

“Naturalizing” René Magritte

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René Magritte, a one-time Surrealist, has begun quietly and rather belatedly invading our field of “vision” (in its many senses) with his not-too-easily-forgettable images and their disturbing implications. The extraordinary scope and extent of his influence can be easily gauged by simply leafing through books of modern art and ads and illustrations in popular magazines: Magrittean images are all over the place, ranging from a pair of five-toed shoes in the ad for Canadian Customs Service by Hodges, Freeman and Robinson, transplanted from Magritte’s “The Red Model” (1935), to an arty but all-the-same randy cover of the *Playboy* magazine (March 1972 issue), featuring the famous nude on the bottle from his canon, “The Lady” (undated) (Roque 71, 73). Those ubiquitous visual puns and perplexities of his art seem to point to a world where the drudgery of logic and practicality can be playfully bypassed and the inexorable demands of the real may be lightly brushed off. In his pictorial world, rocks float peacefully in the air side by side with clouds (“The Battle of Argonne” of 1959); a huge, gorgeous rose fills the entire room (“The Tomb of the Wrestlers,” 1960); and a man cuts his steak and scarf it at the same time, deftly using his four hands (“The Magician,” 1952).

This seemingly agreeable ease and anarchy in the state of affairs in his world, buttressed by his radically and anachronistically conventional pictorial style, however, is rather deceptive: the earliest works of his feature a perfectly respectable-looking woman devouring a live bird, feathers and all (“Pleasure,” 1926), and a policeman holding a mutilated human leg to strike an assassin (“The Threatened Assassin,” 1926-7). Moreover, this potentially destructive flouting of the logic had been carried out as systematically as a sophisticated surrealist, a correspondent of André Breton and Michel Foucault (Gablik 43; Foucault 57-8), could have done. The young Magritte published a picture-essay-manifesto entitled “Words and Images” in *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1925. In the essay he makes it quite clear that he is not going to work in the boundary of traditional pictorial and/or linguistic conventions. Concerning the nature of linguistic reference and pictorial representation, he

makes observations such as: "No object is so inextricably linked to its name that one could not give it another name that would suit it better": "Sometimes a word can only designate itself": "Everything points to the fact that hardly any relationship exists between an object and that which represents it": and "The meaning of shapes that are not clearly identifiable is as important as the meaning of shapes whose outlines are clear" (Schneede 44-5), making it clear that his projects would be as philosophical and speculative as artistic. These quietly subversive remarks are to be fully and richly materialized and recapitulated in his visual images throughout his long and brilliant career.

Considering his self-reflexive and diacritical sensitivity toward language clearly evidenced by the essay mentioned above, it is not surprising that his titles have been invariably vexing and intriguing the audience with their mysterious and mystifying obscurity or seeming irrelevancy to the paintings they are referring to. Every so often it turns out that either the title or the painting does not make any sense at all at first glance, not to mention together. For instance, what does the "Philosophy in the Boudoir" mean when it does not refer to Marquis de Sade's novel with the same title (which it does not, as it stands), and what does a nightgown with "real" breasts complete with very provocative nipples have to do with "philosophy," or any normal order of things for that matter?

What follows is an attempt to come to terms with this mysterious state of affairs in his world and to try to "decode" what he so carefully concealed in the all too familiar objects in his paintings. The titles are vitally important in this project because it is through finding a way to meaningfully relate them to their visual counterparts they are presumably describing that we begin to understand the (il)logic of his world. The four paintings under consideration, "The Rape" (1945), "Common Sense" (1945-6), "Dangerous Relationships" (1936) and "The Liberator" (1947), are representative of his technique in the sense that their titles are brought on "trial" by the images they designate, and in turn, they provide the only available access into the mystery of his images.

The first painting that we will look at is entitled "Common Sense" (1945-6). The major "shock" in the painting comes from the fact that the objects, fruits to be precise, in a still life are painted to be three-dimensional: in other words, they exist on the same reality level as the frame and other objects around them. The title "Common Sense" challenges the viewer to consider the painting and the whole convention of pictorial representation from an entirely new perspective. We begin to ask what is common sense in this particular situation. Usually the common sense would be that objects in a painting are

two-dimensional, one step further removed from the Idea (in Platonic sense) than the reality such as the frame, and there is no confusion among the reality levels between them by any means.

In this painting, however, these conventional expectations undergo a violent frustration because the fruits in the painting and the frame are shown to be existing in the same reality level, while the fruits are painted in a perfectly respectable realist manner. The position of the fruits raises another question: they exist "on" (as opposed to "in") the canvas, forming a vertical relationship with the frame. It is a radical divergence from the convention concerning still life, and it is precisely this violation that shocks the viewer.

However, things take on an interesting turn when we realize that the fruits in "common sense" still life are supposed to be put that way: in other words, if we ignore the position of the frame and the table underneath, the fruits are painted exactly the same way as convention prescribes. And after all, what we are looking at is a still life: the shock involved in this violation of conventional language of pictorial representation comes not from the poor fruits but from the position of the frame and the table themselves, and the existence of the secondary dimension they create for the fruits. By shifting the position of the frame and the table from their conventional location, or by rescuing the fruits from their existential boundary of two-dimensionality imposed on them by convention, Magritte points out the historicity of representation and perception in the experience of art. But at the same time, this radical heuristics is possible through his use of that very language, which is supposed to render "naturally" the primary version of reality, the reality where we reside and encounter this still life, where the state of affairs is strangely disturbed: the water ring of the existential shock created by this disturbance ripples on and on until we, the viewers, feel its moisture and tremble, and our common sense gets soaked and wobbles.

In the case of "The Rape" (1945), the title provides the key to the interpretation of the painting: without the title, the painting would not be "naturalized" (Culler 134-60) or decoded. On the other hand, the painting is a text where the nature of rape is defined afresh. The title and the image, then, are complementary.

In the painting, we are faced with an attractive female torso "draped" with beautiful, long, blond hair. The torso and the hair together form a face, which is set on a graceful and fair neck. The torso is doubtlessly that of a nubile young woman: it has a pair of blooming but at the same taut breasts: the abdomen and waist are decorously slim and graceful: part of the thighs that we see in the painting suggests a pair of nice legs. In other words, the

torso itself is unusually attractive if we look at it separately, i.e. without or independent of the hair. But as it stands in the painting, the same torso constitutes one of the most horrendous things we can think of in the generally bizarre and shocking world of modern painting. It becomes the object of unaccountably intense abhorrence and disgust. How can one explain this strange and unfortunate transformation of this "delectable" female body into a nightmarish abomination that makes us shudder?

The black magic here is achieved through the extrapolation of the torso from its normal position on the body: it is a mutilated piece of flesh that insults us with its bawdy grin; it has lost its face (which we suppose must have been beautiful) and its legs (we already expressed our favourable guess about them), which deprives it of vitality and identity that imbue our bodies with beauty and desirability. The title only can explain why and how this dislocation happens: according to the painter the act or experience of rape violently alienates the body from the person an individual is, and something unexpectedly monstrous happens in the process.

When we look at woman as the object and site of erotic and visual pleasure, we usually think of the torso with its breasts, waist, and the genitalia, exactly the parts that disgust and enrage us in this painting. The painting disturbs us deeply because we suddenly come to face to "face" with the fact that a female torso, however delectable it may be, does not have an inherent charm: the fascination of female body is a combined function of face, torso and legs, not that of torso alone.

This pretty torso, however, does not let us go after this initial educational harassment. She/It demurely challenges us to look at herself, a "face": the neat nipples are blindly staring at us; the shallow valley in the center running down the stomach betrays our expectation, replacing a should-have-been prominence (a nose) with a depression, jumping obscenely into the navel: the decorously taut belly scandalizes us because we don't like the long-stretched piece of flesh that seems to grin; the genitalia looks like an ugly mouth that has just sucked up something and makes us shudder with its deeply rent lower lip. The hideous distortion of the female beauty in this picture calls for some explanation, and the title seems to provide the necessary clue: the act of rape. We the viewers, along with the torso, then, lose our face, thinking of the condition of life we have created that allows a countless number of rapes and other atrocities against the female body to happen around us everyday. Without the title, the implication of the self-same image would not have been realized in our consciousness; without the torso, the rape would not have looked this outrageous.

The title of another painting, "Dangerous Relationships" (1936), apparently comes from the French classic, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) by Choderlos de Laclos, and the subject matter of the painting is accordingly and appropriately erotic: it features a well-developed and at the same time very dainty, "undraped" woman's body holding a mirror with her own or another girl's torso reflected in it. At first glance, the torso seems to be her own because that is the part the mirror is concealing and because it has the same blond, wavy hair and the same fair skin as hers: it seems only natural to assume that the image in the mirror is a reflection of her own body as it is reflected in another mirror.

But then, if that is the case, the image in the mirror should be that of a woman holding a mirror (with the image of a woman holding a mirror — with the image of a woman holding a mirror — with the image of ... ad infinitum: instead, the woman in the mirror is only hugging her own breasts and is facing the wall, not the mirror, which should have been the case. This unexpected and totally inexplicable deviance from the perceptual norm in the mirror is not the only problem in this "dangerous" painting. But before we go on to other perplexities, let us try to figure out why the painter opted for not painting what he should have painted:

If the world in the painting were a "natural" space, the same kind of space as we inhabit, the mirror should have been facing the opposite direction from the original (which is left from the viewer): the hands should have been holding a mirror rather than the breasts: we should not have been able to see the model's lovely torso: finally and most importantly, the image in the mirror should have been a *mise-en-abyme* (Stonehill 8-10), a never-ending series of images of the model holding a mirror, recapitulating itself and getting diminished in size until it dissolves itself into a vanishing point. Representing that situation must have been a real challenge for the painter if he had chosen to do so: instead, he painted a woman not holding a mirror, not reproducing her own images.

If this were the only problem, we could have composed ourselves by assuming that the mirror in her hands is reflecting somebody else who looks exactly like her, but unfortunately and very appropriately, that is not the case. The painting has other representational anomalies. Her left hand turns out to be immaterial: it is not casting a shadow as other parts of her body are. Something extraordinary is disturbing the normal relationship between objects and their reflections, both in the mirror and in the space. It is as if the model, the mirror, the wall, and the shadow had declared their own separate autonomy and decided to operate on their own terms. It is as if

different sorts of spaces were juxtaposed or synchronized by sheer accident under the disguise of could-have-been-perfectly-realist technique and initial impression of naturalness. The individual parts of the painting have the simulacrum of verisimilitude, only to form a totality that undermines the traditional epistemology and painterly language.

This enigmatic combination of entirely normal objects and images seems to have been one of the most persistent themes for Magritte: the famous series entitled, "The Empire of Lights" (1948, 1950, 1953, 1954, 1958) — featuring a nocturnal landscape under broad daylight skies — and their counterpart, "God's Drawing Room" (1958) — featuring a diurnal scene under night skies — deal with the same kind of visual paradox that balks our attempt to "naturalize" (Culler 134-60) the artistic composition according to conventionally and historically prescribed frame of reference. To a serious mind this painting can pose a rather ponderous question because it suggests the precarious nature of relationship(s) among things, which can be easily upturned, invalidated or replaced by other rivalling models of worldmaking (cf. Goodman). The metaphysical monstrosity can deepen the gloom which is already pervading our life with countless number of "natural" and conventional monstrosities: probably that is why this image of a comely maiden is called "dangerous."

This disturbance in the order of things turns out to be capable of getting worse in the next painting, "The Liberator" of 1947. The title seems obfuscating because it is not clear in the painting what or who is being liberated from what and how. It also seems unlikely that the suspicious-looking man who does not even have a face can be a liberator in any meaningful way. Intriguingly enough, he has two brothers or fellow wanderers before him: "The Healer" of 1936 and another "Healer" of the following year feature a similar figure clad in the same hat, manteau, pants and shoes as his. Maybe they are all portraits of the same man.

However, there are some subtle changes in their (his) appearance and in the surroundings among these paintings: the staff in his right hand has been changed and moved to his left hand in 1947 painting; the straw hat on his head (if he ever has a face) gets tilted backward little by little over the years between 1936 and 1947; the birds in the cage, located where his rib-cage is supposed to be, are replaced by a panel or sheet of paper with the image of a bird along with a key, a pipe and a glass. The ordinary-looking landscape in the background undergoes a similar change, ending up featuring a surreal architectural structure through which gorgeous clouds float about in the work under discussion. In sum, these three paintings are clearly interrelated and can be seen as a series of attempts of the painter to clarify a certain idea

therein. What follows is a supposition about what he possibly might have rendered in them.

The first painting features a bird cage with two doves, one in and the other outside of it: the cage doubtlessly forms the man's upper body instead of lying in front of him, because the cage is deep-set, second there is no evidence whatsoever to prove otherwise. This conjecture gets corroborated finally in the second "Healer" painting, where the hat tilted far behind and the wide-open mantle make it clear that the man does not have any face or upper body at all: he has only two arms and two legs. In "The Liberator" the cage is boldly replaced by a panel on which we find the four aforementioned Magrittean objects.

The clue to the interpretation that will be presented henceforth lies in the significance of these objects in the context of his art: the key, glass, bird and the pipe are all recurrent motifs in his paintings, especially in his "theoretical" works. Throughout his career Magritte did a series of works in which the philosophical reflections on the metaphysical status of objects and the nature of pictorial representation, as opposed to linguistic reference, are carried out.

For instance, the pipe occurs in "The Use of Words I" ("This Is Not a Pipe") (1928-9), "Metamorphosis of the Objects" (1933), "The Air and the Song" (1964), "The Shadows" (1966), and "The Two Mysteries" (1964): the bird in the "Clairvoyance" (1936), "The Principle of Uncertainty" (1944), "The Large Family" (1947): the glass in "Personal Values" (1952). It is not less remarkable that all these paintings are explicitly self-reflexive and artistically self-conscious pieces than that these objects recur with little or no modification at all in their configuration throughout his long career. This persistent recurrence of a group of objects almost exclusively in theoretical works allows us to enclose them in a "hermeneutic circle" and thereby unravel the anagrammatic encoding on the painter's part in these paintings.

Keeping these in mind, let us walk up to "The Liberator." The first object on the panel, which constitutes the liberator's upper body, is a key, which different from other three, does not recur in those "theory" paintings. A key — to what is going on in the painting. Another striking object in the painting is a bejewelled face consisting of eyes, lips, and an intricate string of rhinestone mounted on a solid base. And, although it is equally well-founded to think the face to be that of a female, considering its iconic connection with other paintings such as "The King's Museum," "The Landscape of Baucis" and "Every Day" (all from 1966), it seems safer to assume that the face belongs to a male, and possibly and hopefully to the liberator himself.

What about the other three objects, i.e. the glass, bird, and the pipe? They

are, as we have seen above, the familiar Magrittean demonstration pieces with which he expounds his Saussurean concepts of signification and representation. In other words, they are "objects," in Wittgenstein's sense (*Tractatus* 2.02-2.063; Kenny 72-74; Mounce ch. 2), that are employed to show the arbitrary and historically conditioned nature of the connection in a "logical form" (Kenny 57; Mounce 17-19, 27-29) which describes or corresponds to a particular state of affairs. In Magritte's world the logical forms usually face a serious challenge because of his techniques such as isolation, modification, hybridization, and they embody the precarious nature of the tie among elements in that situation.

Seen from this perspective, it is no wonder that the liberator's face is enjoying a tranquil holiday apart from his body, while his upper body itself is relieved from its usual post by a demonstration panel. The logical form of a man is violently disturbed and severed from its representational equivalent. This crisis somehow liberates the objects from their "logical" (meaning *status quo* in Wittgenstein) contexts. Then why not clouds in the sky? And of course that is what happens behind the liberator. The surreal architectural structure can be anything: a building, the sky, or a painting of a building in that already profoundly arbitrary and topsy-turby universe. However, even the chaos is regulated by logic, in this case, by an intertextual clue found in an undated painting, "The Unmasked Universe," and "The Progress of Summer" (1938).

In those paintings the sky consists of a group of box-like structures painted sky-blue, and the clouds peacefully wander around them. Part of the earth is also seen to be "boxed up," that is, they look capable of being divided and piled up, which of course is contrary to our basic notion about its nature, its amorphousness and undivisibility. When the sky (the atmosphere) can be compressed down to a bunch of boxes, why not the soil, the solid substance? Hence the unworldly scene we have in this painting. In "The Unmasked Universe" the heaven and earth are no less susceptible to the change of mode of being than logs, concrete, and other constructional material used in the half-finished ochre building. This explains why the clouds in "The Liberator" are all interspersed among the fantastic buildings ("space") in the background: they are liberated from the all-dissolving atmosphere, the air.

The liberation, then, takes place in many levels in spite of the deceptive simulacrum of stable, *status-quo* reality as economically suggested in the atmospheric contours of the liberator, his posture, and the ground. Every "object" has its own way, and thereby, a wholly new and totally alien universe is created: the "logical" ("existent") state of affairs loses its control over each

object and becomes defunct. Consequently, the pseudo-realist portrait of a man serves as a powerful explosive to blow up the traditional assumptions about pictorial representation as a unidirectional approximation on the part of the painting toward the object, the *Ding-an-sich*.

The title and the painting, then, become a problematic matter: if the figure in the painting is not a human agent, it is inappropriate to name "him" the liberator in our normal, ordinary linguistic practice. But then, "his" presence and the *non-sequitar* "logical conjunction" (Pratt 156) of his body with other "objects" in the painting serve as a liberating force for the viewers.

What is at stake is the familiar question in metaphysics: how to constitute a "world"? The shock we experience in front of Magritte's paintings and the fluster his titles shove us into arise from our immediate recognition that something has gone awry in that world. His images precipitate us into radically different states of affairs and the titles disturb conventional associations between a name and its referent, making the matter considerably worse. As we have seen above, his paintings challenge us with new kinds of space and/or reality and suggest the possibility of fabricating new order(s) of things. His realist style is far outweighed by his manners of arranging objects in his worlds. He knows how to make worlds and puts his intimation into colorful practice: Goodman's principles of ordering, i.e. supplementation, deletion, division, deformation and weighing or emphasis (Goodman 101) correspond to the techniques Magritte employs to arrange images in his works, with similar outcomes.

The ultimate significance of his subversion of the *status quo* cannot be stated simply, but how about the modest proposal of Goodman about this type of radical practices in general?

We do better to focus on versions rather than worlds. Of course, we want to distinguish between versions that do and those that do not refer, and to talk about the things and worlds, if any referred to: but these things and worlds and even the stuff they are made of — matter, anti-matter, mind, energy, or whatnot — are fashioned along with the things and worlds themselves. Facts, as Norwood Hanson says, are theory-laden: they are as theory-laden as we hope our theories are fact-laden (96-7).

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