

## René Magritte and “The Shop-Window Quality of Things”

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On November 20, 1938, René Magritte delivered a lecture on his work to an audience of five hundred at the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp. Entitled “Lifeline” (“La Ligne de vie”), the lecture summarized Magritte’s development as an artist, from his earliest cubist and futurist works to his most recent Surrealist paintings.<sup>1</sup> The text, which mingles biographical remembrances and analyses of specific paintings, has served as the starting point for almost every scholarly examination of Magritte’s work. It has shaped the now-accepted understanding of his paintings as fashioned from a collection of childhood experiences, adult relationships and, above all, what he referred to as Giorgio de Chirico’s “triumphant poetry,” and Max Ernst’s “scissors [and] paste” (“La Ligne” 44).

It must be said, however, that Magritte’s autobiographical account is remarkably incomplete, for it completely ignores his work as a commercial artist. Beginning in 1918, when Magritte was twenty years old, and continuing to 1967, the year he died, he engaged in a variety of commercial activities, including wallpaper design, advertising brochures, posters, billboards and illustrations for musical scores. In retrospect, Magritte’s careful omission of these works in “Lifeline” is understandable, for the painter was known to have had considerable contempt for commercial art, and it seems to have pained him to have had to support himself as a graphic designer.

Magritte’s disdain for commercial art is first recorded in an unpublished text that Magritte wrote with the painter Victor Servranckx in 1922. Entitled “Pure Art: Defense of the Aesthetic,” the essay was written under the influence of the various post-cubist movements that were at the time dominant throughout much of Europe (in particular, Purism and De Stijl). It lays out a defense of the sorts of abstract paintings that Magritte was making at the time, by positioning them as diametrically opposed to what he and Servranckx refer to as “applied art”—a term which they use to designate any kind of artistic production that does not have aesthetic experience as its only concern. With this term, they singled out architecture and textile and furniture design for particular scorn. And to that list they surely could have added wallpaper design, for at that time both Magritte and Servranckx worked as wallpaper designers for a company in Haren.

## 12 THE SPACE BETWEEN

Their antagonism was altogether unmistakable:

APPLIED ART KILLS PURE ART. The devastation caused by applied art is considerable. In order to survive, many artists waste their time on the production of applied art objects which are sold on a large scale. These mediocre works tend to satisfy the aesthetic needs of mankind. As a result, people lose interest in the pure works of art of these artists to the extent that they become unsaleable. Artists should be able to support themselves with their work. (Magritte and Servranckx 18)

Magritte's affiliation with Servranckx was brief, but his antagonistic relationship to the commercial arts remained constant throughout his life. As late as 1949, for example, Magritte referred to advertising as "modern propaganda" ("La Véritable" 273). It is all the more interesting, therefore, that as Magritte turned away from the aestheticism of cubist abstraction, he would adopt a visual language similar to that used at the time by the least adventurous and most generic advertisers.

Soon after writing this essay, Magritte abandoned his interest in Purism and De Stijl, and instead adopted a visual language derived, as he claimed in "Lifeline," from the works of de Chirico and Ernst. This paper argues, however, that Magritte's work as a graphic designer played a crucial role in the development of his aesthetic. More precisely, it argues that his complex relationship to the art of advertising—an art he simultaneously practiced and disdained—engaged the painter in a set of concepts and practices that his friend, the poet Paul Nougé, referred to as "transfiguration." Understood within the context of Nougé's concept of transfiguration and the visual dynamics of public advertising, Magritte's paintings were designed not as representations of a dreamworld but rather as tools to disrupt established patterns of visual experience—patterns established by the commodity culture of urban capitalism.

As Georges Roque has shown, throughout Magritte's life, his poster designs stylistically paralleled his paintings.<sup>2</sup> His earliest posters, like his earliest paintings, were derived from an Art Nouveau lexicon, while his subsequent posters—like his subsequent paintings—drew from the language of Cubism and Futurism. And in the mid-1920s, as Magritte abandoned the techniques of modernist painting and instead turned toward the representational style for which he became famous, his commercial work shifted in like fashion. It was at this time that Magritte befriended Paul Nougé. The two quickly developed a working relationship in which advertising played a significant role. One of their most complex design projects was a pair of advertising catalogues for the Samuel Furrier company (the first for the 1926-27 season, the second for 1928). Magritte supplied the images and Nougé the text. The two continued to work in tandem, with Nougé frequently

applying the titles to Magritte's paintings.

Nougé is a little-known figure outside of Belgium, and he receives only scant attention in most accounts of French Surrealism. Yet he was the central figure in the Belgian Surrealist movement, playing a role similar that of André Breton in Paris. Nougé was a theorist as well as a poet, and it is his theory of poetry (also little known outside of Belgium) that I want to highlight here. Nougé's poetic theory was staked to a combination of Apollinaire's celebration of everyday language on the one hand and Mallarmé's refined symbolist aesthetic on the other.<sup>3</sup> His central concept, which he called "transfiguration," involved a vision of poetry as utilitarian rather than expressive. Poetry, as Nougé understood it, should not be used to *say* something, but to *do* something. Traditional poetic expressions of an authorial subject should be *transfigured* into ordinary language—collections of words expressly designed to produce a certain effect in the mind of the reader. At the same time, ordinary language should be transfigured into the mysterious, and therefore anti-utilitarian, language of poetry. Nougé considered the analysis of poetic and daily language to be a science; indeed, he referred to it as a "science of poetry" and likened it to the work of a biochemist. In his essay "Notes on Poetry," Nougé explains his analytical method:

One can distinguish in general two ways of using language. The first presumes a confidence that one can use it to translate a state, a thought, an idea, that would come before it and that would take it upon itself to express. This usage involves first of all the concern with sincerity and truth.... The second usage takes language as an object with which to provoke, in those who submit to it, certain states, thoughts, or ideas, and that which one would use like an object modifiable like any material object.... This second usage presumes a confidence in a certain science, a certain ingenuity, a certain happiness that experiments sometimes provide. ("Notes" 196)

Nougé's instrumentalism distinguishes itself from the French Surrealist understanding of poetry as a supremely expressive medium. Whereas Breton famously defined Surrealist poetry as an activity designed "to express... the actual functioning of thought" (26), Nougé proposed that poetry serve a radically different purpose. Nougé's most succinct (and self-consciously understated) formulation of poetry's role is probably the following: "to invent... two or three effective ideas" ("Pour garder" 23). Or as he put it elsewhere: "The sole concern—independent of all concern with expression or truth—[is] *the production of an effect*" ("Notes" 195). In other words,

## 14 THE SPACE BETWEEN

where Breton speaks in terms of *expressiveness*, Nougé speaks in terms of *effectiveness*.

Nougé engaged in such “productions of an effect” in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most obvious was a collection of poems entitled “Advertising Transfigured” (“La Publicité transfigurée”) [Figure 1]. In these poems we find commands like “open the door,” “turn left,” and “turn right,” all of which are presented in typographic arrangements that owe less to the conventions of poetry than to those of business signage. Other phrases, however, like “the sun is inside,” and “but one never arrives” ring with the tone of symbolist poetry. It is in the conjunction of these two discordant discourses that Nougé intends his work to be “effective”—effective in that it will, as he put it, “transfigure” the language of advertising. But it will also transfigure the language of poetry. As Nougé argues in a text from 1932, “La Poésie transfigurée,” poetry’s fundamental obligation is to “provoke,” to “threaten” (133-135).



Figure 1: Nougé, from *La Publicité Transfigurée* (1925)

Magritte himself makes no explicit mention of Nougé’s conception of poetry, and offers us nothing that could be used as a positive indication of the painter’s consideration of the concept and practice of “transfiguration.” Nonetheless, I’d argue that Magritte’s work functioned in an analogous fashion, especially in light of the fact that Nougé recognized Magritte’s complex conversation with the images, techniques, and above all, *effects* of urban advertising. Over the years of their friendship, Nougé wrote a number of short essays on Magritte’s work; in one, the poet explicitly associated Magritte’s technique with that of the commercial artist. In building his argument, Nougé goes so far as to claim that “the most important” pictures that have been made in the last hundred years are not housed in art museums, but rather found on billboard hoardings and shop signs (“Peintures Idiotes” 249). For Nougé, the salient attributes of the painters responsible for these works are their anonymity and disinterest in matters of aesthetics. As Nougé put it, the sign painter is concerned with making “images

that would be as obvious and comprehensible as possible, and which have nothing at all to do with the aesthetic concerns of beauty and originality" ("Peintures Idiotes" 250).

Magritte's work with Nougé on the Samuel Furrier catalogs coincided with the painter's abandonment of modernist practices in favor of the imagery and techniques of de Chirico and Ernst. For example, Magritte's 1927 painting, *Girl Eating a Bird*, in which a young girl bites ravenously into the bloody flesh of a small bird, owes an obvious debt to de Chirico's anti-modernist realism and Ernst's violent imagery [Figure 2]. However, almost immediately after the completion of this painting, Magritte lost interest in such narrative enigmas, and his investigation of violence and



Figure 2: Magritte, *Girl Eating a Bird* (1927)

the irrational took on a very different set of visual structures. For example, in *The Murderous Sky* (also from 1927), Magritte holds fast to the image of the bloodied bird [Figure 3]. But rather than place the bird within an unlikely environment (which would have been the method of de Chirico, in whose works we find trains, towers, arcades and children's toys shifted about from one arrangement to another), Magritte fixes upon the bird as if it were itself a mechanically reproduced object. He treats this bird as if it were not a bird at all, but rather a picture of a bird, or rather a collection of identical pictures, which when stacked one on top of the other can be cut out and arranged together on a grid, as one might paste a collection of identical advertising posters on a stone wall.

While our confrontation with this dead and rotting bird is in itself shocking, what comes to eclipse that sensation is the effect of the *multiplicity* of the image. The bird is dead, its life taken from it; but a more profound shock (or "threat," to use Nougé's language) is produced through the pro-



Figure 3: Magritte, *The Murderous Sky* (1927)

cess of image duplication—through the doubling, tripling, and ultimately quadrupling of the figure. In the end, the disturbance caused by this painting owes very little to that which underlies de Chirico's works (or for that matter, Magritte's *Girl Eating a Bird*). It is no longer a question of the depicted narrative, but rather that of the representational logic that subtends and preconditions the very act of narration in the first place. As in almost every subsequent painting by Magritte, the painter plays with the confusion between the representation of an actual thing in the world and a representation of a representation. Sometimes, as in works like *The Murderous Sky*, Magritte depicts things as if they are themselves already representations (and thus repeatable). Sometimes, however, the direction is reversed and representations are treated as if they were things. For example, with *The Eternally Obvious* (1930), Magritte fashioned a multipanel representation of a nude woman—a representation which the painter sometimes embraced as if she were in fact a real woman [Figure 4].<sup>4</sup>

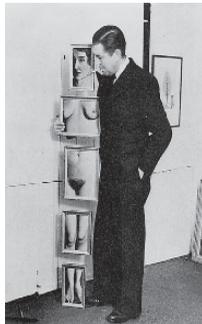


Figure 4: Magritte, Photo with *The Eternally Obvious* (1938)

In order to develop a more complex understanding of what is at stake in Magritte's deliberate confounding of things and representations, and to understand this practice as a visual analog to Nougé's "transfiguration," it is necessary to establish a more detailed understanding of the place of advertising within both art and everyday urban experience during this period. Magritte's longstanding employment as a commercial artist was not the norm among his peers, but he was by no means the first artist to have been drawn to the images offered by modern posters, newspaper advertisements, and billboard hoardings. Most accounts of this history begin with Georges Seurat's emulation of the posters of Jules Chéret, whose so-called "Chérettes" served Seurat as models of modern grace and exuberance.<sup>5</sup> Interest in modern advertising is also found in the collages of Picasso and Braque, a few of which make explicit reference to contemporaneous posters and billboards.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most explicit of all is Robert Delaunay's *Cardiff Team* (1913), in which an advertisement for the balloon manufacturer Astra appears at the center of a swirling vortex which includes a biplane, a Ferris wheel, and a leaping footballer.<sup>7</sup> Within the context of avant-garde poetry, perhaps the most canonical example of such reference is Apollinaire's "Zone," which includes the following celebratory incorporation of industrial and commercial discourse into the realm of the poetic: "You read the ads the catalogues the posters that sing on the highest line / That's poetry this morning for prose the newspaper is fine; Inscriptions of signboards and on every wall / Posters plaques like parrots peck and call." (Tu lis les prospectus les catalogues les affiches qui chantent tout haut / Voilà la poésie ce matin et pour la prose il y a les journaux; Les inscriptions des enseignes et des murailles / Les plaques les avis à la façon des perroquets criailent.) (2).

The works of Picasso, Braque, Delaunay, and Apollinaire date from the 1910s. By the 1920s, the commercial art of the urban poster had attained a significant degree of sophistication, self-consciousness and respect. Journals devoted to commercial art had been established, and celebrated poster designers were asked to provide critical commentary on the art and business of advertising.<sup>8</sup> In the 1920s, the most significant figure was A. M. Cassandre, whose 1923 poster for the *Bûcheron* furniture store established his reputation as one of the most innovative designers. For Cassandre, the effective poster, like the effective commodity, had to be engineered to function within the environment for which it was designed. The poster, wrote Cassandre in 1926, "is designed to answer certain strictly material needs." As such, for him, posters were no different than "fountain pens or automobiles" (qtd. in Mouron 15).

Cassandre was especially attentive to the fact that he was working in a business that had recently turned a corner. By 1920, posters and billboards had become so pervasive that they had become naturalized—part of the unquestioned landscape of the modern metropolis. As Louis Chéronnet,

writing in 1927, exuberantly declared:

The composition of the air has changed. To the oxygen and nitrogen we breathe we have to add Advertising. Advertising is in some way an elastic gas, diffuse, perceptible to all our organs... [I]t surrounds us, envelops us, it is intimately mingled with our every step, in our activities, in our relaxation, and its “atmospheric pressure” is so necessary to us that we no longer feel it. (qtd. in Varnadoe and Gopnik 299)

It seems that these enormous, ubiquitous posters exerted a paradoxical influence, for Chéronnet’s account of advertising as something like a pressure that we no longer feel because of having been acclimated to it is contradicted by a statement he wrote in 1926 in which posters exert an entirely unignorable influence: “Excessive, hallucinatory, the billboard imposes itself everywhere, whatever the speed of the passerby or the thoughts that absorb him... It is in the image of our existence: multiple and simultaneous” (qtd. in Varnadoe and Gopnik 300). There was one advertisement in particular that symbolized all that was excessive and hallucinatory about modern advertising—the Cadum Soap ads [Figure 5]. Cadum produced a number of hygiene products such as toothpaste and ointments, and their various advertising campaigns began around 1909.<sup>9</sup> But the most aggressively advertised product was their soap. The so-called “Cadum Baby,” who first appeared in posters around 1912, was to become the most ubiquitous icon of Parisian advertising. Indeed, its presence on the streets of Paris was so domineering and inescapable, that from 1920 to 1940, it seemed as though almost everyone who wrote about life in the city at some point felt compelled to confront the image of the gigantic smiling baby. De Chirico wrote about it in a text from 1925, likening it to an “antique god” (234) and it featured as a protagonist in Robert Desnos’s 1927 novel, *La Liberté ou l’amour!* (Varnadoe 300). It even appeared in a scene in Rene Clair’s 1924 film *Entr’acte*.



Figure 5: Cadum Billboard (1926)

Léger, writing in the journal *L'Art Vivant* in 1926, offered a remarkable analysis in which he contrasted the appearance and effect of the Cadum posters with Cassandre's advertisement for the *Au Bûcheron* furniture store. "We are confronted," he wrote,

with two levels of poster: Cadum, or the bare object without any value, and the works of Cassandre who is unquestionably an innovator in the "art" of the mural poster. Cadum is a "hole in the wall," a complete break with its surroundings. Cassandre's is a shallow composition, which tries to establish a connection with its environment. From the strictly advertising viewpoint, I don't know which is better, perhaps it is the Cadum ad. In any case, from the street's point of view, Cassandre's is the best... [T]he street is too dynamic, too exhausting and nerve-wracking. Our life today, so filled with tension and trepidation, should have quieter and more orderly streets, to rest our nerves instead of exciting them. Now, which are the more tranquilizing: the multiple, hallucinatory images of the Cadum baby or the images created by Cassandre? The latter, of course. (qtd. in Mouron 156)

Léger was by no means a surrealist, which makes it all the more compelling that he seems to have found it self-evident that the image of the Cadum Baby was, as he put it, "hallucinatory."<sup>10</sup> In particular, Léger is drawn to the fact that, on the streets of Paris, one regularly confronted identical copies of the Cadum Baby—sometimes as a small poster on a hoarding, sometimes as an enormous billboard, and sometimes as a sculpturally shaped cut-out form. Looking again at Magritte's use of the multiple depiction of a dead bird in *The Murderous Sky*, it is not difficult to recognize a similar logic at work.

Although Magritte lived in Paris in between 1927 and 1930—the very years in which Léger, de Chirico, Desnos and Clair all recorded in one way or another their fascination with the image of the Cadum baby—he left no written indication that he was similarly struck. Still, it seems altogether impossible that he would have remained uniquely untouched by its overbearing presence on the city streets. Regardless of its direct impact upon the painter—or, for that matter, the impact of any other work of commercial art—Magritte's painting is finely calibrated to the sensitivities triggered by the hallucinatory, gigantic baby who hovered over the city like an antique god. Works like *The Murderous Sky*, and indeed all of his mature paintings, exploit the same impersonal, workmanlike, and crudely utilitarian style used to paint the face of the Cadum baby.

Magritte insisted throughout his career that his paintings were not engaged in a search for a personal style or technique,<sup>11</sup> and although

he never explicitly referred his critics to the techniques of the professional advertising illustrator, his style in fact bears greater resemblance to that of the Cadum baby than to that of any of his Surrealist contemporaries. Even de Chirico, to whom Magritte so often acknowledged his debt, owed much to the modernist devices of Post-Impressionism and Cubism.<sup>12</sup> Like Cassandre, and like Nougé, Magritte held a functionalist understanding of his work. For example, in response to a 1935 questionnaire, he declared a painting ought to be understood above all as an “instrument,” a “tool” (“Réponse à l’enquête ‘Sur la crise de la peinture’” 85).

Thus, seen in relation to the posters of the Cadum baby, Magritte’s work effects a transfiguration analogous to that which Nougé articulated with regard to the crossing of poetry and advertising copy.<sup>13</sup> In Magritte’s case, it is the crossing of painting with the advertising image. In addition, when seen alongside advertising images such as the Cadum Baby, Magritte’s paintings serve to thematize a distinctive aspect of modern, urban experience—that of an “hallucinatory” confusion between reality and representation.

Georg Simmel’s sociology of urban experience provides, I think, the best formulation of the psychological and sociological issues at stake in urban experience as it was transformed by the various tools of commodity culture, of which the billboard is clearly the most spectacular element. In “The Sociology of Senses” (a section of his 1908 *Soziologie*), Simmel distinguishes dominant sensory experiences in small towns from those in urban centers. “In the [small] town,” he writes, “[one] is acquainted with nearly all the people he meets. With these he exchanges a word or a glance, and their countenance represents to him not merely the visible but indeed the entire personality” (360). In small towns, people know each other, and as a result their sensory experiences are rich in association. Sounds and images are linked to underlying familiarity and comprehension. When a voice is heard or a face is seen, the sense-data is connected to an already-understood human relation, and thus “the entire personality” is grasped at the same time as the sound or image is experienced.

According to Simmel, socialization in a large city operates differently. First of all, visual experience dominates, and aural experience is marginalized. “Before the appearance of omnibuses, railroads, and street cars in the nineteenth century,” writes Simmel, “men were not in a situation where for periods of minutes or hours they could or must look at each other without talking to one another” (360). For Simmel, the near exclusive reliance on sight to the exclusion of hearing is a source of profound disorientation. For Simmel, one of the great paradoxes of social interaction is that, for all the importance placed upon visual experience, it is, he claims, our sense of sound and not sight that enables us to reach beyond the merely apparent realm of sense-data to the “real self” that lies behind.

"Indeed," he writes, "the majority of the stimuli which the face represents [to our sense of sight] are often puzzling." Thus, he notes, "in general, what we see of a man will be interpreted by what we hear from him" (360). The urban dependence upon sight and the relative disengagement from sound has profound consequences, for the world as seen but not heard is a world of fleeting images, without substance and meaning. "Modern social life increases in ever-growing degree the role of mere visual impression which always characterizes the preponderant part of all sense relationships between man and man, and must place social attitudes and feelings upon an entirely changed basis." And this, notes Simmel, "brings us to the problems of the emotions of modern life: the lack of orientation in the collective life, the sense of utter lonesomeness, and the feeling that the individual is surrounded on all sides by closed doors" (361).

Simmel's essay on the Berlin Trade Exhibition of 1896 supplements this analysis of sensory experience, enabling one to understand the problematics of urban sensory and social experience within the larger framework of consumer capitalism. In this text, Simmel notes that the crowded heterogeneity of objects on display in the exhibition has the effect of "paralyzing the senses," which then induces "a veritable hypnosis where only one message gets through to one's consciousness: the idea that one is here to amuse oneself" (255). Perhaps more significant, however, is the effect of this hypnotic experience upon our psychological relationship to such displays. We are overcome, claims Simmel, by what he calls "the shop-window quality of things," which manifests whenever a given commodity is no longer distinguished by its intrinsic usefulness or inherent value, but is instead perceived only through the lens of the object's appearance. The display window, Simmel implies, has severed appearance from reality and left the urban shopper as disconnected and unsure of his relation to the world of things as the rider of the metropolitan bus or subway is of his relation to the other passengers. Simmel's analysis of urban experience suggests that the confusion between appearance and reality which lies at the core of Magritte's work should be understood as a call to critique the conditions of urban experience at large.

When considered apart from the context of Surrealism as André Breton defined it, and instead placed alongside the most paradigmatic works of "mediocre applied art," Magritte's work reveals itself to be engaged in a profound reflection on the experience of image-saturation—on the condition, described by Simmel, in which the distinction between a thing and its image has blurred to the point of near indistinguishability. My argument here is thus fundamentally at odds with that of scholars like Varnedoe and Gopnik who claim that "there seems to have been no conflict, and little overlap, between the day job serving commerce and the studio role of a professional subversive" (302). There was indeed a substantial "overlap"

between Magritte's day job as a commercial artist and his studio work as a painter. It is certainly true that Magritte—unlike Seurat, Delaunay, and Léger—offered no direct quotations of iconographic and formal elements of modern advertising. Nonetheless, Magritte's paintings were steeped in an urban experience of image saturation. What matters more than the technical similarity between Magritte's paintings and the Cadum Baby is the *functional* similarity. The effect of advertising was, as Chéronnet put it, "hallucinatory" and, for Simmel, this hallucinatory experience was bound to "the shop-window quality of things"—the displacement of use-value by display value. Both are the result of modern image saturation, and Magritte responds to this condition by incorporating its contradictions into the heart of his work.

To this point, I have tracked two elements in parallel: first, Magritte's response to the modern condition of image saturation, a condition exemplified in the case of the Cadum Soap billboards and by urban advertising in general; second, Magritte's intention of using his painting as a means of "transfiguring" the increasingly pervasive influence of commodity capitalism. But Simmel's work makes clear that these two elements—image saturation and commodity capitalism—are intimately interconnected. Capitalism not only transforms use-objects into exchange-objects but also invents a new category of objects—display objects. And these new objects are all the more bizarre in that their ontological status (as image-like, as something to be seen, not used) serves to undermine the most basic distinction between an object and an image, between a thing and a picture. This, Magritte's work suggests, is the ultimate source of the hallucinatory nature of everyday life. The question now is, what does Magritte hope to accomplish by this exploitation of the confused boundary between thing and picture? To what extent did he imagine that his hallucinatory pictures of things-becoming-images could serve as critiques of capitalism itself?

First, it should be noted that Magritte's understanding of art's relation to the commodity culture is less straightforward than that of the Pop artists of the 60s who often cited Magritte as a model and inspiration. It is telling, for example, the most obviously hallucinatory aspect of the Cadum billboards—their gigantism—is one that Magritte would approach only much later in his career. Works like *The Listening Room*, with its collection of outsized personal effects, only begin to appear in his work in the nineteen fifties [Figure 6]. The notion that ordinary objects of consumer capitalism have come to occupy a place of enormous importance in everyday life is one that was central to artists such as Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg, but was of only passing interest to Magritte. The paucity of works such as *The Listening Room* seems to me significant, for it suggests that Magritte never considered it his task to associate the work of art to the discourse of the commodity fetish. Nonetheless, his insistent reiteration of "bourgeois ideology"

deserves consideration. As a point of comparison, the words of Osip Brik, from 1924, are illuminating. Brik, a critic and theorist of the Russian

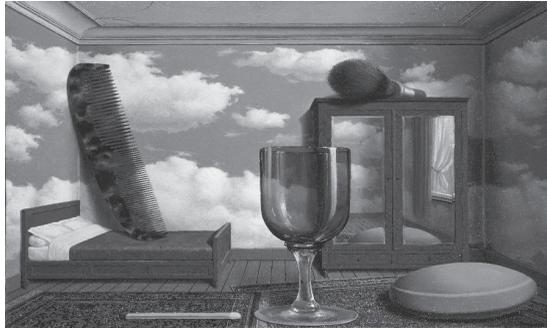


Figure 6: Magritte, *Personal Values* (1952)

avant-garde, offered one of the clearest pronouncements in support of an effort to utilize art as a tool to reconstruct everyday life in line with communist ideals. "It is becoming obvious," wrote Brik,

that art culture is not totally covered by objects for exhibition and museums, that, in particular, painting is not "pictures," but the entire aggregate of the pictorial designing of life... [T]he picture is dying... it is inextricably bound to the forms of the capitalist system, to its cultural ideology... Our cultural creative work is now entirely purpose-orientated. We do not think up for ourselves any cultural work that does not pursue some definite practical aim. The concepts of "pure science," "pure art," and "self-valuable truths and beauties" are foreign to us. We are practitioners—and in this lies the distinguishing feature of our cultural consciousness. The easel-art picture can find no place in such a consciousness. For its strength and significance lie in its non-utilitarianism, in the fact that it serves no other purpose than that of pleasing, of "delighting the eye." (349)

Clearly there are fundamental historical differences that separate Magritte's context from Brik's. In the 1920s, the place and function of the commodity object in capitalist Belgium was qualitatively different from its place and function in the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, there exist three compelling parallels between Brik's and Magritte's understanding of art's relation to social forces. First, Brik's statement about "pure art" would surely apply to Magritte's early work with Servranckx. Second, Brik's broadened

conception of painting as more than the collection of pictures hung on the wall of a gallery or museum runs parallel to Magritte's own widened perspective. Third and most saliently, both insist that advanced works of art must be understood not only in terms of aesthetics, but also in terms of utility; Brik refers to that which is "purpose-orientated," while Magritte refers to his paintings as "tools." There is, however, one crucial difference: Brik insists that his critique of "pure art" leads logically and inevitably toward a complete abandonment of the practice of the "easel-art picture." Magritte, of course, never abandons the (bourgeois) "easel-art picture." The difference can be explained in terms of the object of their critiques. Brik's concern lies with the productive component of the work of art, while Magritte's concern lies with the experience of pictorial *consumption*.<sup>14</sup> It was designed not to provide an alternative to capitalism, but rather to disrupt it internally—to transfigure it (to use Nougé's term) so that the codes of visual consumption would be upset by the codes of visual contemplation. In an urban environment in which the shop-window quality of things worked to disrupt the distinction between reality and representation, Magritte's paintings served to highlight this disruption, to draw attention to it, and, in effect, to manufacture—at the site of consumption—the experience of alienation that Marx located at the site of production. In other words, whereas Brik hoped to de-alienate production, Magritte wished to re-alienate consumption. The difference concerns one's orientation vis-à-vis capitalism: Brik aimed to destroy it from the outside while Magritte set out to unravel it from the inside.

### Figures

1. Paul Nougé, poem from *La Publicité transfigurée*, 1925.
2. René Magritte, *Young Girl Eating a Bird (pleasure)* (*Jeune fille mangeant un oiseau (Le plaisir)*), 1927. Oil on canvas, 74x97 cm. Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf. © Art Resource/Artists Rights Society, New York.
3. René Magritte, *The Murderous Sky (Le ciel meurtrier)*, 1927. Oil on canvas, 73x100 cm. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. © Art Resource/Artists Rights Society, New York.
4. Photograph of René Magritte with *The Eternally Obvious (L'évidence éternelle)*, London, 1938. *The Eternally Obvious*, 1930. oil on five canvases, 22x12; 19x24; 27x19; 22x16; 22x12 cm., mounted on glass. The Menil Collection, Houston. © Art Resource, New York.
5. Photograph of construction site in Paris with Cadum billboards, 1926. © Albert Harlingue/Roger-Viollet/The Image Works.
6. René Magritte, *Personal Values (Les valeurs personnelles)*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 80x100 cm. Collection Harry Torczyner, New York. © Art Resource/Artists Rights Society, New York.

### Notes

I would like to thank the Estate of René Magritte for generously granting permission to reproduce the works that accompany the text.

1. For a detailed account of this lecture, see Sylvester and Whitfield.
2. My understanding of Magritte's various commercial projects is greatly indebted to the detailed account that Roque provides.
3. For a complex analysis of Nougé's poetics, see Michel Biron, "Le refus de l'oeuvre chez Paul Nougé."
4. Michel Foucault argues that Magritte's painting effected a shift from "resemblance" to "similitude—the difference being that resemblance "has a 'model,' an original," while similitude "develops in series that have neither beginning nor end" (44). With similitude, it is no longer possible to distinguish the model from the copy. As Foucault puts it: "Resemblance predicates itself upon a model it must return to and reveal; similitude circulates the simulacrum as an indefinite and reversible relation of the similar to the similar" (44). Foucault's analysis has had an enormous influence on subsequent accounts of Magritte's painting, including my own. As will become clear, what most distinguishes my account from Foucault's is the fact that I situate Magritte's practice in relation to everyday urban experience, while Foucault's analysis eschews historicization.
5. See Herbert, "Seurat and Jules Chéret" 156. For Seurat's place within the history of artists interested in advertising, see Varnadoe and Gopnik 236-343.
6. See Rosenblum.
7. For an extensive analysis of Delaunay's use of the Astra advertisement, see Rousseau.
8. Varnadoe and Gopnik's text and sources in *High and Low* provide a tremendously rich resource for the historical study of urban advertising.
9. See Wlassikoff and Bodeux.
10. Intriguingly, this was the same term used by Chéronnet (see above). This may suggest that the term "hallucinatory" was in fact an accepted attribute of these enormous billboards.
11. In "Lifeline," Magritte notes: "In my view, this detached way of representing things is characteristic of a universal style in which the manias and minor preferences of the individual no longer play any part. For instance, I used light blue when it was necessary to represent the sky and I never represented the sky, as certain bourgeois artists do, to give myself the opportunity to show such and such a blue next to such and such a grey for which I might have a preference" (46). In a 1948 letter to his friend Louis Scutenaire, Magritte writes of his "disgust at being sincere" (Sylvester 167). For Magritte, at issue was not the sincerity of the artist, but the effectiveness of the image.

12. For de Chirico's stylistic debt to various modernist painters, see Rubin.
13. Roque offers a different analysis of Nougé's concept of *transfiguration*. For Roque, *transfiguration* is used to describe those works by Magritte where one object seems to transform itself into a different object (a bottle becomes a carrot, for example); or where an object is represented by a word (in a sense, it is transformed into a word). See Roque 16-19.
14. Recently, Christina Kiaer has offered an analysis of the Soviet Avant-Garde that takes into account theories of consumption as well as production. Her argument suggests that Magritte's attention to modes of consumption as I've outlined it, while not applicable to Brik's position as presented here, has certain affinities with other Soviet theoreticians and artists.

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