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Infinite Recess: perspective and play in Magritte's *La Condition Humaine*

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> Despite the shifting abundance of detail and nuance in nature, I was able to see a landscape as if it were only a curtain placed in front of me. I became uncertain of the depths of the fields, unconvinced of the remoteness of the horizon.[1]
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> Art, as I conceive it, is resistant to psychoanalysis. It evokes the mystery without which the world would not exist, that is, the mystery one should not mistake for some sort of problem, however difficult.[2]
>
> *Rene Magritte*

1.

Rene Magritte thought of himself not so much as a painter as a philosopher – one who used the medium of images instead of words in order, as he said, to 'put reality on trial' and thereby challenge common-sense modes of thinking and perceiving.[3] Paraphrasing the artist's ideas on the deceptiveness of appearances, Suzi Gablik writes that 'Seeing is an act ... in the course of which it can happen that a subject escapes our attention. "A thing which is present can be invisible, hidden by what it shows." For example, "it is possible to see someone take off his hat in salute without seeing politeness".'[4] Through odd juxtapositions of everyday objects, Magritte's paintings give an insight into their true nature, ordinarily hidden from view – or camouflaged – by their very everydayness.

While he worked in the medium of images rather than words, many of Magritte's most philosophical images explore the interrelationships of images and words, and of words and things, in a direct way. Michel Foucault examined this side of his work in an essay on the painter's famous *The Treachery of Images* ('*This is not a pipe*').[5] And various critics, like Gablik and Jean Clair, have pointed out numerous striking similarities between Magritte's paintings and the contemporaneous writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein.[6] Wittgenstein argued that the muddles in our thinking about mind arise from a sort of doubling, whereby every outward action is felt to have an inward analogue; the error of infinite regress comes from mistaking different ways of talking about our experience for distinct

actions occurring in separate locations in reality. To avoid such mistakes, the philosopher suggested that every mental process simply be substituted by the worldly activity that corresponds to it – imagining is just another form of painting a picture, thinking is just another form of talking, and so on.

While it may be that they never encountered each other's work, the language philosopher and the object painter clearly reached many of the same conclusions about the nature of language, and about the ambiguous location of mental acts like thinking and perceiving. In his 1933–34 lectures eventually published as *The Blue and Brown Books*, Wittgenstein wrote: 'I can say: "in my visual field I can see the image of the tree to the right of the image of the tower" or "I can see the image of the tree in the middle of the visual field." And now we are inclined to ask "and where do you see the visual field?"'[7] As Gablik observes, Magritte almost seems to have had this very question in mind when, in 1933, he painted *La Condition Humaine* (*The Human Condition*) (plate 19) – one of many works through which the painter explored the location of perception using the device of a picture which appears to match exactly the 'real' landscape behind it. Exemplifying the juxtaposition of banal objects to undercut common sense, *La Condition Humaine* shows a window, in front of which there is a simple landscape scene resting on an easel. The scene depicts a tree and path in front of a woods, and appears perfectly contiguous with the landscape visible around the painting's edges, outside the window. Consequently, the easel picture appears in many ways rather like a simple plate of glass. We know that the picture is not 'really' a plate of glass only because we cannot see the easel behind it. Also, because we view it from an oblique angle, we can see the near (right) edge of the canvas as a thin strip of white, while on the far left side it partly occludes the curtains.

In his lecture 'La Ligne de Vie II' ('Lifeline', February 1940), Magritte explained *La Condition Humaine* as follows:

> *The Human Condition* was the solution to the problem of the window. I placed in front of a window, seen from inside a room, a painting representing exactly that part of the landscape hidden from view by the painting. Therefore, the tree represented in the painting hid from view the real tree situated behind it, outside the room. The tree existed for the spectator, as it were, simultaneously in his mind, as both inside the room in the painting, and outside in the real landscape. Which is how we see the world: we see it as being outside ourselves even though it is only a mental representation of it that we experience inside ourselves. In the same way, we sometimes situate in the past a thing which is happening in the present. Time and space thus lose that unrefined meaning which is the only one daily experience takes into account.[8]

However, the problems posed by *La Condition Humaine* go far beyond the Wittgensteinian problem of the location of mind. Among the many 'obviousnesses' it puts on trial is perspective itself. Gablik writes, for instance, that it reveals the 'contradiction between three-dimensional space, which objects occupy in reality, and the two-dimensional space of the canvas used to represent it. The ambiguity in Magritte's image suggests that there is something

19 René Magritte. *La Condition Humaine*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 39 3/8 × 31 7/8 in. Washington: National Gallery of Art, Gift of the Collectors Committee. © 2001 C. Herscovici, Brussels/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph © Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

irreconcilable in the confrontation between real space and spatial illusion.'[9] It is necessary to ask, though: What exactly is the nature of this ambiguity, or this irreconcilability? On one level, the painting seems almost contrived to do the opposite of presenting us with an irreconcilability – rather, it seems to show a perfect harmony of representation and represented, such that the picture comes

close to disappearing, thereby approaching the Renaissance perspectivists' goal of creating a spatial illusion so perfect that it could be mistaken for real space. Moreover *La Condition Humaine* has none of the impossible juxtapositions, bizarre or incongruous objects, or inversions of scale that are found in so many of Magritte's other works. Yet the effect of this banal landscape painting in front of the 'real' landscape it represents is undeniably uncanny. It is this uncanniness I would like to reflect on in the following pages, because existing commentaries on the work, including Magritte's own, fail fully to elucidate the important 'how' of the artist's interrogation of reality, and particularly the 'how' of his critique of perspective.

After closely examining certain of *La Condition Humaine*'s perspectival conundrums, I will argue that an equally helpful interpretive framework to that of Wittgenstein may be that of psychoanalysis, and particularly the object-relations theory of D.W. Winnicott. While psychoanalytic themes suggest themselves quite obviously in many surrealist images, and while certain Freudian notions like castration and fetish have already been applied to Magritte's works (to the painter's own chagrin), I suggest that his unique application of 'object-philosophy' to problems of spatial depth and its representation in art suggests a way of thinking about perspective as a question of object-relating, the simultaneous search for autonomy and ontological security through play. Through psychoanalysing Magritte's paintings in a manner that departs from the authoritive and simplistic psychoanalytic pronouncements on meaning that the painter found so objectionable, I hope to turn Magritte into an ally in the project of psychoanalysing perspective itself, re-examining certain debates in art history over the nature of perspective, illusion and the sublime, from the standpoint of the preservation, as opposed to the destruction, of mystery.

2.

La Condition Humaine is not the first work in which Magritte experimented with a canvas that apparently reveals precisely what it conceals: his 1931 *La Belle Captive*, in which an easel picture standing in a field shows/hides a village behind it, is probably the earliest use of this device.[10] But by situating the painting within a room that yet looks out onto nature, *La Condition Humaine* reveals the full extent of what is at stake with this trope of visibility-in-concealment. Not only does it firmly establish the perspective illusion at the site of perception, as a kind of sentinel guarding the barrier between 'internal' and 'external' reality; it also quite overtly calls to mind Alberti's famous metaphor of the picture plane as a window.[11]

In perspective, the picture surface is to be imagined as a piece of glass onto which the painter has exactly traced what he sees through it. The picture is thus equivalent to an exact cross section of a pyramid of light rays converging from a piece of visible reality to the painter's stationary eye.[12] While theoretically the artist may rely solely on geometry to construct a perspectivally correct scene, practically speaking it is the fixity (as well as monocularity) of his eye that is key: just as rays of light passing through a camera aperture will only project onto the

film an exact (though inverted) image when the camera is motionless, so the artist's eye must not deviate from a single position relative to its object if he is to capture the disposition of lines and angles with absolute precision. For this reason, perspective pictures have an ideal 'station point' where, in theory at least, the viewer, too, should stand in order maximally to experience the depth illusion the artist has created.

Sometime in the early fifteenth century Filippo Brunelleschi made viewers of his first perspective demonstration look at a panel of Florence's Baptistry through a peephole. To be more precise, the peephole was drilled through the panel, in the exact spot of the vanishing point, and the viewer looked through this hole from the back, at a mirror held up in front to reflect the view. This, what Hubert Damisch calls the 'mirror stage of painting', firmly established the correspondence between the vanishing point and the point of view, both of which were singular.[13] For subsequent theorists, such as Leonardo, the perspective illusion was thought to depend utterly on the singularity and fixity of the point of view – thus despite the fact that 'many [men's] eyes endeavour at the same time to see one and the same picture produced by this artifice, only one can see clearly the effect of this perspective, and all others will see confusion.'[14]

Strictly speaking, Leonardo was incorrect. As Gombrich has pointed out, and as we may know from our experience in movie theatres, perspective renderings can be viewed slightly obliquely without detriment to the three-dimensional illusion.[15] However, if we regard perspective as a signifying system (within the larger 'language' of European painting), there is a degree of truth to Leonardo's claim. Perspective is predicated upon the *idea* of a single, fixed point of view – which becomes, as it were, the cipher in the perspective code, the single fact upon which the correct interpretation of a depth rendering rests.[16] This dependence of perspective on the notional singular, solitary viewer had, and continues to have, enormous implications for Western culture and the 'centring of the subject'. By relating the whole of the visible world to a single point, perspective provided a model of individuality, and of the transformation between the objective and the subjective. This was the main theme of Panofsky's pathbreaking 1927 essay *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, the touchstone for numerous more recent attempts to philosophize perspective, or to link it historically to modern, bourgeois ideology.[17] Louis Althusser considered ideology to rest on the capacity of language to 'interpellate' persons into subjects through the deictic address 'You there!'; since perspective 'addresses' the spectator at a fixed spot, one could make the argument that it silently interpellates the spectator into an individual viewing subject.[18]

The theoretical if not actual dependence of the depth illusion on occupying the 'true point of sight' occupied originally by the artist has been a recurring theme in perspective discourse from Alberti and Leonardo right to the present day, and continues to be a bone of contention in the debate between realist and nominalist art historians.[19] Although perspective painters after Brunelleschi have seldom actually made viewers look at their works through peepholes, the device has remained a favourite tool of perceptual psychologists to test the rigours and limits of vision. When vision is restricted, many of our standard means of determining an object's size, shape and orientation are eliminated – namely parallax and the

ability to move up close to an object, all of which are normal for everyday seeing. It is in such circumstances that the role of schemata and expectation – i.e., the 'beholder's share' in perception – can be tested. One famous study by Adalbert Ames, cited by Gombrich in *Art and Illusion*, showed how the limitation of visual information via peephole induces a precipitous haste to situate the percept in relation to oneself, thereby overcoming ambiguity. Gombrich's description of this experiment is rich with implications, particularly for those who see in perspective a sort of perfect model of 'ideology':

> Ames has made use of this interdependence of knowledge and the estimation of distance by making his subjects look through a peephole at the enlarged or diminished images of familiar objects, such as wrist watches or playing cards. The expected reactions happened: the large wrist watch was judged to be of normal size but nearer; the diminutive one was estimated to be farther away than it really was. What is interesting in this experience is not that one is easily deceived, but that even an awareness of the ambiguity will not prevent one from making a guess. On the contrary, the habit, or compulsion, of jumping to a conclusion will always have the better of us when we look through a peephole. We will always see an object at a distance, never an appearance of uncertain meaning. The best we can achieve is a switch from one reading to another, a trying out of various interpretations, but the demonstration confirms that ambiguity as such cannot be perceived. The disciples of Ames refer to this fact as the 'thereness-thatness' experience; to perceive means to guess at something somewhere, and this need will persist even when we are presented with some abstract configuration where we lack the guidance of previous experience.[20]

Of course, 'to perceive means to guess at something somewhere' is an interesting conclusion to draw from an experiment which is predicated not on natural vision but on the unnatural limitation of perception via a peephole. Gombrich should properly have said, '*to have extraordinary limits imposed on ordinary perception* means to guess at something somewhere.' To the extent that perception is never total or perfect, this recalcitrance of the mind to ambiguity perhaps comes into play all the time to an important degree. Yet by downplaying here the factor of the elaborate contrivance in the experimental situation, Gombrich misses perhaps one of the most significant illusionistic features of the perspectivist's art, which is the ideal if not actual limitation which flat, illusionistic perspective imposes on seeing. In the absence of a peephole, the 'constancies' nevertheless make perspective fairly robust, and the de facto inability ever to test the depth of the flat pictorial field, the inability to enter or move through it, induces the same guesswork or presumption of 'something somewhere' that a peephole can establish with a real three-dimensional space lying beyond it. In this respect, the peephole drilled through Brunelleschi's Baptistry panel was strictly redundant: the image *was itself* a kind of peephole.

The power of perspective to create 'the viewer' as a solitary subject of visual experience may issue as much or more from the discourses and practices

surrounding art and viewership as it does from paintings themselves. It has been noted, for instance by Peter de Bolla in *The Discourse of the Sublime*, that historically perspective discourse is nothing if not repetitive.[21] Repetitiousness goes along, in many cases, with tautology, and it is interesting that a degree of self-reference is likewise characteristic of attempts to describe or explain perspective. I might cite a modern example: Brian Rotman's apt formulation in his book *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*. A perspective image makes, he writes, a 'deictic declaration' – namely, 'this is how I see (or would see) some real or imagined scene from this particular spot at this particular instant in time.'[22] (One may be reminded here of Hegel, who begins his *Phenomenology of Spirit* by imagining a philosopher who declares his presence by pointing at what he sees before him, thereby grounding sense-certainty in the basic categories 'this', 'here' and 'now'.)[23] The insistent placing and re-placing of the viewing subject with respect to the picture and to the world it depicts can be thought of as 'legislating' the viewer and his movements.[24] Perspective and its discourses thus arguably help to fashion a particular mode of being-in-the-world which is distinctively modern: namely, a sovereignty constituted through spectatorship, in which the world comes to be understood, as Heidegger argued, as a picture.[25] And in perspective discourse the peephole itself, as a physical apparatus enforcing the viewer's sovereignty, has a kind of legendary status – to use Damisch's terms, it is an 'imago' in the Freudian sense.[26] This imago not only legislates but also perseverates the dyadic subject–object relation, asserting it through repetition, and blocking off from view the messy, convivial aspects of viewing pictures.[27] Even Leonardo's oft-cited mistake that a perspective picture must be viewed through a peephole in a single precise spot and that all others viewing it will see 'confusion' is based on this perseveration: one will note that his claim has the tautological structure of a taboo, designed to 'prevent the impossible' – in other words, eccentric viewers should be prevented from seeing what, according to him, they could not see anyway.

3.

The idea of the peephole, and the notion that perspective may somehow 'legislate' both our movements or even our being, provides the first clue, I think, to the inner workings of *La Condition Humaine*. The fact that we view the easel picture only from the point of view we do indeed occupy may induce in the viewer a sense of frustration – rather akin, indeed, to being forced to see something through a small peephole in a fixed spot. Many of Magritte's 'impossible' views are just the sort of thing that might also be realized three-dimensionally in one of Ames's experiments, using special rooms and other tricks to produce a realistic appearance of what is actually a very abnormal or distorted situation. A likely kinaesthetic response in this case is the urge to move to one side in order to see 'behind' the easel picture, a desire perpetually thwarted by the two-dimensionality of the painting as a whole, which effectively enforces the 'true point of sight'. We are forced to infer, because we cannot confirm it, that from any other point of

view than the precise one taken, there would be no 'illusion' and thus the work would be nothing special – just a picture of a picture.

This effect can only be described through repetition: *only as it exactly is does the easel picture show us exactly the part of the scene we would see, from the spot where we are, if the easel picture was not there to block our view*. Or: *only as it exactly is is the landscape hidden by the easel picture perfectly shown in the easel picture, such that there is no apparent discontinuity in our visual field*. (In some ways *La Condition Humaine* echoes Brunelleschi's original demonstration of perspective – whereby, through the restriction of vision through a peephole, viewers were induced to see, as his biographer Manetti famously put it, 'truth itself'.[28] And, as its illusion is verified specifically by matching/covering the reality behind it, Magritte's easel picture also resembles Brunelleschi's second perspective demonstration, a panel of Florence's Palazzo della Signoria which was cut out along the top to match the skyline exactly as seen from the spot where the artist painted the panel.[29])

By turning the painting as a whole into a peephole, Magritte manages to illustrate something that is really true of all perspectival images, which is that they represent the very *point* of view, and distribute it, as it were, over the whole surface of the canvas. A picture undertaken according to the rules of perspective is a device to take a singular point of view, a particular bundle of light rays, and make it available simultaneously to different viewers – a fact that is obscured by the historical insistence upon the solitude of the perfect observer. Looking at *La Condition Humaine*, we are not only looking at a scene, we are looking at the point of view taken onto the scene – in effect, we are looking at an approximation of a hypothetical individual's (the artist's) *visual field*, as he stands in a fixed spot, with his eye pressed up against a rectangular opening. Magritte's painting enables us to stand back from this visual field, and to see it within a larger visual field, thereby playing at the infinite regress that bothered and fascinated Wittgenstein.

There is another added strangeness about the easel picture in terms of its perspective. For the easel picture's illusion to work, we must, as I said, occupy the point of view which we do in fact occupy, and *this point is offset to the right of centre*. In a manner not unlike the anamorphic skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, albeit to a much lesser extent, Magritte's painted landscape appears exactly 'correct' only from a certain oblique angle. If the easel picture were, hypothetically, to be turned and seen straight-on, the painted landscape would (we might infer) appear stretched out slightly side to side. Although the broadening of the objects in this case would perhaps be small enough that the tree and path could still appear realistic (since, paraphrasing Gombrich, 'there are such trees, and such paths'),[30] it would no longer match the 'real' landscape behind it. This apparent anamorphosis contributes significantly to the uncanniness of Magritte's painting, and lends weight to its critique of perspective. While anamorphic pictures are eminently possible, they can only be accomplished through elaborate planning, calculation and considerably greater preparatory work than that entailed by ordinary perspective. The very claim that the condition of the easel picture is that of containing within itself the reality outside, and that we mistake the one for the other, can only be made by eliding not only the rigorous expectations of the system – i.e., fixed point in space, motionlessness and

so forth – but also the elaborate, calculated set-up and contrivance through which its anamorphic trickery has been accomplished (pretending, as the viewer likely will, that Magritte actually sat and painted the scene 'from life').

By subtly making us aware of the dependence of illusion on elaborate contrivance, *La Condition Humaine* shows us the dream of a picture actually mirroring reality so accurately that its own material presence is effectively obviated, while in the same stroke revealing just how precarious or contrived this dream actually is, the monumental artifice required to sustain it or the rather far-fetched conditions under which it is possible. On one level, 'the human condition' could thus be taken to refer to what Norman Bryson calls 'the natural attitude', the naïve realist view of representation as potentially a mirror onto reality, the pictorial equivalent of the 'transparency of language' that Magritte so effectively undercuts with his famous pipes.[31] Specifically, *La Condition Humaine* presents the natural attitude precisely as it appears to a sophisticated nominalist: i.e., as blind faith in what is in fact a deceptively convoluted illusionistic construct, achieved in part by making the viewing subject stand in a certain, precise spot, seeing a scene laid out with a great deal of advance preparation for his highly restricted, *unfree* gaze. We must see the easel picture the way we *do* see it – history is transformed into Nature before our very eyes, and thus illusion is revealed as illusion*ism*, a question of power.[32]

There could be no better demonstration of this power, nor better proof of how the restriction of viewership induces jumping to conclusions about 'truth itself' (or about 'thereness-thatness'), than the painter's own description of what his easel picture 'obviously' depicts – 'exactly that portion of the landscape hidden by the painting'. Because *La Condition Humaine prohibits verification*, because we cannot in fact see 'behind' the easel picture, the content of the easel picture can only be an article of faith. The 'real', occluded landscape *could* be completely different from the one that the absent artist has painted: there might be no 'actual' tree, for instance, or there might 'really' be a building there that has been left out of the picture. There could 'actually' be a person standing there, or the 'real' path might suddenly deviate or come to an end. Innumerable details could be different, but because there are no clues to a deception having occurred, we are already persuaded from the start that the easel picture represents, as Magritte says, the precise part of the landscape that it happens to hide from view. Magritte is not simply being ironic when he describes it thus, since his 'Wittgensteinean' interpretation – that the painting shows how the perceived world is both external and internal to the mind – rests on the idea of a real landscape beyond the window which the landscape in the painting perfectly matches. 'One may suppose', he conceded in a 1934 letter to Andre Breton, 'that behind the picture the scene is different from what one sees, but the main thing was to eliminate the difference between a view seen from outside and from inside a room.'[33] But there is no way for him to render his argument visually – no way for him to, as he says, 'eliminate difference' – without there being a degree of ambiguity, the lingering possibility that it could just as easily be otherwise.

In other words, the easel picture must of necessity conceal something. Under the system of linear perspective, which Magritte willingly adopts (if only for the sake of critique), something is necessarily hidden from our view by any object.

And if the landscape is hidden, then it could possibly be different from the picture. The sameness or difference of the 'real' landscape behind the easel picture is of decisive importance, and it may be in the painter's (and the viewer's) urge to 'eliminate difference' that the uncanny power of *La Condition Humaine*, and indeed much of the power of perspective itself, is to be found.

4.

On one level, by inspiring a critique of infinite regress à la Wittgenstein, *La Condition Humaine* is certainly effective as philosophical inquiry or even as a 'solution' to a philosophical problem – i.e., by showing the unity underlying the apparent duality of mind and world. But we are faced with an important choice at this juncture as to which Magritte we are to believe. Are we to believe the Magritte who stated that *La Condition Humaine* explored, or solved, 'the *problem* of the window'? Or are we to believe the Magritte who wrote that art 'evokes the mystery without which the world would not exist, that is, the mystery one should not mistake for some sort of problem, however difficult'?[34]

The painter's famous resistance to psychoanalysis was based on the apparent haste of that profession to assign meanings to things such as paintings, and thereby solve them, coldly, in the manner of problems, rather than allowing mystery to flourish in the space they present to the eye and to the mind. 'Nobody in his right mind believes that psychoanalysis could elucidate the mystery of the universe,' Magritte writes, because 'The very nature of the mystery annihilates curiosity.'[35] But as we have seen, at the easel picture there is, on the part of Magritte as well as later writers, precisely such a blockage, a cutting-short of curiosity. It induces us to jump to a conclusion about what is already behind the picture, perhaps absolving us of the responsibility to inquire into that hidden/obscured space. We are told, and indeed readily tell ourselves when first setting eyes on it, that what is behind the picture is just the same as what we already see in the picture. It seems to say (or, hypnotically to suggest), 'pay no attention to that man behind the curtain' – and our immediate impulse is to obey.

It is reasonable to ask if there could be something more than the mind's resistance to ambiguity at work in our (and Magritte's) assumption that *La Condition Humaine* contains a 'real' landscape identical to – but hidden by – the one in the easel picture. Specifically, we are forced to consider the problem – in another context explicitly rejected by Magritte – of fetishism and its origins in castration. In Freudian thinking a fetish has an aetiology in the traumatic discovery of the mother's or girl's lack of a penis. '[T]he last impression received before the uncanny traumatic one is preserved as a fetish,'[36] Freud writes – hence the tendency of fetishists to cathect undergarments and shoes which represent 'the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic'.[37] Other of Magritte's paintings have been interpreted in these terms. Writing to his friends Louis Scutenaire and Irene Hamoir in 1937, Magritte described an evening with two London psychoanalysts who authoritively pronounced upon the shoe-feet in his painting *Le Modèle Rouge* (*The Red Model*) as 'a case of castration'. 'You will see from this,' he wrote, 'how it is all becoming very simple. Also, after several

interpretations of this kind, I made them a real psychoanalytical drawing ... Of course, they analyzed these pictures with the same coldness. Just between ourselves, it is terrifying to see what one is exposed to in making an innocent picture.'[38] Derrida cites this episode as a parallel to Heidegger's overhasty interpretation of Van Gogh's *Pair of Shoes* as belonging to 'a peasant woman', in his controversial essay 'The Origins of the Work of Art'. The 'silence' of the shoe-feet in Magritte's painting, Derrida writes, 'makes the expert speak, and he will not take long to say, like Heidegger speaking of Van Gogh's picture: "it has spoken." '[39]

Without, hopefully, speaking too precipitously on behalf of Magritte's easel picture, let me suggest that it does cut at least two things short: our view 'beyond the window', and, more importantly, the very act of interpretation of/in this occluded space. A certain effort of thought is required before the possibility of non-identity between painting and landscape is likely to occur to us.

In subordinating the world to the purview of the gaze, and moreover in creating the possibility of *elongation to infinity* (including the idea of the visual pyramid as a cone that so elongates), it is easy to equate seeing with male virility and power. The visual pyramid, or more exactly its mirror image in the recession of parallel lines to the vanishing point, may be regarded as a phallic penetration of space. The equation receives added negative support from Freud, who noted that castration is often symbolically transferred to the eye, in the form of blinding and threats of blindness.[40] Thus perspective, so emblematic of 'phallogocentric' power/knowledge, is not only related to male privilege in respect of the phallus and the eye but just as well to the corresponding vulnerability that ownership of these organs entails. A painting which, like Magritte's easel picture, fully satisfies the Renaissance aim of corresponding to a reality behind the picture plane also fully sections or cuts the visual pyramid. It is not to be too easily dismissed that our presumption of a continuation-to-infinity beyond the picture plane may on one level constitute a defence against the cutting-short of reality that is, at the same time, wrought by the picture plane itself. (The link between perspective, the phallus and castration was directly explored by Salvador Dali in a couple of works from the same year as *La Condition Humaine*: namely the painting *Myself at the Age of Ten when I was the Grasshopper Child – [Castration Complex]* and the etching *Enfant sauterelle [Grasshopper Child]*.[41])

But the simple equation of perspective with the phallus, and thus the reduction of the uncanniness of *La Condition Humaine* to castration-anxiety ('just like that,' as Derrida might say) is, while suggestive, not altogether satisfying. Seeing perspective as a defence against cutting-short of vision wrought by the picture plane fails to explain the persistence of the picture as object, and thus cannot account for our desire for the obstruction in the continuity of the visible world that it constitutes. Indeed one is inclined to ask if castration itself (as explored, for instance, in Dali's work), may itself be symbolic of some more profound anxiety or ambivalence than the simple loss of the male member.

Whereas in Freudian analysis the fetish is an object that preserves or suspends knowledge of a fairly concrete lack, in later psychoanalytic thinking the object may assume considerably more ambiguous and also universal proportions. In this respect we may wish first of all to apply to *La Condition Humaine* the notion of

'sublime object', as described in the work of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek. A sublime object is one whose various abstract meanings obscure the traumatic impact of its material presence – a presence which stands in the way of nothingness or nonbeing. Consequently such objects, as materialized symptoms, provide, Žižek writes, a sort of answer to the eternal philosophical question 'Why is there something and not nothing?'[42] They give a something in the place of a nothing, or indeed help place nothingness itself under the sign of negation. A few critics, such as John Berger, have pointed out the possibility – or indeed, the banal but important reality – that there is in fact *nothing* behind the easel picture in Magritte's 'window' series: 'Is it possible/impossible', he asks, 'that when the canvas moves, we shall see that behind where it originally was *there is no landscape at all:* nothing, a free blank?'[43] Clair likewise feels compelled to assert the essential two-dimensionality of *La Condition Humaine* and its variants, by likening them to perspectival *intarsia* or *marquetry* – pictorial depth is really a two-dimensional puzzle, he argues, and by 'fitting' so well into its own space, Magritte's easel picture reacquaints us with the flatness of the picture plane that perspective ordinarily negates.[44] We might return here momentarily to Wittgenstein, who in his *Philosophical Investigations* provides an interesting parallel for this deconstruction of the apparent depth of the world, with his parody of the 'useless' notion of self-identity:

> 'A thing is identical with itself.' – there is no finer example of a useless proposition, which yet is connected with a certain play of the imagination. It is as if in imagination we put a thing into its own shape and saw that it fitted.
>
> We might also say: 'Every thing fits into itself.' Or again: 'Every thing fits into its own shape.' At the same time we look at a thing and imagine that there was a blank left for it, and that now it fits into it exactly.
>
> Does this spot • '*fit*' into its white surrounding? – *But that is just how it would look* if there had at first been a hole in its place and then it fitted into the hole.'[45]

The notion of a nothingness lurking just out of our view, hidden by the mundane presence of an object, is an essentially paranoid idea, and thus the 'sublimity' of perspective is profitably considered in light of its symbolic relation to nothingness, nonbeing and death. Magritte explicitly used perspective to figure death and death to figure perspective – his *Perspective* series consists of portrait-like images of coffins, standing, sitting, or reclining, in some cases in poses that suggest famous paintings like Manet's *Olympia*. These pictures perhaps belong to a tradition going back to the sixteenth century, in which perspective has been used in various ways to signify a nexus of inauspicious and frightening 'human conditions' such as madness, melancholia and mortality.[46] Holbein with his anamorphic skull and Dali with his perspectivally elongated ones both belong to this tradition of linking deep, receding space and the arcane excesses of the perspectivist's art to death. Modern filmmakers, such as Hitchcock and Kubrick,

have likewise used exaggerated spatial depth to signify madness and to create a mood of fear and suspense in their works.

But while there may be a paranoid dimension to Magritte, it is necessary to explain not only what we may find uncanny in his works, but also, at the same time, the source of their appeal. Despite the anxiety or unease that Magritte's paintings sometimes, or to some degree, provoke, they often have a distinctly nostalgic, childlike quality as well, inspiring a kind of love and longing. Foucault saw in Magritte's word-pictures a kind of elementary didacticism – i.e., 'object lessons' that transpire in a schoolroom. One could add that many of his landscapes, such as the one in *La Condition Humaine*, appear in many ways rather like the views one might see out of a schoolroom window, while daydreaming. His houses-inside-trees, in the early evening, or his blue skies dotted with clouds, likewise recall some childhood summer that never existed. Magritte himself said that a decisive moment in his life was when, as a youngster, he emerged from the tunnels underneath a cemetery and saw a painter at work.[47] Somehow his landscapes, quite apart from their philosophical critique, also carry us back to such a place and time, and create a world in which we are invited not only to think, but also, simply, to play.

I would therefore suggest that we might profitably see Magritte's constant returning to favourite, mundane objects (jingle bells, etc.), and his experiments with space and scale, as a form, not of sitting-and-learning, but more exactly of sitting-and-*playing* – specifically, playing with what D.W. Winnicott called 'transitional objects'.[48] Transitional objects are not themselves toys – they are mundane objects found lying around in the environment, which the child takes and uses as playthings in various open-ended ways, imbuing them in the process with new meaning. As props in the drama of separation and individuation, transitional objects help a child produce its own autonomy and gain mastery over solitude, particularly through their symbolic destruction and then rediscovery. Freud's '*fort/da*' game, in which a child plays 'gone' and 'there' with a spool, is perhaps the most famous example of what Winnicott would later call transitional phenomena.[49]

The ambiguous dual character of objects in such play is that they both unite the child to the mother and also signify a separation, rather in the same way that an ocean both unites and separates continents – i.e., how you see it depends on your point of view, your perspective. It can be useful to apply the notion of transitionality to art, where not only do otherwise mundane objects assume enormous importance as subjects for representation, but where the most exemplary and compelling features of paintings are often elements which have the indeterminate, 'there/not there' quality of a child's plaything. The Mona Lisa's smile is one example, as is the famous Duck/Rabbit discussed by Gombrich (and before him Freud and Wittgenstein). Both seem to flip-flop between multiple interpretations, or between presence and absence. Any particular claim (such as 'It *is* a smile' or 'It's a rabbit and not a duck') effectively destroys this neither/nor quality, whereas effective playing – and, by extension, wisdom – means acceptance of paradox, holding contradictory ideas simultaneously.

Thwarting interpretation – making definitive statements on meaning impossible – was Magritte's goal with his art, where we might say that transitionality is

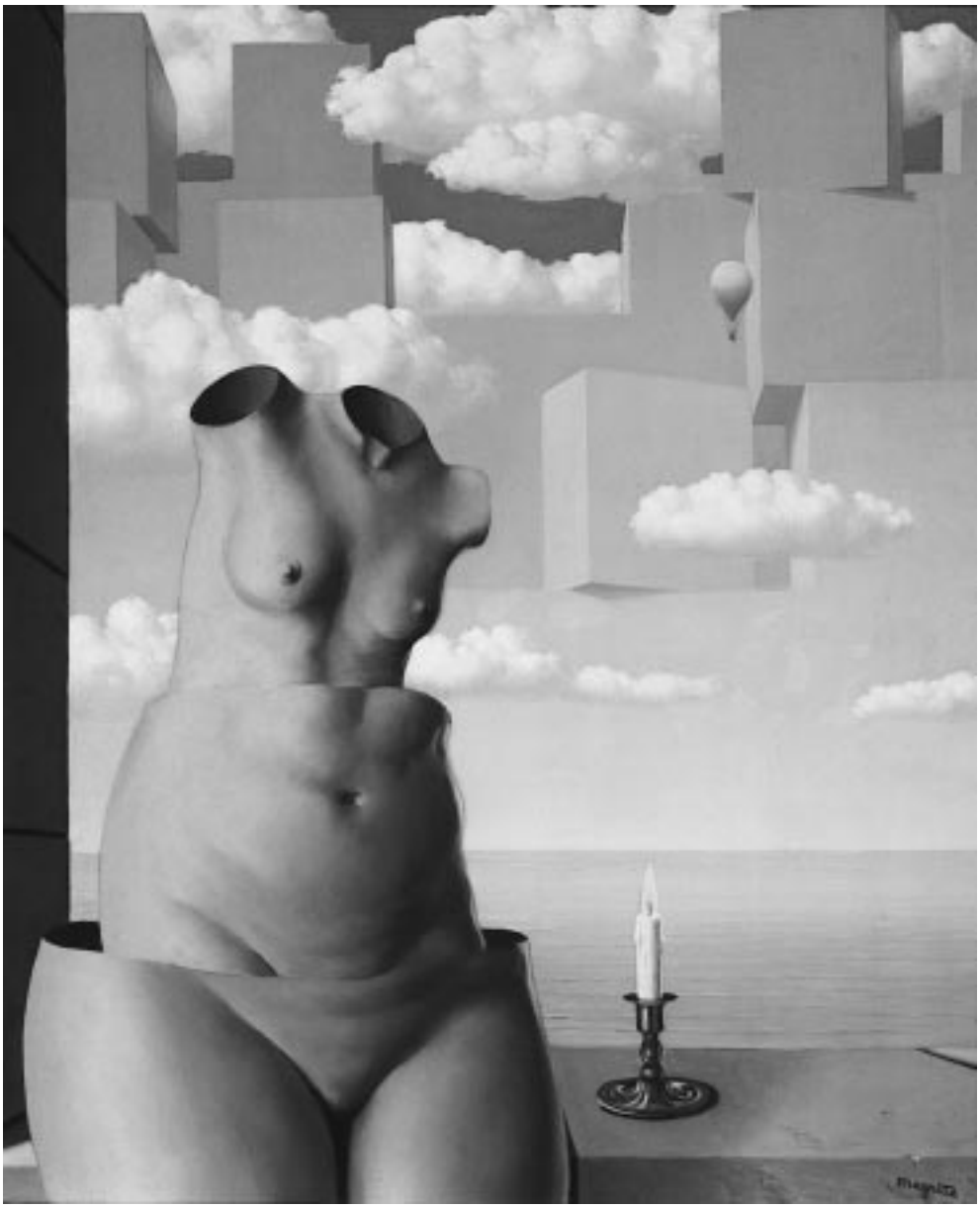
raised to the level of philosophical method. He interrogates being by playing imaginatively with found objects' loss or destruction, thereby raising them to the level of a question that is never intended to be finally answered. And it is in this painter's work that we may begin to see how perspective itself, that ambiguous formation lying somewhere between nature and art, which is neither exactly found (as objectivists have claimed) nor simply made (as nominalists like Goodman contend), is itself a kind of transitional phenomenon serving an important role of mediating both our being in the world as well as our separation from it.

5.

An important feature of Magritte's daydream world, and one that arguably contributes significantly to its 'childlike' appeal, is the apparent closeness of the horizon. The world as Magritte paints it is rather like an enormous room – his 1931 *La Géante* (*The Giantess*), based on a Baudelaire poem, presents this notion quite literally, with the nude Georgette towering over a tiny man in the foreground of a large bedroom, his back turned away from us. As Clair observes, many of Magritte's landscapes and cloudscapes appear as stage backdrops, like effects of a discernibly finite space that is painted or decorated to look infinite.[50] Perhaps the best example of Magritte's 'enormous room' world would be his 1948 *La Folie des Grandeurs II* (*Delusions of Grandeur*) (plate 20), with its sky composed of building blocks. I would suggest that it is in terms of transitional phenomena that we should understand this paradoxical, enclosed-yet-vast character of space as Magritte renders it, not to mention his expressed ambivalence about landscape – i.e., his assertion that he 'became unconvinced' of the distances of the horizon or the fields, or that they seemed to him like no more than a painted backdrop.

To build a sky of blocks, or to express doubt about the 'depths of the fields', is to express a nostalgia for a pre-rational or pre-modern way of life, identified either with childhood or else with a remote historical past. Perspective is historically linked to the rationalization of space and to the rise of modern science, and Magritte, as we have seen, intensely disliked rationalism – which he saw as obstructing 'mystery' through its fearful, crutch-like reliance on measurable facts. In a 1959 letter to Harry Torczyner, Magritte writes of the 'clumsiness – or unintelligence rather – which reduces the large to the small, the unknown to the known, according to a habit that is the contrary of any true activity of the Mind' –

> the public's interest in the current projects for exploring the Moon is in line with this habit of reduction and confusion: people want to reduce mystery to something knowable, and they confuse the *familiar* feeling they have for things about which they are ignorant (for example, the mystery as to the precise number of fleas on the youngest lion in the jungle, or a comprehensive 'lunography') with the *nonfamiliar* feeling of mystery (the mystery of smoking a pipe in a pleasant room).[51]



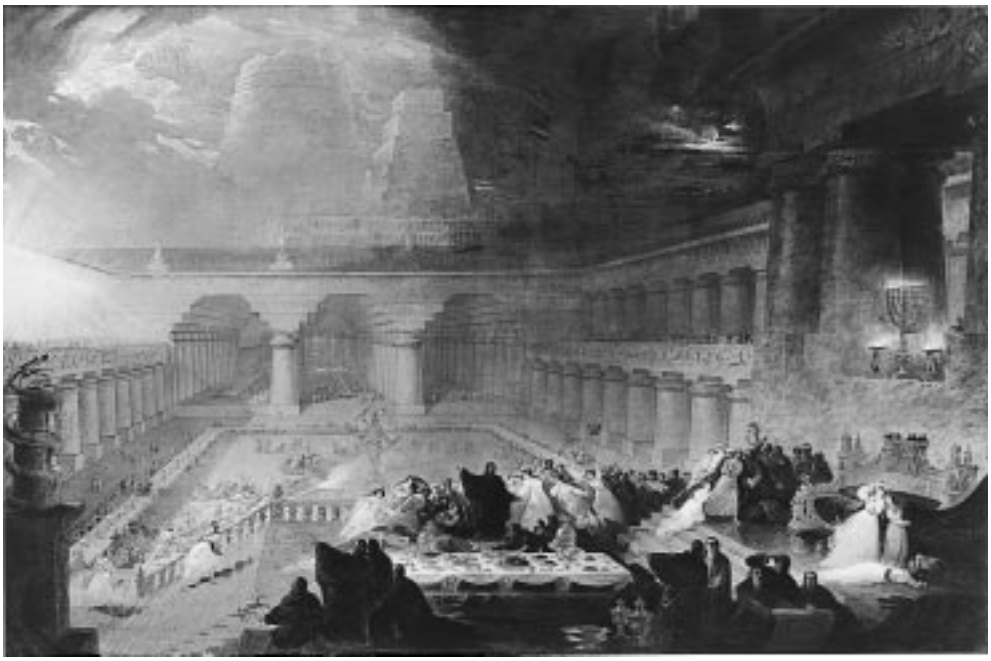
20 René Magritte, *La Folie des Grandeurs II*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 39 1/8 × 32 1/8 in. Washington: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966. © 2001 C. Herscovici, Brussels/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Lee Stalsworth.

It is crucial to distinguish, of course, between the reduction of the unknown to the known – i.e., for the sake of overcoming mystery and ensconcing ourselves with familiar facts – and the reduction of the infinite extension of rationally knowable spacetime to a horizon which renders the beyond fundamentally unknowable, thereby preserving mystery. Magritte's desire to preserve mystery is

closely related to Heidegger's nostalgia for authentic being, constituted as it is through the assertion of a human existence lived within some definite, perceptible horizon. Indeed 'mystery' is in many ways a form of what phenomenologists call 'ontological security' – an emotional, non-rational trust in 'being', which suspends or forestalls inquiry into the unknowable space beyond the visible.[52] Ontological security is maintained – and mystery preserved – the more magical thinking and guesswork, and not direct, empirical knowledge, enters into our perceptions. As I said, it is specifically when our vision is limited by a peephole or a horizon that we, to use Gombrich's phrase, 'guess at something, somewhere'.

But the nostalgic fantasy of limited perception is, of course, to have the cake of security and to eat it too, by also simultaneously having a sense of infinite possibility or openness afforded by a vista or a window. Modernity (or maturity) confers power-in-knowledge, but insists pedantically on the distinction between the possible and the impossible. Magritte's ontologically secure vistas, in contrast, strike an 'impossible' compromise between two human needs with respect to space – to hide in order to preserve mystery and wonder, as well as to seek and explore, and even to solve problems. *La Folie des Grandeurs II*, for instance, expresses this dream of refuge while also giving an impression of vast prospects provided by deep skies, distant horizons, and a far-off hot-air balloon.[53] Ontological security is indeed a kind of paradoxical feeling of 'grandeur', of sovereignty over the world, having uninterrupted access to its original plenitude, and being supremely important or powerful while also, at the same time, being safe. A picture on an easel that shows us what is behind it on the one hand seduces or 'lures' us – induces us to leap imaginatively into the 'somewhere' that lies beyond it – while at the same time it affords a kind of security, not unlike a crossing guard. It blocks access to the peril of an unknown, which itself, by being a barrier, it constitutes. Such a condition of security and power resembles, of course, the original state of plenitude enjoyed by an infant with constant access to the mother's breast – a fact which may illuminate Magritte's linkage of enormous rooms and building-block skies to the female body: the ziggurat-like diminishment of the torso in the *La Folie des Grandeurs* series, for instance, could be interpreted as a compromise between an elevated or superior vantage point and the proportions of the female form as they would appear, from below, to a child (i.e., diminishing upward).

Because it is crucially different from real, physical safety, ontological security is connected in an interesting and counter-intuitive way with the sublime. In the absence of scientific understanding of the vicissitudes of weather, for instance, the pre-modern human admired by Heidegger, secure in a known world defined by a visible horizon, is in fact confronted, as Žižek points out, 'with unpredictable catastrophes which seem to emerge "out of nowhere" '.[54] The weather in Magritte's most 'sublime' works is often peaceful, but one could argue that his paintings, and his understanding of space and its perilousness, descend directly from the iconography of colossal, indifferent nature in landscape paintings of earlier centuries. Although the sublime was traditionally figured through tempests and cliffs, there is perhaps little difference between the perils of weather or geography and the similarly decisive existential perils of childhood (such as the mother's unpredictable



21 John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1820. Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 × 47 1/2 in, New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

comings and goings) or the relative enormity of transitional objects that have been invested with overriding symbolic significance.

Freud himself never quite made the equation with the eighteenth-century category of the sublime, or with the seventeenth-century landscapes of Poussin and Claude Lorrain that were its precursor, but his 'death drive' – explained initially through the child's *fort-da* game played in his mother's absence – is equivalent to the older aesthetic notion of the vertiginous drawnness of the subject towards its own destruction.[55] There is indeed a curious similarity between the world of a painting like *La Folie des Grandeurs II*, with its building-block sky, and one of Poussin's landscapes such as *Landscape with Polyphemus*. The colossus sitting just over the horizon, on the one hand posing a kind of distant threat, is also a kind of guardian (or indeed, shepherd) of an infinity that, by his very presence as a reference of scale, comes also to seem reassuringly small – rather, indeed, like an enormous room. Storm clouds piling to heaven like a wall give to the paintings of John Martin, such as *Belshazzar's Feast* (plate 21), a similar, enclosed-yet-vast quality, and make God's divine wrath seem cosy and inviting, like a tempest in a teapot. Likewise Kant's famous descriptions of the sublime, his gigantic pyramids viewed from afar, and his 'bold, overhanging, threatening rocks', describe not simply landscapes that would dwarf a grown man, but also a small child's experience of a more mundane terrain.[56] The aesthetic of sublimity is in many ways a nostalgia for the scale of childhood experience, and for the paradoxical, dimly remembered (or merely supposed) security-in-peril that is linked to it.[57]

6.

Panofsky's argument that Renaissance perspective was a convention, expressing the world-view of a particular culture at a particular historical period, helped to explain and justify theoretically the spatial experimentation in the art of the first half of the twentieth century.[58] The overthrow of perspective in cubism, surrealism and abstract art has been described as an attempt to liberate perception, thought and representation from a kind of conceptual cage. Gablik's own argument, for instance, is that Renaissance perspective corresponded to Piaget's 'concrete operational stage' of child development, destined to be overcome in a mature, (post-)modern art no longer slavishly bound to spatial conventions and an ideology of resemblance.[59] Art in its mature, 'formal-operational' phase can now, she argues, avail itself fully of arbitrary pictorial signifiers wholly decoupled from 'reality', and thus operate with the transformational flexibility of verbal language itself.

Because Magritte was committed to the philosophical argument against 'transparency', seeking to decouple words from things, one could see his critique of perspective partly in these terms. By revealing the exquisite contrivance entailed in any perspective illusion, *La Condition Humaine* deconstructs resemblance in a manner that Nelson Goodman would have saluted. But it would be a mistake to see any questioning of perspective – in art, history, or theory – as straightforward conceptual or cognitive liberation, without also seeing how independence from some constraining influence can only be articulated *through* that influence. Negation, as Freud argued, can only operate by first affirming what is to be repudiated.[60] The dependency of critiques of perspective upon perspective itself have been noted recently by various writers, and Magritte's critique is similarly dependent on what it critiques.[61] More importantly, the painter's resistance to the infinite depths of the horizon seems, I would argue, to be a desire not simply for the mind's liberation from common sense, but also for the security that comes from imposing limits on a panorama, limiting the recession of a space that is terrifying in its infinity. His critique of perspective is partly a resistance to a rational continuous spacetime that is symbolically linked, historically as well as in his own work, with death and nonbeing – and thus it represents a search for security as well as 'liberation'.

It may even be possible to see the symbolic form of perspective itself as reflecting not simply the will-to-knowledge of an emerging scientific world-view, but also a more primordial desire for dependence, an impulse to withdraw into a secure confinement that is both enlarged and enclosed like the environments and objects of childhood. While on the one hand perspective produces the impression of infinitely receding space and thus turns an opaque surface into a sort of window, it is also equally true that the appeal of a good perspective picture is in showing space the way a window does while at the same time being recognizably a solid, opaque object. The iconic (or, as Goodman would have it, symbolic)[62] negation of the picture's solidity effectively returns us to that solidity – like a transitional object, we see it as both there and not there at the same time. The depth illusion, and more generally the Renaissance and post-Renaissance conception of art as a portal or mirror onto reality, thus appears as a compromise formation; it asseverates a barrier to our vision while at the same time repudiating

it through a semblance of what is behind. Alberti's window thus reveals that perspective responds, first and foremost, to the condition of the wall, and exists fully within the context of our need of walls – enabling us to hide while seeking.

The notion of perspective as offering a compromise between concealment and visibility reveals precisely the thing that we may find 'nice' about *La Condition Humaine*: what else does the easel picture resemble, I would ask, but a scared chameleon, frozen on a twig, waiting for a threat to pass by? We can see it, but just barely, and may even find ourselves touched by its earnest and almost successful effort at mimicry.

'Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an *itself* that is behind,' writes Lacan.[63] In the 1935 essay that inspired this notion, Roger Caillois argues that mimicry in nature cannot simply be reduced to its defensive function, but that it represents a 'pathology' in the fundamental distinction that exists 'between an animal and its surroundings'.[64] Beginning as a kind of spell, to paralyse through fascination, mimicry ends by 'catching the sorcerer in his own trap ... [resulting in] *assimilation to the surroundings*'.[65] The human condition, Magritte seems to say, is to want not to be seen, or rather, to prefer to be identified with something other, something 'behind' one's visible self. Indeed the self-effacing, chameleon-like easel picture could be thought of as a variant of the anonymous 'bowler-hatted man' that makes an appearance in so many of Magritte's later works – somehow standing out by not standing out, and in fact resembling, Gablik argues, the retiring, quintessentially bourgeois painter himself. So on one hand, we may see in the easel picture's (or Magritte's) absence of qualities the neurotic mortification that represents the death drive at work.

But there is also something genuinely redemptive in this mimicry, and something that enables us to find in perspective not simply an ideology or a symbolic form, but also a positive ethic for living. Like a Zen monk having achieved *satori*, the easel picture has nearly rid itself of the encumbrances of personality, character, or ego. It has, as much as possible, 'gotten behind itself' or obliterated itself by pointing silently at the world beyond the window – as if to say, 'the world does not need me to exist.' The striving for this sort of enlightenment is a noble goal, arguably, though it is virtually indistinguishable from a 'pathology' or breakdown in the distinctions basic to seeing and thinking. And its worth as a goal may be unchallenged by its ultimate unattainability. Indeed, the fact that the easel picture, like the monk, still needs to be minimally present, minimally visible, in order to make a claim for its own non-existence is what makes the message and its bearer appealingly human. The easel picture seems to say (with Wittgenstein) 'Look where I am pointing; don't look at my finger', only to realize, perhaps somewhat shamefacedly, that in this very utterance the finger stands out even more vividly than it would have otherwise. Negation, the hallmark of repression, appears in Magritte's easel picture under a considerably more appealing light – as the human condition of being there, if only faintly, quietly, shyly, a minimal signifier of its own absence in the humble project of disclosing the beautiful world to view.

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Notes

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3 Gablik, op. cit., op. cit. (note 1), p. 11.
4 ibid.
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6 Gablik op. cit. (note 1); J. Clair, 'Seven Prolegomenae to a Brief Treatise on Magrittian Tropes', *October* 8, Spring 1979, pp. 89–110.
7 L. Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, New York, 1965, p. 8.
8 R. Magritte, 'The Life Line', reprinted in Gablik, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 185–6.
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15 E. Gombrich, 'The "What" and the "How": Perspective Representation and the Phenomenal World', in Rudner and Scheffler (eds), *Logic and Art: Essays in Honor of Nelson Goodman*, Indianapolis, 1972; also see M. Kubovy, *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art*, Cambridge and New York, 1986.
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17 E. Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, New York and Cambridge, 1997.
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19 On the eighteenth century notion of the 'true point of sight', see de Bolla, op. cit, (note 16), p. 195 ff.
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22 Rotman, op. cit. (note 16), p. 19.
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26 Damisch, op. cit. (note 13), p. 112.
27 ibid., pp. 131–2; de Bolla, op. cit. (note 16).
28 See Damisch, op. cit. (note 13), p. 116.
29 ibid.
30 Gombrich, 'The "What" and the "How" ', op. cit. (note 15), p. 144.
31 Bryson, op. cit. (note 16).
32 On the distinction between illusion and illusionism, see Mitchell, op. cit. (note 18), pp. 329–44.
33 Magritte, quoted in D. Sylvester, *Magritte: The Silence of the World*, Houston and New York, 1992, p. 298.
34 Magritte, quoted in Torczyner, op. cit. (note 2), p. 83.
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53 On 'prospect-refuge theory' applied to landscape painting, see J. Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape*, Chichester and London, 1996.
54 Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, op. cit. (note 52).
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58 Elkins, op. cit. (note 18).

59 S. Gablik, *Progress in Art*, London, 1976.

60 S. Freud, 'Negation', in *Collected Papers, vol. V*, op. cit. (note 36).

61 Clair, op. cit. (note 6), p. 93; see also Elkins, op. cit. (note 18); S. Melville, 'The Temptation of New Perspectives', *October* 52, Spring 1990; and Mitchell, op. cit. (note 18).

62 See N. Goodman, *Languages of Art*, Oxford and London, 1969.

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64 R. Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', *October* 31, Winter 1984, p. 17. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer of this article for drawing my attention to Caillois's remarkable essay.

65 ibid., p. 27.