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A Lacanian Gaze at René Magritte

One of the most important concepts Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) developed is the idea of the mirror stage, which “seems to have come to him from his regular conversations in 1932-3 with Salvador Dali” (Diatkine 649). In the conversation, the great thinker and the artist influence each other. Both Salvador Dali (1904-1989) and René Magritte (1898-1967) are surrealists, and applying Lacan to viewing René Magritte’s various paintings certainly clears up the puzzles left by the painter because most viewers consider Magritte’s works difficult and obscure. Although there is no solid document showing whether Magritte was, in any way, influenced by Lacan, this paper offers a close reading from the Lacanian perspective to several of Magritte’s paintings.

Magritte and Lacan approximately live in the same era, and it is likely that they influenced each other.¹ René Magritte, a Surrealist painter, was born in Lessines, Belgium. He is a philosophical artist, who expresses his ideas of philosophy through his paintings. Magritte, according to James Harkness, “very slowly grew bored with painting as an end in itself” and “[h]e disliked being called an artist, preferring to be considered a thinker who communicated by means of paint” (2). Just as Eric Wargo describes: “René Magritte thought of himself not so much as a painter [but] as a philosopher—one who used the medium of images instead of words in order. [...] While he worked in the medium of images rather than words, many of Magritte’s most philosophical images explore the

¹ 如王國芳、郭本禹所著《拉岡》所言：「超現實主義作家善玩文字遊戲以及語言倒亂等特點直接影響了拉岡的語言和寫作風格，使用玩笑和雙關也成為拉岡的特殊風格之一。」(頁 43)

interrelationships of images and words, and of words and images, in a direct way” (47).

Magritte sees himself not so much as a painter but as a philosopher, and thus a large number of his paintings are philosophically meaningful. Therefore, applying Lacanian ideas to his works helps resolve the puzzles and provide another perspective of seeing.

The object of the Lacanian gaze is the object of the act of looking, or the object of the scopic drive (Evans 72). Dylan Evans continues to illustrate: “The gaze is therefore, in Lacan’s account, no longer on the side of the subject; it is the gaze of the Other” (72).

Evans also compares the gaze and the eye:

Lacan now conceives of an antinomic relation between the gaze and the eye: the eye which looks is that of the subject, while the gaze is on the side of the object, and there is no coincidence between the two, [...] When the subject looks at an object, the object is always already gazing back at the subject, but from a point at which the subject cannot see it. This split between the eye and the gaze is nothing other than the subjective division itself, expressed in the field of vision. (Evans 72)

When we gaze at something, we not only look at it and concentrate on the subject at which we cast our sight, but the subject also looks back at ourselves, which makes the conversation begin. When viewers cast the gaze at the paintings, “the subject also tries to adapt himself to it” (Murphy 79), anticipating the react of the viewers. The gaze is related to *object a*, as Murphy defines it: Lacan’s notion of gaze is “vision, representation and that elusive thing behind both vision and representation that slips forever from our grasp—object a” (79), and the gaze “surrounds us from all sides even before we are born” (79). The gaze comes along with the Other, and “is not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other” (Lacan 84). The Other here is the social scheme, and our way of seeing is dominated by it.

One of the social schemes is language. When Bruce Fink discusses the Lacanian theory in the relationship between the analyst and the analysand, he defines the real as “what

has not yet been put into words or formulated” (49) and also as “what Freud calls trauma—traumatic events [...] that have never been talked through, put into words, or verbalized” (49). Yet, Fink continues to elaborate: “This real, according to Lacan, has to be symbolized through analysis: it has to be spoken, put into signifiers (‘signified’)” (49). Here Fink deals with the idea of the real, first unspoken, then put into words. Our understanding of ourselves and the world is very much structured by language, “language preceding our birth, flowing into us via the discourse that surrounds us as infants and children, and shaping our wants and fantasies” (Fink 49). However, Magritte uses his painting to subvert our belief by telling us what we see is not what it really is.



Figure 1.
The Treachery of Images, 1929.
Oil on canvas, 60 x 81 cm.
Los Angeles County Museum
of Art

One has a name and thus its existence is definite, just as Fink writes, “When Lacan says in [Seminar XI] that the subject’s being is eclipsed by language, that the subject here slips under or behind the signifier, it is in part because the subject is completely submerged by language, his or her only trace being a place-marker or place-holder in the symbolic holder” (52). However, Magritte questions this rule by saying what appears to be a pipe is not a pipe. The tag of language is ripped off. The subject’s cover of language is ripped off.

The pipe painted on the canvas, according to Plato, is certainly not a pipe, but simply a

form of mimicry, just as the Platonic term shows: three times away from truth². However, Magritte here takes art into another level by stating that the pipe painted on canvas is not a pipe, but a genuine art work, a painting with its own life and value, and not simply mimicry. Eric Wargo also cites Lacan: “Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an *itself* that is behind” (65, emphasis original) Many critics keep asking questions of the meanings of this picture, and Feng-jung Liu says there is no single correct answer but involves many layers of meanings. The representation here does not reform the object, but rather defamiliarizes.³

In Lacanian perspective, there are two signifiers here: the word, “a pipe,” and the pipe drawn on the canvas. Both of them represent the Symbolic pipe. Michel Foucault also says, “Yet perhaps the sentence refers precisely to the disproportionate, floating, ideal pipe—simple notion or fantasy of a pipe” (16). The artist presents the notion of a pipe, but the viewers are haunted by the language written below. As Harkness analyzes, “In the Old Testament, the Word is the Beginning (of Creation)” (6), so our way of understanding the world is dominated by language and the word is the beginning of knowing. From the Greeks to the end of the sixteenth century A.D., the name of the father, i.e., “the language of Adam” (6), remained dominant. He continues to illustrate the history of the Word:

Even with the arrival of the Renaissance, Christian Europe continued to give the Word—religious revelation—precedence over both reason and the evidence of the senses as final index of the Real. During the Enlightenment, *les philosophes* often regarded words and things as more than artificially linked, witness the prominence of onomatopoeia and the principle of

² Plato states that we have three beds in Book X, *Republic*: one exists in nature, another is the work of the carpenter, and a third is the work of the painter. He claims, “The imitator or maker of the image knows nothing, we have said, of true existence; he knows appearances only” (34), and considers art inferior, just as his statement shows, “The imitative art is an inferior who from intercourse with an inferior has inferior offspring” (35).

³ Translated from “此作品或許意指「再現(representation)」(或任何「再現」)並非它所再現之事物。此作品可被視為某種「去熟悉化(defamiliarization)」,無人習慣於觀看事物且賦予標籤以致無法看到其深層與特殊性。”(劉 13)

“similitude” in the abundant universal language schemes of the period. In the nineteenth century, Romanticism’s intense aesthetics (especially in the poetry of Mallarmé) conferred upon the Word a mystical substantiality affording the writer new stature as heir to the religious visionary and the epic hero. In our own day, finally, a complex, mathematicized, but still recognizable variation on the theme lies in the work of the Cartesian Noam Chomsky. (Harkness 7)

Just as Freud thinks the unconscious is structured like language, “[m]ajor schools of traditional Western thought were unable definitively to separate language from its objects” (Harkness 8). However, the history of the word is overthrown by René Magritte’s sentence, “This is not a pipe,” and Harkness also writes:

The mystical, Platonic identification of words with the essences of things is what many of Magritte’s canvases vigorously assault. Just as in Saussurean linguistics words do not “refer” to things, in Magritte’s Surrealism the painter’s images do not really “resemble” anything whose sovereign presence would lend it the aspect of a model or origin. (Harkness 7)

The declaration abolishes the Platonian contempt of imitation, declares the independence of the work and the artist, and also validates the value of the signifier/a painting. Art is for art’s sake, and likewise, Harkness analyzes, “From Klee and Kandinsky forward, modern art declares that a painting is nothing other than itself, autonomous from the language that lies buried in representational realism” (9).

Magritte not only draws pictures on objects, but he also focuses on people’s portraits, such as the following one:



Figure 2.
Attempting the Impossible, 1928.
Oil on canvas. 116 x 81 cm.
Toyota Municipal Museum of Art,
Toyota Aichi

This painting depicts the traditional masculine writing as the dominant way of narration, just as in Margaret Atwood's *Aias Grace*, Grace, while going through the pre-Freudian talking therapy with Dr Simon Jordan, thinks, "while he writes, I feel as if he is drawing me: or not drawing me, drawing on me—drawing on my skin—not with the pencil he is using, but with an old-fashioned goose pen, and not with the quill end but with the feather end" (79). That is, the male, dominant figure is seducing her while writing her testimony down. This picture obviously mocks the situation between a male painter and a female model, and the model's being is constructed through the painter's eyes and hands, i.e. seeing and painting. On the other hand, the female model seems lifeless, gazing at the distance.

In this picture, the woman is being created through the brushes of the painter. It is like Lacan's idea that children sense their own being through the mirror stage, i.e., his identity is constructed through the mirror image of himself. The painter here is the mOther of the nude, as a creator and also the Other, and the woman being painted is the subject "caused by the Other's desire" (Fink 50, emphasis original). The painter, though a male, is the mother/creator of the woman; his desire leads to her existence.

All the subjects in art works are caused by the Other's desire; especially like the

following painting, the crimson of the dress and the wall triggers viewers' desire:



Figure 3.
The Lovers, 1928.
Oil on canvas, 54 x 73 cm.
Private Collection.

This painting by René Magritte is commonly associated, by art critics, with Magritte's traumatic experience at the age of fourteen.⁴ Magritte's mother, Régina Bertinchamp committed suicide and was drowned in 1912. When her body was found, her face was covered with her pajamas. They did not know whether she decided to cover her eyes so as not to see the scene of her death or it is done by the flow of the river.⁵

Slavoj Žižek cites “a vulgarized version of narrativist-deconstructionist psychoanalysis” deployed by John Gray, author of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*: “since we ultimately ‘are’ the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, the solution to psychic deadlock lies in a creative ‘positive’ rewriting of the narrative of our past” (125). Although Žižek considers this point as “[r]idiculous” (126), he continues to illustrate it, “let us not forget that it also had its politically correct version, that of ethnic, sexual and other minorities rewriting their past in a more positive, self-assertive vein” (126). Likewise, from a conventional art critic's view, René Magritte creates this painting as a way to rewrite the past, to relate the scene of his mother's death with a happier scene—a couple kissing—and by

⁴ 如高榮禧於《西方藝術中的女體呈現—傅柯的啟迪》所言：「馬格利特另幅名為〈戀人〉(The Lover, 1928)的畫，其中兩位戀人的頭部皆被衣物包裹，似乎可以逆溯馬格利特青春期的重大創傷經驗：14歲時，在河邊找到屍體時的母親，其睡衣倒翻纏在臉上而裸露出身體，想必這一幕景象曾深深地影響馬格利特日後的創作。」(頁65)

⁵ In Suzi Gablik's book, *Magritte*, translated into Chinese, a passage is cited to describe the death-scene of René Magritte's mother: “這位畫家的母親自己投入水裡，當他們找到屍體時，發現她的睡衣纏在她的臉上。沒有人知道是她用睡衣把自己眼睛遮住，不去看她所選擇的死亡，還是水流把她遮起來的。”(19)

doing so, the traumatic experience is rewritten.

From the Lacanian gaze, this painting shows a sense of “jouissance,” which, according to Freud’s interpretation, is “horror at pleasure of his own of which he himself was unaware”⁶ (Fink 60). In this painting, both of them are attracted to someone unknown with the face unseen, and thus horror but also pleasure occur. The pain of his mother’s death is transformed into jouissance, just as Eric Wargo analyzes Magritte: “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” (59).

Hsin-tien Liao argues that the way of seeing is very much based on the western tradition of “ocularcentrism”—“the world is comparatively established by the manifest and the latent, and the visible and the invisible” (3). However, this painting by Magritte overthrows the western tradition of the perspective.⁷ Through the perspective way of seeing, the viewers are supposed to be omniscient, but in this picture, the couple’s faces are covered with cloth. Thus, the power of viewing is abolished. In Magritte’s paintings, rationalization in visuality collapses.

Aside from *The Lovers*, which hides faces from viewers, Magritte also creates a series of paintings of unsighted faces, and these paintings violate our conventional viewing rules. When we cast our glance at the portraits, we are supposed to see the faces of the men being painted. Just as Lacan says, “The painter gives something to the person who must stand in front of his painting which, in part, at least, of the painting, might be summed up thus—*You want to see? Well, take a look at this!* He gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one’s weapons” (101, emphasis original). However, when we are ready to look at the

⁶ Quoted from Lacan’s Seminar X.

⁷ Liao states that the visual rationalization is one of the great events in the Renaissance, and the perspective stands for the outcome of it. (廖新田指出“將視覺理性化是西方文藝復興時期最偉大的事蹟之一，[...]透視法代表視覺理性化的成果” (8-9) 。)

pictures, our perspective is blocked by an object in Magritte's several paintings.



Figure 4.

The Son of Man, 1964.

Oil on canvas, 116 x 89 cm

Private Collection

Figure 5.

The Man in the Bowler Hat, 1964.

Oil on canvas, 65 x 50 cm.

Private Collection

If we ignore the possible implications of the apple and the dove for a moment, the face seems to reveal a deeper meaning. The face is the most obvious signifier of a person, but it is blocked here. In the pictures, the unseeable face is dissociated with the whole body; in Lacanian terminology, the covered face can be seen as “the imaginary PART-OBJECT, an element which is imagined as separable from the rest of the body” (Evans 125). The covered face is the *object a*, which “is both the void, the gap, and whatever object momentarily comes to fill that gap in our symbolic reality” (Homer 88).

Žižek cited Greene’s observation in *The Power and the Glory* that it is impossible to feel hate if you visualize a man or a woman’s face; but if hatred is a failure of imagination, then, for Žižek, pity is a failure of abstraction. Here Žižek seems to say if we can imagine a man clearly, then it is unlikely to hate him. It can also be inferred that the face, as a signifier, is solidly associated with his identity and how others define him. However, if the face cannot be seen, is the identity lost? Wargo describes Magritte’s idea: “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” (65).

Through the Lacanian concept of the Real, the pipe certainly is not just a pipe, but a work that reminds us of the dominant Other—language. Also, by means of his theory of the mirrore stage, desire and jouissance, we can, when looking at *Attempting the Impossible* and *The Lovers*, think outside the box of of dominant male painter’s role and the conventional trauma theory. Lastly, the Lacanian idea of *object a* explains the meanings of the blocked faces in *The Son of Man* and *The Man in the Bowler Hat*. All in all, this paper hopes to offer a niche to understand René Magritte’s works better through the Lacanian eyes.

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