928) https://www.René-magritte-paintings.org/the-symmetrical-trick-1928.html ; *The Ordeal of Sleep* (1926) http://www.mattesonart.com/1926-1930-surrealism-paris-years.aspx ; *Atlantis* (1927) http://www.artnet.com/artists/ren%C3%A9-magritte/latlantide-k9oU3e2GiZ1cdO7f263WFQ2 ; *The Age of Marvels* (1926) https://www.google.com/search?q=magritte+age+of+marvels&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjQ2dzQvcLcAhUHbK0KHT3iDHIQ_AUICigB&biw=1028&bih=648#imgrc=bPeiwHMt7q1StM: ; Some of these may be seen in David Sylvester's Magritte (2009, pp. 15, 17-21.

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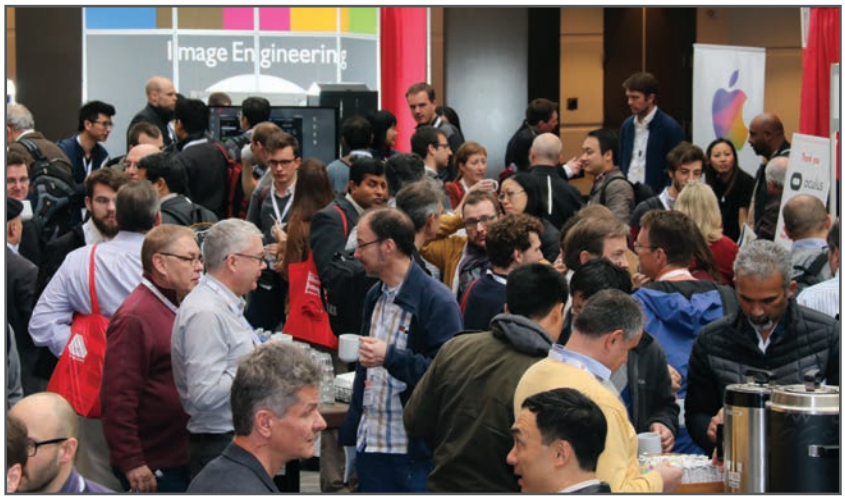

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