

**Putting God in a Frame: The Art of Rene Magritte as Religious Encounter**

**Paper and Multimedia Presentation**

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It has been said, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” Images can possess a power more potent than any word, spoken or written. They inspire us. They motivate us. They provoke us. They make us laugh. They fill our eyes with tears. They remind us of the good times. They remind us of the difficult times. They show us places we have never been. They remind of places near and dear to our hearts. They show us things we have never seen. They comfort us with the familiar. They tell stories. They capture precious moments and preserve them so that they remain untouched by the relentless progression of time. The image, that which is seen, is unexplainably powerful.

Perhaps that is why man has been so fascinated with images. For the last two thousand, three thousand, five thousand years, humanity has engaged in the production of art, in the making of representational images. Man has sought divine guidance through images, hewn of wood, stone, silver, and gold. Humanity has sinned because of what was seen.<sup>1</sup> Deliverance has come through the viewing of images.<sup>2</sup> Images have been used to show humanity’s development, to illustrate the progress of human cultural evolution. Images have shaped public opinion and have moved the inactive to action. Images have changed our world. Images touch humanity’s soul in a way almost nothing else can.

Given this awesome power images possess, one cannot help but wonder if this human fascination with the image is the result of divine design. Did God not make us creatures who

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis 3:6 “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.”

<sup>2</sup>Numbers 21:8-9 “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.’ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then anyone who was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.”

yearn to create? Did he not plant within us the ability to perceive and appreciate beauty? Does God have a purpose in the image? Can God use the image to communicate to us? It is in the shadow of these questions that this paper seeks to examine the works of an artist who understood the power of the image; indeed his art is dependant upon the existence of such a power.

This artist is Rene Magritte. While Magritte does not enjoy the popularity and immediate name recognition of his contemporaries like Salvador Dali and Pablo Picasso, the corpus of his work is as significant as theirs, if not more so. Magritte's work investigated the question of representation and the nature of art, a question which has consumed the modern art world for the last 30 or 40 years. Magritte confronted the tension between art merely representing objects and art making a statement independent of any object. He thus anticipated subsequent trends in modern art- Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Post-modern art.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Magritte's work has enjoyed a tremendous influence upon modern advertising and thus upon popular culture. Commonplace images, such as the CBS logo and the sky background used by Microsoft (when your computer shuts down) are all original to Magritte.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while being relatively unknown in popular circles, he has nevertheless exerted a considerable influence upon American culture and upon American art. Magritte proudly stands as one of the last great European painters. It is my hope that within this study of Magritte's work, we will not only see and

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<sup>3</sup>Examples of which include Jackson Pollock's *Lavender Mist (No. 1)* (1950), Andy Warhol's *Twenty-Five Colored Marilyns* (1962) , and Mark Rothko's *Number 14* (1960) respectively.

<sup>4</sup>Example of these works being *The False Mirror* (1935) and *The Curse* (1937) respectively.

experience the power of the image, but we might also begin to correlate the power of the image with God's ultimate design.

Rene Francois-Ghislain Magritte was born on November 21, 1898 in Lessines, Belgium, to a fairly affluent family. Magritte's early life was fairly uneventful yet he may have shown some artistic promise, for at the age of twelve, Magritte began to take drawing lessons. However, in 1912, as Magritte was 14 years old, a major event occurred which would forever change the future artist's life. His mother, aged 41, for reasons never discovered, committed suicide by drowning herself in the River Sambre. Magritte and his brothers discovered their mother's body which was nude, save for her night clothes which had floated in the water and had wrapped themselves around the corpse's head, covering her face.<sup>5</sup> It must have been a horrific sight, one which caused unknown psychological trauma. The image certainly stayed with the young Magritte for allusion to it would resurface again and again in some of his later art. In *The Menaced Assassin* (1926) he painted a dead woman lying on a couch, nude save for a piece of clothing wrapped around her neck. In two works entitled *Memory*, Magritte painted a woman's blood stained head as the central figure of the painting.<sup>6</sup> In another series of works, Magritte

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<sup>5</sup>Suzi Gablik, *Magritte* ( New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 22. Magritte's life-long friend Scutenaire related the following account, as told to him by Magritte: "They searched the house in vain; then noticing footprints outside the front door and on the sidewalk, they followed them as far as the bridge over the Sambre, the river which ran through the town. The mother of the painter had thrown herself into the water and, when they recovered the body, they found her nightgown wrapped around her face. It was never known whether she had covered her eyes with it so as not to see the death she had chosen, or whether she had been veiled in that way by the swirling currents."

<sup>6</sup>There are a number of problematic issues related to the titles of Magritte's works. Magritte often used the same title for multiple works, many of which were either identical or similar in theme. Unfortunately, Magritte did not follow a set pattern to this practice. Magritte would sometimes paint multiple versions of the same basic picture within a period of days (as in

painted images whose faces are concealed beneath some type of cloth [*The Lovers* (1928), *The Lovers II* (1928), *The Invention of Life* (1927), and *The Central Story* (1928)].<sup>7</sup> Late in his career he repainted Jacques-Louis David's *Madame Recamier* (1800) and Edouard Manet's *The Balcony* (1864), yet in Magritte's works, the human figures have been replaced with coffins [*Perspective I: David's Madame Recamier* (1950) and *Perspective II: Manet's Balcony* (1950)]. Other works such as *The Ordeal of Sleep* (1960) and *Homesickness* (1940) also contain themes related to his mother's death. All of these works (and others) may have had some connection either directly or subconsciously to the traumatic death and discovery of his mother.<sup>8</sup>

In 1916, Magritte received a formal art training as he attended the Academie des Beaux Arts in Brussels for two years. Upon the completion of his training, Magritte used his artistic

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*The Lovers* (1928) and *The Lovers II* (1928)). At other times, Magritte would paint a picture and then wait years before painting another version of the picture (as in *The Curse* (1931) and *The Curse* (1937)). Some works were re-painted five or six times (*The Lost Jockey* and *The Empire of Lights*). This fact necessitates that the viewer must be mindful of the dates of each work in order to make sure the proper work is being viewed. Another complication relates to the translation of the titles. Most of Magritte's works were originally given French titles, which means the titles are sometimes translated into English differently. In addition, Magritte sometimes would give different styled works similar titles and conversely, would give similar paintings different titles (for example *The Fair Captive* (1931) is the picture of a town and *The Fair Captive* (1967) is a picture of the sky, and *The Listening Room* (1958) and *The Wrestler's Tomb* (1961) are similar pictures of large objects filling a room).

<sup>7</sup>Within this work, I am using a modified definition of a series. Generally speaking, when an artists paint a series, he or she will paint similar works together, or within a set time frame. That is not what is meant when referring to Magritte's work. As mentioned previously, Magritte very often repainted his pictures, or painted the same picture multiple times. He would produce four or five versions of he same picture, but he might do so over a stretch of twenty or thirty years. Therefore this work will use the term "series" to delineate works which are either identical or very similar in theme and image, even though they are not related chronologically.

<sup>8</sup>Various interpreters of Magritte have attempted to make his mother's suicide the center of all his art. However, Magritte himself rejected such an assessment.

abilities commercially as a carpet designer, a wall paper designer, and a graphic artist. He first began to produce paintings in 1919. Over the course of his 50 year career, he would go on to produce over 1,800 paintings, dozens of photographs, several films, and 8 bronze sculptures.

When Magritte first began to paint, there was nothing in his work to indicate that he would be a great painter. Magritte's first works were produced in the cubist style of his contemporaries, yet they lacked the tonal harmony and complexity of form found in the works of Braque and Picasso.<sup>9</sup> By 1925 Magritte was beginning to distance himself from the cubists as he produced various works which were more in keeping with the futurist school. But even in this new style, he still seemed to be struggling to define himself and his style as a painter. When some of these early works such as *Georgette* (1923), *The Bather* (1925), *The Blue Cinema* (1925), and *Primrose* (1926), are compared to each other this searching and transition can be clearly seen. There is little stylistically to indicate that these are works by the same artist. One might even argue that there is little to commend these pieces as great works of art. Magritte was still trying to define himself, to find his artistic niche. In fact, Magritte never did consider himself to be an artist. One of Magritte's friends explained

He particularly liked to refuse the name of artist, saying that he was a man who *thought*, and who communicated his thought by means of painting, as others communicated it by writing music or words. Painting represented for him a valid means of expressing, in a constantly changing light, the two or three fundamental problems with which our mind is always struggling. More particularly, it represented a permanent revolt against the commonplaces of existence.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Some of these works include *Head of a Man* (1920), *Military Tattoo* (1920), *Landscape* (1920), *Georgette at the Piano* (1923), and *Donna* (1923).

<sup>10</sup>Gablik, 9. Suzi Gablik, art critic and historian, became close friends with the Magritte family in the course of researching her book. In fact, she lived with the Magritte family for several months as she was writing her book.

This early stylistic struggle may have been related to his need to find an appropriate vehicle which would enable him to communicate his philosophical ideas.

This search for artistic identity took a step forward when Magritte stumbled upon a black and white picture of Giorgio De Chirico's work *Song of Love* (1914). De Chirico was painting in a style that would eventually be named "Surrealism" by poet, art critic, and friend of Magritte, Andre Breton. De Chirico and the surrealists, who were heavily influenced by the thinking of Sigmund Freud, attempted to paint images which they had not seen with their eyes, but rather which were derived in their subconscious. They attempted to use distorted or fictional objects to represent real things in the world. Thus surreal works are full of symbolism and are intended to convey a message to the viewer. The artwork of Magritte's contemporary and close friend Salvador Dali is a prime example of this artistic school. Dali distorted what was real in order to paint a dreamland, or a subconscious view of the world.<sup>11</sup>

After being exposed to De Chirico's work, Magritte began to experiment with this style. One of his first attempts to do so is his work *The Window* (1925). In this transitional piece, Magritte has grouped together real objects, but he has placed them in such a way that each does not properly relate to the other objects. There is a window and a curtain which looks out upon a pastoral scene and a blue sky, yet in front of that stands an outstretched hand, a small bird, and a pyramid. There seems to be no relationship between the hand, the bird, or the pyramid. Unlike a typical surrealist painting Magritte has not distorted his objects. Magritte has painted real

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<sup>11</sup>Dali's best known works being *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), *Soft Construction of Boiled Beans* (1936), and *Sleep* (1937).

objects, but he has arranged them in a surreal way. Thus the painting is surreal because of the arrangement of the objects in pictures.

This particular painting is an important work within the progression of Magritte's style, for it is a microcosm of the whole of Magritte's work. This one painting contains the major themes which would be developed in later paintings (like windows, the sky, and an anonymous person). In addition, the method used in this painting, placing real objects in an unreal juxtaposition, represents the *modus operandi* that Magritte would eventually adopt.<sup>12</sup> Magritte did produce some works which appear to be more akin to classical surrealism.<sup>13</sup> Yet even within these surrealist works, especially *The Lost Jockey* (1925) and *The Difficult Crossing* (1926), certain recurrent elements (like the curtains and windows) are beginning to appear and reappear in Magritte's work.

An important distinction between Magritte and the surrealists must be noted at this point. While his works are surreal in style, Magritte contended that they were not symbolic and they were not derived from his subconscious— this differed from the beliefs of the other surrealists.<sup>14</sup> Eventually, Magritte would resist interpreting any of his works. He explained, "One would have

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<sup>12</sup>Magritte is commonly considered to be the father of Belgian Surrealism. However, most scholars recognize that Magritte's brand of surrealism was markedly different from the Parisian surrealists and the other Belgian surrealists.

<sup>13</sup>These works include *The Lost Jockey* (1925), *The Difficult Crossing* (1926), *Left behind by the Shadow* (1926), *The Man of the Sea* (1926), and *The Forest* (1926).

<sup>14</sup>Gablik, 10-11. Magritte contended, "To equate my painting with symbolism, conscious or unconscious, is to ignore its true nature."

to be ignorant of what I paint in order to associate it with naive or learned symbolism.”<sup>15</sup> His images speak for themselves. The objects within the works do not represent something outside of themselves, they are the objects they appear to be. However, it is the way they are positioned and arranged which speaks to the viewer.

In 1926 Magritte produced the most important painting in his career up to that point, the work being entitled *The Menaced Assassin*. Within the work Magritte paints a single moment in time, yet that moment relates a narrative scene. A man, presumably a murderer, stands at a Victrola, listening to the soothing melody, cool, calm and collected, his briefcase sitting on the floor next to a chair which holds his overcoat and hat. On the other side of the room a nude, strangled female lies dead on the couch. Outside the room, two men wait on either side of the door, one with a club and the other with a net, each ready to pounce on the murderer. All the while, three observers silently watch the man as they peer into the room through the window.

The picture is a disturbing scene, a scene which is surreal, not because it is from an imaginary or subconscious world, but because it portrays something which is completely irrational and shocking. The picture does not portray beauty. It has no artistic worth. It simply shocks the viewer and raises questions in the viewer’s mind about the scene, about what has come before this moment and about what will transpire after. How can the killer be so calm? How long have the men in the window been watching? What have they seen? Will the murderer somehow escape? In a final attempt to make one more stab at our emotions, Magritte has given the painting a title which suggests that the criminal is the victim. He is the one who is menaced

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<sup>15</sup>Meuris, Jacques, *Magritte*, trans. by Michael Scuffil (Köln, Germany: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1992), 29.

and threatened. Ultimately, the picture raises more questions than it answers. The picture, and all the elements in it including the girl, the killer, the motive, the outcome, and the ultimate meaning of the picture, become an unanswerable mystery. The picture shocks the viewer, and provides no remedy to alleviate the sensation of mystery the picture has created.

*The Menaced Assassin* thus stands as a marker, as a milestone. It is one of the first works truly done in the “style of Magritte.” It effectively shocks and mystifies, and maybe even disturbs us, the viewers. Magritte himself conceded that, “Experimentation ended in 1926, and gave way to a concept of the art of painting to which I have remained faithful. . . Familiar objects have been assembled together in the portrait to obtain a sensational result.”<sup>16</sup> *The Menaced Assassin* provided Magritte with a formula which could be followed to replicate the same effect in other, different images. The works that followed portrayed unrealistic or surreal events in realistic ways, just as the Menaced assassin had.<sup>17</sup> *The Menaced Assassin* seemed to have answered the question of who the artist Magritte was.

After Magritte discovered his methodology, the use of everyday objects in unusual circumstances, he began to experiment with various motifs- painting the same idea in different ways. In order better to understand his work and to see the theological thought of Magritte, we

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<sup>16</sup>Rene Magritte, Brussels, to Maurice Rapin, 20 June 1957; quoted in Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: The True Art of Painting*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Abrams Press, 1979), 15. Magritte remained faithful to this style, with the exception of his “Renoir” and “Vache” works which were produced in 1943-4 and 1947 respectively. Within these works, Magritte’s aim was the same, but he abandoned his realistic painting. He instead adopted a painting style reminiscent of Impressionism, using short brush strokes and bright, vibrant colors to construct his images. By 1949, Magritte had returned to his former technique of realistic painting.

<sup>17</sup>Rene Magritte, Lecture given 20 November 1938 at the Musee Royal des Beaux-Arts, Antwerp; quoted in Torczyner, 121.

will examine his work within a discussion of several of these motifs. Most of these motifs existed in some form in his early work, although they were only elements in the early works. In the works of the mature Magritte, they would come to dominate the paintings.

One of the most important of these motifs is the commonplace item of the window. We see them. We walk by them on a daily basis, usually without even noticing that they are there. Windows are openings from one room to another. They are quite literally ways to view into other worlds. We seldom see them, for we instead see through them. However, the view they offer is incomplete and limited. Looking at the outdoors through a window is not the same as actually being outdoors. Windows limit the perception to just one sense, that of sight. Windows block out the smells of a coffee refinery, the sounds of cars speeding down the road, the heat, the oppressive ninety-eight percent humidity. Looking through a window is significantly different from being in the place you are looking at. In addition, because windows are usually closed, we must look through the glass. Given the angle at which we stand, the state of cleanliness, or the glare on the glass, the window itself may distort our view of the outside world. Windows limit what we can see, thus the one sense windows are intended to serve, that of sight, cannot fully function to the utmost and is thus restricted.

Magritte too was very aware of both the benefits and limitations that windows present. In many ways, the windows and their limitation are symbolic of the limitation of man's knowledge and ability to understand his world and ultimate reality. Magritte seems convinced that there is a reality outside of our current physical existence, a world beyond what we can see, touch and smell. Windows offer an opportunity to look beyond this existence, into the larger existence, or true reality. While we can make attempts to understand our larger surroundings, Magritte uses

the windows to emphasize that those attempts are limited and may be skewed. Magritte explained, “This is how we see the world. We see it outside ourselves, and at the same time we only have a representation of it in ourselves. In the same way, we sometimes situate in the past that which is happening in the present. Time and space thus lose the vulgar meaning that only daily experience takes into account.”<sup>18</sup>

This idea is best seen in a series of pictures, the first of which Magritte entitled *The Human Condition* (1933). Within this work, Magritte portrayed an easel and painted canvas which stands in front of a window. The scenery on the canvas matches perfectly with the outdoor scene. In the middle of the canvas stands a large tree. Of course we, the viewers, do not know if such a tree exists in the artist’s yard because our view is obstructed by the canvas. Thus by illustrating the limitations of seeing the world through a window, Magritte questions our ability to perceive true reality.<sup>19</sup>

Magritte’s painting is a microcosm of every artist’s work. On canvas, she records what she sees in his world, and the viewer’s only view of that world is the one presented to him on the canvas. Thus Magritte is illustrating the dynamics of how faith operates. The viewer must trust the artist to accurately paint the world she sees outside the window (true reality). If the artist is not trustworthy, the viewer cannot place faith in the existence of the tree.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Magritte, “La Ligne de Vie II,” February 1940; quoted in Torczyner, 102.

<sup>19</sup>Rene Magritte, Lecture given 20 November 1938 at the Musee Royal des Beaux-Arts, Antwerp; quoted in Torczyner, 121.

<sup>20</sup>Within the Christian tradition an immediate corollary would be the Biblical writers and the canon. One must place faith in the accuracy of the writers efforts to describe and relate the nature of true reality.

Other works in the series make use of a road which is painted on the canvas, a mountain range, a country inn, and a beach.<sup>21</sup> In a twist of this idea, Magritte painted several works in which the glass of the window itself contained the outdoor scene. In *The Key to the Fields* (1933), Magritte painted an outdoor scene, yet the window is shattered. The broken pieces of glass, which are lying on the floor are not clear, but rather contain the outdoor scene on them. In *The Field Glass* (1963) a look through the window reveals a blue sky, except for the crack where the window is open, which reveals it is really black outside. It is as if the original view was nothing more than a painting which was seen by looking at the window, rather than looking through it. These works, like the others, are still questioning true reality and man's perception of that reality.

In all of these works, Magritte is building upon and illustrating Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* as he shows us that what we are looking at may be a projection or a shadow and not true reality.<sup>22</sup> By calling the work the human condition, he is essentially arguing that man has no

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<sup>21</sup>These works are entitled *Euclidean Promenades* (1955), *Call of the Peaks* (1942), *The Fair Captive* (1967), and *The Human Condition* (1935).

<sup>22</sup>Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* is recorded in Plato's *Republic*. The allegory begins as follows: "And now, I [Socrates] said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: Behold! human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets. . . . and they [the humans] see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave. . . To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images. . . This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun. . ."

sense of what reality truly is. We are looking at a canvas which may or may not correctly represent reality. We are looking through a window which is distorting and limiting our ability to see the real world. Any determinations we make about the real world, we make based upon faith, and our trust in those who have described that reality to us. Thus Magritte is arguing, or more specifically picturing, an argument for a metaphysical, spiritual realm as the base of true reality or being and is illustrating the necessity of faith to comprehend that reality.<sup>23</sup>

Magritte builds on these ideas in several works which question the artist and the nature of art as a representation of reality. In *Treason of Images* (1928), Magritte paints a pipe and then writes beneath it, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (This is not a pipe). He produced an English version the following year and produced a new version with the original painting in it some thirty years later.<sup>24</sup> The point of all three works is to show that art is not portraying true reality. Art is composed of a representation, an image the author puts on the canvas. Any piece of art is always based on perceptions- those of the artist and our own perceptions as viewers. Thus Magritte is again illustrating the difference in perception and reality. He is displaying faith in practice- the artist relates his perception and the viewer has to trust that perception. These same basic

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<sup>23</sup>Gablik, 75. Gablik affirms, “For example, *The Human Condition I* actually formulates the contradiction between three-dimensional space, which objects occupy in reality, and two-dimensional space of the canvas used to represent it. The ambiguity in Magritte’s image suggests that something is irreconcilable in the confrontation between real space and spacial illusion. In this single image he has defined the whole complexity of modern art— a complexity which has lead to a devaluation of the imitation of nature as the basic premise of painting.”

<sup>24</sup>These works are entitled *This is not a Pipe* (1929) and *The Two Mysteries* (1966). Magritte used the same technique in other works, such as *This is not an Apple* (1964). In a reworking of this idea, Magritte also produced paintings which placed names (apple, hat, etc.) under images which did not correspond to their label. Examples of this include *The Literal Meaning* (1929), *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1927), and *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1935).

concepts are shown in a different way in the work entitled *Clairvoyance* (1936). Within this painting, Magritte shows himself painting a bird in flight, yet his model is a simple egg. Thus the artist is painting what does not yet exist, but what will exist.

This whole family of paintings is illustrating a tension, an argument which has spawned a debate over the nature of art— whether art is autonomous or is representation- a debate which has captured the modern art world for the last 40 years. It gave birth to abstract and pop art and even today contemporary artists like Mark Tansey are echoing Magritte's concerns about the nature of art and representation.<sup>25</sup> Thus the questions of true reality, perception, and faith are still being addressed by those who have come after Magritte.

Magritte continued to investigate this idea of reality by employing another motif, that being the curtain. Magritte's use of curtains goes back to some of his earliest paintings.<sup>26</sup> Initially, Magritte included curtains in the sides of his paintings. The obvious illusion is to a stage. Thus Magritte, by including curtains, may be informing the viewer that what they are seeing is a performance and is not real. In addition, much like windows, curtains limit one's view. Yet, unlike windows, they obscure and hide those things which lay behind them and only provide a partial view. Thus by using the curtains, Magritte is again showing that true reality is hidden or obscured.

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<sup>25</sup>Mark Tansey is a contemporary artist (a philosophical painter) who credits Magritte as being a major influence on his work. In his *Action Painting* (1981 ), he borrowed Magritte's idea of capturing an artist and his canvas. However, in a twisting of Magritte, rather than painting what is not seen, Tansey shows the artist to be painting exactly what she sees, and in so doing shows the contradiction between the moment that art portrays and the time it takes to produce the image (thus showing that art is not autonomous because it is not truly timeless).

<sup>26</sup>These works include *The Bather* (1925), *The Lost Jockey* (1925) , *Difficult Crossing* (1926), and *The Village of the Mind* (1926).

Eventually, in order to make his point more understandable, Magritte moved the curtains from the sides of his works into the center of the canvas. Thus what is seen is the curtain, and the curtain alone.<sup>27</sup> In one of his final paintings, *The Fair Captive* (1967), Magritte combined a canvas with the curtains. The canvas stands in the center of the work, upon it is painted an image of the sky which stands behind it, yet the entire right side of the background is covered by a curtain. In the work the view of the real world is blocked by both the canvas and the curtain. Thus Magritte is illustrating the same theological points, albeit with different images.

Magritte also made use of the sky as a major motif in his work. For Magritte, the sky represents ultimate reality—the world as it truly is (not unlike the Christian association of heaven being in the sky). One of his best known uses of the sky is the work *The False Mirror* (1935). The work makes allusion to the eye being the mirror into the soul, yet this iris has been replaced with sky. Magritte also used the sky in a series of works entitled *The Empire of Lights*. In all of these works, a blue daytime sky stands overhead, while the house in the lower half of the picture is illuminated by a lamp because it is night below. Within these works, Magritte seems to be arguing that man is not living in the ultimate reality. This world is dark and gloomy compared to the way true reality is. We live in night while we aspire to live in the day. These works seem to illustrate the existence of the world Magritte is attempting to connect with.

Over half of Magritte's works incorporate the sky in one way or another. In some works it is part of the background, in others it is the central theme.<sup>28</sup> In some of Magritte's works he

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<sup>27</sup>These works include *The Memoirs of a Saint* (1960), *Le Beau Monde* (1962), and *La Gioconda* (1964).

<sup>28</sup>These works include *The Curse* (1931), *The Curse* (1937), *La Reconnaissance Infinie* (1963), and *High Society* (1967).

integrated the sky with windows or canvases or curtains, or a combination of all those elements.

Regardless of how it was used, it was always used to make the same point about reality.

The final motif employed by Magritte that we will discuss is that of the anonymous figure.<sup>29</sup> Magritte often concealed the faces of his figures thus making them unknown and unknowable. The figures may be anonymous because their back is to us, the viewers, or the figures may be anonymous because their faces are obstructed by various objects.<sup>30</sup> Apart from the sky, it is these bowler wearing men for which Magritte is best known.

By portraying these figures as anonymous, Magritte is doing several things. First, he is universalizing these figures. He is denying the viewer the ability to identify the people in order to identify themselves with the person. Magritte is arguing that all of us are these people. In addition, he is using these figures to question our ability to understand the world in which we live. If our view is obstructed, or we have our back to the real world- as the bowler wearing men do- can we truly comprehend the world around us? Just as windows and curtains obscure true

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<sup>29</sup>There are other major motifs employed by Magritte, but due to length restrictions, they will not be discussed in this work. The first of these motifs is the use of stone. Magritte pictured items, like chairs, fruit, and candles made of stone. Works representative of the stone motif are *The Glass Key* (1959), *Zeno's Arrow* (1964), *The Castle in the Pyrenees* (1961), *Souvenir of a Journey* (1955), and *The Legend of the Centuries* (1948). The second motif is that of combining plants and animals to create new creatures. Along the same lines, Magritte also painted humans and replaced their flesh (either all or parts of it) with either stone or wood. Examples of this motif include *Discovery* (1927), *Treasure Island* (1942), *The Companions of Fear* (1942), *The Taste of Tears* (1948), and *The Lost Steps* (1950). A third motif within Magritte's works relates to feminine nudity. Magritte painted nude females (usually his wife), yet he did not do so in an erotic or sensual manner. As is the case with all his works, he used nudity with a twist (painting inverted mermaids with the head and torso of a fish combined with human legs). Examples of this motif include *Discovery* (1927), *Collective Invention* (1935), *Black Magic* (1935), and *Flowers of Evil* (1946).

<sup>30</sup>These works include *The Schoolmaster* (1955), *The Ready-Made Bouquet* (1956), *The Spirit of Adventure* (1962), *The Son of Man* (1964), and *The Great War* (1964).

reality, so too does humanity's perception and position. Within these same works, Magritte also seems to be questioning our identity, or our ability to truly discern our identity. Even when we try to examine ourselves, do we really understand what we are seeing?<sup>31</sup>

While the bulk of Magritte's works are asking religious or at least metaphysical questions, Magritte only employed religious imagery in a handful of paintings. One such painting is *Nightingale* (1962). Within this painting, the viewer looks through an arched window to see a rail-yard with a train steaming down the track. In the sky, a cloud hovers over the station and on that cloud sits a white haired, bearded old man in white robes. The picture seems to be God looking down on the train yard. In the picture, God isn't doing anything, he is just sitting on a cloud. This picture may very well represent Magritte's own deist view of God. The fact that God is not doing anything may be a direct picture of God's current work in the world (as Magritte saw it).

A second work with religious iconography is entitled *Homesickness* (1940). This work pictures an angel, dressed as a European gentleman, leaning against the railing of a bridge. Next to him sits a lion. The angel has his back to the viewer, which helps the picture take on a general sense of melancholy and sadness. One can almost sense the angel's desire to return to his home, to a far better place. This picture seems to recognize that there is another reality, the angel's home. In addition, Magritte seems to be conceding that it is a better place than this world.

Perhaps the most directly religious piece is entitled *Eternity* (1935). In this work Magritte paints a scene from a museum or art gallery. Behind a velvet rope stand three sculptures: a

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<sup>31</sup>This is seen in *Reproduction Prohibited (Portrait of Edward James)* (1937) and *Dangerous Relationships* (1936).

sculpture of Jesus's head, a block of Butter, and a sculpture of Jerome's head. Magritte himself never interpreted or explained the work, thus there is no official interpretation, rather the work can be interpreted a number of different ways. The picture may be saying that Christianity and the Bible are not eternal, but they will melt away with the passing of time, just as the block of butter will. Or perhaps the work is arguing the opposite, that Christ and the Bible enrich our lives, just as butter enriches our food. Perhaps it is an argument that the things of this world (the butter) will pass away, while eternal truth (Christ and the Bible) will remain forever. Or, and probably most likely, Magritte is not trying to saying anything at all. The painting may intentionally employ these religious figures as a way of creating mystery- to force the viewer to say "what does it mean." Regardless of the meaning of the work, this is the only work by Magritte which pictures or refers to Christ.<sup>32</sup> Magritte seems to be more interested in picturing religious question without having to make use of religious iconography.

In order to truly understand Magritte, we must not only examine "what" he painted, but we must also address the issue of "why" he painted. Why did Magritte paint in this peculiar style? What was his overarching motivation? Was he trying to replicate the beauty he saw in the world? Was he just trying to take a art in a new direction? What was he trying to do with his art? The motivation which drove Magritte to produce these works, like most of his works themselves, may be quite unexpected. Magritte paints to shock us. Magritte paints to surprise

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<sup>32</sup>Magritte himself was not a religious man. He would probably be best classified as an agnostic or deist. However, his wife was a devout Roman Catholic (Magritte never objected to or tried to hinder her from practicing her faith).

us. Magritte paints to provoke us. Magritte paints to mystify us. Magritte paints to bring us into a religious experience, an encounter with the metaphysical.<sup>33</sup>

Magritte's paintings are all produced in order to confront us, the viewers, with what he referred to as "the mystery." You don't just look at a Magritte painting-the work is designed to cause a response- to touch you, the viewer. Each painting is supposed to produce an initial response, be it amusement, shock, bewilderment, or even disgust. That response is a crisis moment- a moment which enlightens you to the fact that there is a reality beyond the world that you know.<sup>34</sup> Because what you are seeing does not occur in the world that you know, it causes you to consider (and possibly doubt) reality and contemplate the existence of a world outside of this reality. The art critic Suzi Gablik explained that, "For Magritte, painting was a means of evoking a meta-reality which would transcend our knowledge of the phenomenal world. He referred to it continually as 'the mystery'- about which it is impossible to speak, since one can only be seized by it. . . . For Magritte, painting was never an end in itself; it was only a 'lamentable expedient' by means of which such a passage could be negotiated."<sup>35</sup>

These pictures are all designed to evoke responses which are religious moments- moments which testify to the fact that this world is not the ultimate reality.<sup>36</sup> This effect is not

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<sup>33</sup>Gablik, 24.

<sup>34</sup>A. M. Hammacher, *Rene Magritte*, trans. James Brockway (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985), 11.

<sup>35</sup>Gablik, 13.

<sup>36</sup>This aim partially explains Magritte's practice of repeatedly painting the same pictures in various versions. These works should be understood as attempts to replicate a strong religious experience. This is not unlike the repeated use of a particular song or chorus within a Christian worship service. If a song is especially good at enabling a religious experience to occur, the

unlike that produced by a particular song or piece of poetry within a church context. Our response to songs and scripture help us, as Christian worshipers, to transcend this existence- to become aware of a greater reality.<sup>37</sup> Magritte would argue that if his images shock you, if they puzzle you, if they stir your emotions, then you have the potentiality of transcending this existence.<sup>38</sup> Thus an opportunity for a religious encounter presents itself whenever his works are viewed. Magritte is producing a means (his paintings) of encountering God.

This overview of Magritte's work reveals two important truths and hopefully will establish two points of discussion. First, it is my hope that this examination of Magritte's work has illustrated how modern art does in fact engage philosophical and metaphysical questions. Many people (both sacred and secular) are guilty of assuming that modern art has degenerated into finger-painting– a talent-less and intellectually bankrupt endeavor. In fact, there are probably some in this room who prefer their children's work to that being produced by artists today. I hope that this examination of Magritte has illustrated that art can and very often does delve into deep philosophical and theological matters. Art questions our existence, the nature of reality (and truth), and our perception of reality (and truth). However, art does not always

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music minister will repeat that song often (putting in the program every other week) until it loses the desired effect.

<sup>37</sup>Rene Magritte, Lecture given 20 November 1938 at the Musee Royal des Beaux-Arts, Antwerp; quoted in Torczyner, 125. Magritte himself explained, "The pictorial experience which puts the real world on trial, gives me a belief in the infinity of possibilities as yet unknown to life. I know I am not alone in affirming that their conquest is the sole aim and the sole valid reason for the existence of man."

<sup>38</sup>Rene Magritte, Lecture given 20 November 1938 at the Musee Royal des Beaux-Arts, Antwerp; quoted in Torczyner, 121.

employ religious images to do so. A picture does not have to include a religious symbol or image in order to be dealing with religious ideas.

In addition, a picture does not have to question reality (like Magritte's do) to be religious. For example, let us consider Mark Tansey's *The Key* (1984). On first look, this may seem to be a scene that is acted out every time you and your spouse go out. The couple have obviously had a nice dinner, probably at the Commander's Palace or Palace Cafe. They may have gone to a show, and now the wife impatiently waits for her husband to find the right key to open the door. However, if you will look at the gate, it may remind you of Ghiberti's famous work entitled *The Gates of Paradise* (1450), located at the Il Duomo in Florence, Italy. And if you look at the top of the gate, you may notice an angel with her sword drawn, across from a serpent in a tree. Now, for all of you Bible Trivia buffs, where does a man and a woman, a snake in a tree, being locked out of any area, and an angel with a sword all come together? The answer is of course Genesis 3 and the narrative of the fall of man. Thus Tansey's work is an illustration of the Edenic fall. Adam and Eve have gone out for a night on the town, but they want to get back into paradise-yet they can't. They have been shut out of the garden (and ultimately God's presence). In the picture, we can already sense the stress entering into the relationship between the man and woman. Thus the picture beautifully portrays the theological implications of the Edenic fall. This is a theological picture, yet it contains no theological figures or icons.

If this study has done nothing else, it shows that one can indeed ask ontological questions about the nature of true reality and epistemological questions about our perception without using religious imagery or iconography. I am of the opinion that Christians do not engage the arts and thus do not see or hear the questions being asked. Christians have abandoned the arts to the non-

believing world and to movements on the theological fringe. Thus the “religious” art which has been produced as of late consist of works like Edwina Sandy’s *Christa* (1974), Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ (Body Fluid #1)* (1987 ), Chris Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1999) and *Bathtub Jesus* (1999), and Renee Cox’s *Yo Mamma’s Last Supper* (2001). All of these works distort the orthodox understanding of Christ and Christianity. While art asks questions about reality and identity– ironically these are questions Christians have the answers to– Christians are not seeing the questions, and are certainly not answering the questions through the same visual means in which the questions are being asked. Thus the church is missing an opportunity to enter the debate.

Secondly, I have tried to communicate that Magritte’s motivation for painting was religious in nature. Just as a church song leader, or a preacher tries to create an environment conducive to a religious encounter, so too is Magritte’s work designed to facilitate a religious encounter. From a theological standpoint, Magritte’s work would fall under the category of general revelation or natural religion. Magritte is taking the world he sees and is wrestling with philosophical questions about that world and his place in it. The result of this struggle is his conclusion that some other, greater reality exists. However, Magritte is unable to say exactly what that reality is. Just as a painting has a signature which attests to the creator, Magritte recognizes the existence of a master artist. Magritte is attempting to encounter the master artist (God), yet he is doing so without the aid of special revelation. Through the use of images, and the responses they evoke, he is affirming the existence of God, yet his method provides no means to know or relate to that God. Thus ultimately Magritte and his art is deistic in its orientation.

While Magritte's methodology ultimately is incomplete because it cannot say anything about God, it is worth asking the question "Is his motive appropriate?" Can God be encountered through visual arts? The Roman Catholic Church believes so. They invest money and time into the production of paintings, statuary, and stained glass windows, all of which serve as teaching tools and as means of encountering God's truth. Some of the greatest works of art known to man, Raphael's *Crucifixion* (1503), Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel Mural* (1540), and Leonardo's *Last Supper* (1498) were all works produced for and by the church. Catholics also construct their church buildings so that one will be confronted with the nature of God just by entering the buildings. The buildings strengthen the experience and illustrate in physical form the sovereignty, transcendence, and immenseness of God. Are these efforts just a show of pride, power, and popery? Is this idolatry or is it a legitimate way of accessing God? Can God speak to us through what we see?

This is a question the church must address as it tries to evangelize and disciple a generation which has been raised on television and video games. Indeed, our own institution's emphasis on technology and PowerPoint seem to recognize the power of the image. Yet, I wonder if we are using these tools to their full potential? Is the projection of literary material as powerful as an image? And are we not, in our use of technology, the exception rather than the rule.

As products of the Protestant Reformation, Evangelicals (especially Baptists) have rejected the use of any images. We have interpreted God's word to be a literal vocal or written word. Our revivalist past has only added to our emphasis on vocal communication. Every teaching opportunity in our churches is done through oral communication. Sunday School

lessons are spoken. Our worship is centered around congregational singing. The height of the worship service is a 30 or 45 minute oral address, otherwise known as a sermon. Discipleship training, like Sunday School, takes place through the spoken word. I will not even begin to mention what the interior and exterior of our churches looks like, or what feelings our architecture evokes. Our whole church experience is geared toward hearing, such that a blind person can encounter God in a Baptist church as easily as someone who possess all five senses. Of course the church is not alone in this vocal emphasis. All of the training we provide at this institution is literary and verbal.

The question I would like to propose is this: “What is the role of visuals in the church?” In both our churches and institutions, are we not limiting our ability to encounter God to the sense of hearing? Can God speak to us through images? Do churches need to do more than just limit religious encounters to the spoken word? What should our buildings look like? Can churches appropriately make use of images? Can we, or should we at Seminary use images in our teaching? Is Magritte right? Can God be put into a frame?

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