1. INTRODUCTION

The enormous growth of interest in the work of René Magritte is testimony to his life as a creative person. The life and work of such individuals can be viewed from a multitude of perspectives; no single one accounting for things in their entirety, yet each contributing in some way to an understanding of the whole. We thereby come to understand their historical moment, psychological being, and forms of creativity. Some of these perspectives are those of art history, art criticism, and psychoanalysis. The view I wish to present is that of the cognitive psychology of visual perception, as this too may further our understanding of Magritte. As a cognitivist, Magritte creates the necessary and sufficient conditions which enable the visual system to dynamically alter perceptual organizations. This is especially true with regard to our perceptual experience of what is occluded (covered and behind) and what is not. I wish to examine the ways in which Magritte creatively allows us to manipulate occlusion in five types of perception. These categories of perception are that of figure-ground, aperture, transparency, reflection and complete occlusion.

2. ART HISTORY / ART CRITICISM

Magritte has received the greatest amount of attention from those perspectives in which he is viewed as a part of the Surrealistic movement—a response to the insanity and carnage of World War I. [1] Not merely a response to other artistic movements such as Dada, but also an “in your face”, counter-conformist reaction moving away from realism to dream-nightmare imagery in which the boundaries of consciousness are loosened and rendered more fuguelike. Hammacher discusses this focus as that of the experiences of half-sleep, or those just prior to waking and points to Magritte’s fascination with the lucidity of these mental events, while also being aware of their fuzzy distinction from memories of the waking state. [2] From these descriptions we could also place it in what is called stage 1 of non-REM sleep.
Anyone attempting to store in memory the titles of even a short list of Magritte’s paintings, immediately finds the task quite daunting. Several writers have considered the important role of the relationship between language and imagery in the artist’s work. Jacques Meuris [3] discusses the interesting group process which often led to the naming of a completed work, showing that the intent was not only to raise questions about the meaning of words themselves but to create a poetic marriage between the image related feelings and its title. Suzy Gablik [4] has pointed out the similarities in this regard between the work of Magritte and the philosophy of Wittgenstein in their separate efforts to grapple with the paradoxes arising from language itself. Indeed there are ways in which a painting of a pipe both is and is not a pipe. The viewer is thereby challenged to reevaluate what was conveyed in the painted image, as well as what is being concealed by the image. The omnipresent theme of mystery and intrigue are thereby maintained by Magritte in that the viewer is unavoidably left with a sense of the unknown as well as the unknowable.

3. PSYCHOANALYSIS

From the psychoanalytic perspective, the case history approach is required. Therefore the unconscious wishes, needs, and unresolved psychosexual conflicts of childhood development are the route to understanding Magritte’s creative work. What better candidate for such an approach than the pubescent René, insecurely attached to a mother who throws herself in a nearby river, and whose nude body he sees retrieved many days later, with wet nightgown pulled up over her head. The headless body is made visible to him. This, the focus of his Oedipal desire is now uncovered. The occluded is unoccluded, but lifeless.

Magritte himself was overtly hostile to Freudian thinking. He resisted the notion of interpretation of his work in general, as well as drawing any specific connections between his psychological development and his art. There was no relationship and psychoanalysis could contribute nothing to the mysteries of life.

Ellen Handler-Spitz has elucidated how Magritte’s creativity is related to his adolescent tragedy and its consequences in terms of obsessions with “seeing and knowing and seeing as knowing”. [5] His fixation becomes the conflict between types of looking—forbidden and repulsive looking, impossible, dangerous and aggressive looking. Georgette, the young woman he meets shortly after the suicide of his mother later becomes both wife and sole model for the painter, an object of displaced aggression and misogyny. David Sylvester, the most prominent historian of Magritte,
has called into serious question whether Magritte could have possibly witnessed the retrieval of his mother’s body, as he reportedly told his biographer Louis Scutinaire. [6] Doesn’t this deal a devastating blow to a psychoanalytic understanding of the essential trauma experienced by the thirteen year old Magritte and its influence on his subsequent work? Interpretation is always nourished by flexibility. Psychoanalysis is no different. Perhaps it was the fantasy of witnessing the nude mothers’ body pulled from the river which is all important? The most recent psychoanalytic approach accepts the factual basis of Sylvester’s finding that Magritte couldn’t have witnessed the event and asks us to understand the trauma as typical of all children who suffer the loss of a mother. Kaplan argues that in such cases “screen memories”, however erroneous, serve to camouflage and transform the more intense pain of the actual life of the mother. [7] In this case, what is screened is the long history of deep depression and attempts at suicide by Regina Magritte. Interestingly, from this point of view, Magritte’s strong identification with Edgar Allen Poe has nothing to due with themes of mystery, poetry or the unknown, but rather their shared trauma of maternal death during childhood.

4. COGNITION / PERCEPTION

The cognitive psychology of visual perception is rooted in the work of a small group of European psychologists who founded the Gestalt movement. Their basic question was tantalizingly simple, namely, why do we see things the way that we do? [8] Since what impinges on the retina from the external world is only a complex array of light waves, how is it that we perceive form, shape and movement? Why isn’t our perceptual experience chaotic and incoherent? For the Gestaltists, order comes about through universal principles of organization. Mind has rules to make sense out of the visual world. These cognitive processes are active and may result in a scene being seen in a new and different way. I call these alterations construals. We experience sudden shifts in perceptual consciousness due to a change in underlying organization. One example is a rural Ethiopian version [9] of the well known reversible figure in which we see a young woman whose head is turned away from us, or, an instant later, a construal in which an old woman with much larger nose, almost facing us (see Figure 1).

What had been a youthful neck is suddenly construed as the jutting chin of an elderly face. Note the way in which the same boundary or edge can be construed as a central part of one organization or another: the chin of one woman, becomes the nose of the other. The ear of one
becomes the eye of another.

Led by the many contributions of Arnheim [10], some Gestalt psychologists showed an interest in understanding the relationship between their empirical laboratory findings and art. Several painted their own demonstrations of perceptual effects [11]. Of course, interest in the relation between visual perception and visual art was not limited to experimental psychologists of this persuasion alone [12], and in a general way the psychology of visual perception continues to widen our understanding of art ranging from Renaissance [13] to Abstract. [14]

In what follows I wish to examine five different categories of perceptual organization involving occlusion and the ways in which Magritte provides the basis for changing construals.

5. FIGURE-GROUND

The fundamental issue of why we perceive anything at all was established with the discovery by the Danish Gestaltist, Edward Rubin, of the principle of organization called figureground. [15] Rubin demonstrated that the visual system always organizes the field in such a way so that a segregated whole, a form, stands out against a more poorly defined background. The figure is organized so that it seems to have the quality of protrusion, solidity, and segregation. It seems closer to us. The ground is experienced as behind with the quality of looseness and absence of boundary. What is behind is experienced as continuous. Logically, we can perceive only one organization at a time. Therefore, the perception of figure—figure without background is not possible.
An awareness of behindness is basic to the visual experience of figure-ground. There is always a portion of the ground which is perceived as behind and covered by the figure. Although not seen, it is experienced as being there. A mental process of “filling in”, takes place. Magritte ingeniously plays with construals of the figure-ground relationship in regard to what the perceptual system should organize as occluded. Many paintings exemplify this, including The Ocean, The Titanic Days, and The Magician. In The Endearing Truth the simplicity of the figure-ground construals are clear. If we perceive the textured wall, then the table and alcoves become background (see Figure 2).

At that point when we see the table, with wine, bread and fruit, everything else has become organized as background. What had been figure is now ground, and subsequently shifts yet again (Whether these construals are under conscious control shall be considered later in our discussion). The way in which Magritte manipulates construals of figure-ground is most striking in terms of his choice of objects for juxtaposition. For example, the standing nude woman with a hand over her chest in The Ocean, becomes the erect penis of the reclining bearded nude male, when mind construes him as figure, rather than ground.

6. A P E R T U R E

Some experiences of behindness involve a kind of “looking through” which requires the organization of an aperture or opening. In aperture viewing, hints of what is occluded are available within the aperture, but the visual system must fill in and construct that which is occluded. From
the Gestalt point of view, the aim is to organize the material so that the most complete, wholistic form is perceived. We take the multiple apertures in *Carte Blanche* and see both an entire woman and horse in a forest (see Figure 3).

The humor lies in the alternate construal of it’s impossibility. If we present *Carte Blanche* anorthoscopically, that is, move it behind a stationary vertical slit in an opaque surface, we perceive it void of impossibility: a woman on a horse in front of trees. In fact, research has demonstrated that we don’t need an extended retinal image to perceive an entire form. Mind can construct form using very little information. *The Eternally Obvious* is another case of Magritte’s use of multiple apertures (see Figure 4).

To perceive a complete nude woman is to experience her as being behind five different rectangular apertures. An alternate construal is that of five paintings of segments of her body hanging in front of a wall. Anything which destroys the organization of aperture interrupts our ability to perceive a whole woman. Filling in and completion become more difficult, even impossible. If we move out of alignment or occlude (with two fingers, for example) any two noncontiguous frameworks, we can no longer organize an aperture and therefore cannot see a complete woman. In paintings involving a single aperture, such as *Blood Letting*, we either see a gold framed painting of a red brick surface hanging on a wall, or construe an opening, formed by the frame, and perceive what is behind as brick wall. Occluding the occluding edge, the borders of the gold frame, results in the construal of aperture only.
7. Transparency

In addition to aperture viewing, another way of “looking through” is the experience of transparency (Again, this was an area of early Gestalt interest). [17] Although there is an occluding surface, the scene lying behind is completely available to the perceiver through the occluding surface and its structure is preserved. As Gerbino has pointed out, an essential quality of the experience of transparency involves seeing one color through another. [18] In a fairly large number of paintings, Magritte uses two primary methods which invite construals of transparency. In one approach, a painting on an easel is precisely superimposed over a portion of a scene such that it duplicates, in a continuous way, the occluded scene. In any one of the series of paintings titled the Human Condition, as well as others, such as The Fair Captive or Where Euclid Walked, the visual system moves back and forth between two different construals. We may perceive a transparent surface, (e.g., sheet of glass), which we are looking through, on an easel in front of the scene, or a painting of exactly that portion of the scene which is occluded on the easel. The critical information which Magritte provides the visual system for these construals takes the form of an occluding edge. It is this edge which we use to either organize transparency or solidity. If we occlude the occluding edge, our perceptual experience is fundamentally altered. Placing our finger or an object such as a pen over the vertical occluding edge in any one of the Human Condition paintings, generally renders it to be one of an empty easel in front of a scene, with the top part of the easel
magically suspended in mid-air (see Figure 5).

The construals of solidity or transparency are destroyed. There no longer is an experience of a segregated whole, neither a transparent surface nor an occluding painting. Only an aperture.

A second approach involving transparency is seen in a smaller series of works, such as Evening Falls, The Door to Freedom and The Domain of Arnheim. Here the transparent occluder is made apparent by organizing it as an aperture. The occluding edge is created by representing the occluder as broken. Our experience is that of looking through a broken opening in a glass window. Occluding the occluding edge, results in the destruction of aperture and our perceptual experience reverts to that of transparency. However, Magritte does something more. He allows us to visually raise the question of whether our experience of transparency is real at all. He asks us whether there is such a thing as transparency, by duplicating shards of the occluded scene as figure. Is the sun of Evening Falls figure or is it ground [see Figure 6)?

Is it transparently occluded or an occluder? Can we imagine of ourselves as Magrittian and add new complexity to this painting by removing the complete sun, leaving only shards of sun, and thus allow the visual system to organize yet another construal?

8. Reflection

Reflection is not a given. Perception of a reflective surface must be organized by mind as a segregated whole. In certain ways the necessary cognitive processes are similar to the construction of a transparent sur-
face, with the major exception of duplication. We learn that a reflective surface reveals itself through duplication of action and image. We reject the synchrony as coincidence, and organize the surface as reflective. Depending on angle of regard and distance it is usually the case that a mirrored surface can be construed as aperture (Some reflective surfaces can be construed as transparent, as when we admire our reflected self as we pass a shop window, only to then become aware of someone behind the glass, gazing at us). Magritte allows us to violate the duplication requirement of reflective surfaces. In *Not To Be Reproduced*, a quick glance does not provide reason to perceive reflectivity, although that organization occurs rather quickly (see Figure 7).

More likely we may initially perceive the reflective surface as aperture. Occluding the borders (gold frame) of the reflective surface, results in the construal of one person standing behind and partially occluding another. The construal of reflectivity is no longer possible.

9. COMPLETE OCCLUSION

The more diminished the information available to the visual system, the more difficult the construction of behindness. This is most striking in the very small number of paintings in which Magritte makes an effort at what I refer to as complete occlusion. It is not just that we perceive two covered heads kissing in *The Lowers* (see Figure 8).

We construe aspects of the faces behind, in terms of nose, chin and forehead. At the same time that they could be many possible faces, it is also the case that they could not be many other faces. We construct a
delicate nose and no longer perceive a jutting chin. It is worth noting that the mouth-chin-nose border shared by the figures can yield a construal in which there is a shift in the perceived relationship regarding which face is closer to us.

10. CONCLUSION

The standard twentieth-century explanation of why we see the same entity in new and different ways has been that of neural satiation. Simply put, after one set of neural cells fatigue, another set become activated
resulting in a different organization, a new construal. Prior to his death, the perceptionist, Irvin Rock Rock, presented evidence that the capacity to organize and reorganize the proximal stimulus can best be understood in terms of cognition rather than neural satiation. In this view, mental processes (not always under conscious control), such as intentionality, attention, and knowledge are crucial in the perceptual experience of construal. Therefore the complex changes in perception are neither spontaneous nor automatic. This makes sense of situations in which we must elucidate our perception of a Magritte painting to another observer before they too have the experience.

A brief trip to the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique in Brussels, to view their Magritte holdings, produced an unexpected surprise: a book to instruct children about Magritte. Using the painting The Secret Double, it begins with an easel holding an empty picture frame in which one is instructed to place it over a number of images. A series of holes in another page invites one to “look through” at other images for a sense of mystery. One is then required to cut out parts of images and place them over or next to others, producing figure-ground construals. Finally, an irregular cut-out aperture within the head-shoulders of the figure invite us to place parts of The Secret Double behind it. One approach to introducing children to an initial appreciation of Magritte is by allowing them to construct construals of perceptual occlusion.

REFERENCES


[9] I wish to thank Dagmawit Belaineh, a student in an introductory psychology course of mine, whose drawing, from childhood memory, I use to illustrate construal.


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