MULTIPLE SOLUTIONS TO THE
"PROBLEM OF THE WINDOW":
A HISTORIOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO RENÉ MAGRITTE'S
PAINTINGS-WITHIN-PAINTINGS

Molly Harrington

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Professor Pam Simpson, Advisor
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I.

Introduction

René Magritte continually revisited and added to his series of paintings-within-paintings throughout his career. He created at least thirteen oil paintings and twelve gouaches of this particular subject, beginning in 1931 and ending in the year of his death, 1967. These mesmerizing images feature a painting of a landscape resting on an easel directly in front of that very portion of the same landscape, often seen from inside a room and through a window or doorway (e.g. *The Human Condition*, fig. 1). The painting-within-a-painting series is often called just that in literature, but I will call it the *Fair Captive* series after the English translation of *La Belle Captive*, the title of the first image in the series (fig. 2). This title also encapsulates the message of the entire series, which is about an artist’s attempt to hold a beautiful landscape captive on a canvas. While most art historians who have worked on Magritte address this series, some devoting more time to it than others, there is not currently a book focusing only on the *Fair Captive* series and there does not seem to be a consensus about the definitive meaning of the images or about how they should be viewed. The paintings-within-paintings are sometimes recognized as a category of their own, sometimes grouped with others of Magritte’s visual puns, and sometimes not mentioned at all.²

Magritte created several more paintings and gouaches with slight variations on this theme, and of the variations I find most relevant the group of paintings in which a window revealing a landscape is shattered but the broken pieces of glass retain the image of the landscape (e.g. *Evening Falls*, fig. 3). Other Magritte paintings feature obstructed scenery and easels or

decorative frames, but I have limited my study to those that involve either a window or door, and a painted canvas or painted windowpane specifically. These are the most common "types" in the series, and the ones that speak most directly to the "problem of the window" that Magritte attempted to solve, and to his philosophy on the relationship of art to thought and reality.

I intend to look at the historiography of interpretations of Magritte's *Fair Captive* series to find the strongest methodology for the series specifically. Because Magritte returned to the *Fair Captive* theme so often throughout his career, I believe that finding an effective methodology for these twenty-five paintings and gouaches will suggest the most effective way to think about Magritte in the twenty-first century, especially in the context of contemporary artists who claim him as an influence.

René Magritte was an incredibly prolific artist. He is best known for his visual puns, especially *The Treason of Images* (fig. 4), which is arguably more famous than Magritte himself. He often returned to the same themes over and over, making copies of his own paintings or changing small details so as to change the message of an image. While art historians have continued to address Magritte, it seems that the scholarship that takes him most seriously appears after the advent of Pop Art, a movement that had much in common with Magritte's intentions in creating art, although Magritte actually disapproved of Pop. This is a common problem in literature on Magritte: the artist himself almost always disagreed with what was written about him. Some consider his paintings jokes, others deep metaphors for mankind, but Magritte disagreed with both assessments.

Magritte wrote and lectured about the purpose of art, the relationship of art to the world and of images to words, and had very clear ideas about what painting should attempt to do and

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what it should not. While these ideas were often in line with those of the Surrealists, he disapproved of the use of psychic automatism, dream imagery and Freudian analysis—methods key for other Surrealists. His academic painting style also set him apart from abstract surrealists: though he passed through a period of geometric abstraction at the beginning of his career, his signature style is realism with unrealistic or shocking subject matter.

Magritte did not live the life of a quintessential artist. His modest middle-class lifestyle was quite unusual for a member of the Surrealist group, although his friends in the Belgian Surrealist circle were more conservative than those in André Breton’s Parisian milieu. He often wore a bowler hat much like the one that appeared in so many of his compositions, once telling a friend he preferred a mass-produced version to a stylized fashionable one, which may be indicative of his self-effacing nature. He married young and was faithful to his wife until his death. Georgette kept him on a regimented painting schedule, setting up a corner of the living or dining room for Magritte to work. Magritte’s early career was more typical of a businessman than a free-spirited artist. He worked variously in a wallpaper factory and for a publicity agency, designing posters before his first exhibition of semi-Cubist works in 1920 at Le Centre d’Art in Brussels. Magritte left Belgium only twice during his career, once to make connections in Paris and once during World War II. During his short time in Paris he isolated himself from Breton after a disagreement. From then on, he had a tumultuous relationship with the father of

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8 Gablik, 154.
9 Ibid., 23-4.
Surrealism, sometimes contributing to "mainstream" Surrealist journals but also painting a series in the 1950s entitled The Art of Conversation (fig. 5) that openly mocks the Parisian Surrealists.¹¹

But to succinctly summarize Magritte's life, or at least what is written about it, one needs only mention one event that happened during his childhood. In 1912, when Magritte was fourteen years old, his mother committed suicide by drowning herself in the Sambre River. Although Magritte did not speak of his mother's death in adulthood, he gave his account of the event to his friend Louis Scutenaire. The image of his mother's body pulled from the river over a week later with her nightgown covering her face remained lodged in his memory forever.¹² He probably never actually saw this, but historians have treated it as valid information because it is significant that he believed he saw his naked mother with her nightgown shrouding her face.

Magritte wrote to his friends about an extreme depression that he felt periodically throughout his life: a result of growing up with his mother's depression and later dealing with her suicide.¹³ Certainly, we can see evidence of Magritte's fixation on his mother's suicide throughout his art, from The Lovers (fig. 6), which features a male and female with faces shrouded in white cloth, to Musings of a Solitary Walker (fig. 7), with a bowler-hatted man walking away from a corpse by the river. What I was most interested in, however, were those of Magritte's images that do not feature obvious references to this life-changing tragedy, images without humans in them.

I believe that a thorough examination of the Fair Captive series could be the key to understanding Magritte's entire body of work. I intend to look at the historiography of literature on the Fair Captive series, taking into account what has been said and what has not, to find the strongest method for analyzing the series. I will often extend an author's argument to apply it to

¹² Gablik, 22.
the series or to argue for or against the use of a certain methodology. I realize that the three methods I have chosen are not the only methods for analyzing Magritte, but I find these to be the most common and the most important, especially because they contrast very sharply with one another.

I will first examine the *Fair Captive* series from a formalist point of view, emphasizing Magritte’s choice of an academic painting style to argue that his academicism added to the meaning of this series. I will demonstrate that Magritte was aware of formalist theory and of his contemporaries’ use of geometric abstraction, and that he used the *Fair Captive* series as a critique of both modernism and academic landscape painting. I will then look at how historians have applied psychoanalysis to the *Fair Captive* series. Although this series has not received as much attention as other Magritte paintings, it can nonetheless be connected to biographical details. I will argue that while most art historians apply Freudian concepts to Magritte, D.W. Winnicott’s object-relations theory is most useful for the *Fair Captive* series. Finally, I will consider the series from a semiotic and structuralist standpoint, focusing on the titles of images and the easels as signs with multiple meanings. Primarily, I will focus on the idea of canvas, easel, and window as frame and how these elements denote the power of the artist and the artist’s choice to frame how we see the world. Although most recent scholarship on Magritte has taken a post-Freudian approach, I will argue that a return to a more traditional examination of formal elements is appropriate and necessary for a full understanding of the *Fair Captive* series, and of Magritte’s work in general.
II.

Holding the Fair View Captive: Magritte's Formalism

René Magritte's group of oil paintings and gouaches of paintings-within-paintings reveal a bit of the outside world as seen through an open window or doorway but obscure with a painted canvas just the portion of the view that the canvas itself depicts. The viewer is most interested in what lies behind the canvas, because its presence causes us to question whether it truthfully mimics the natural world behind it or whether the artist has completely invented what we see. Consequently, Magritte's series also reveals a bit of the inside world that causes us to make assumptions about the outside world, and the impossibility of reconciling these two realities.

Magritte's work belongs in a discussion of major developments in perspective and human perception; it refers to concepts developed during the Renaissance but goes further to question whether we can overcome the tendency to assume that painted representations are real, a weakness which may be described by the title of the second work in the series, *The Human Condition*.

Commonly, art historians pay little attention to Magritte's formalism and style other than to contrast his unusual use of academic, realistic painting with that of other Surrealists or modern artists. Formal elements play an unusually important role, however, in discussion of the *Fair Captive* series. The very fact that paintings make up the subjects of these paintings suggests that Magritte's artistic process and choice of style cannot be ignored. Virtually all art historians addressing any aspect of Magritte's work mention the "problem of the window,"¹⁴ which Magritte himself addressed in a 1938 lecture entitled 'La Ligne de vie.' In creating these paintings, Magritte attempted to solve this "problem," which to him was the universal struggle to separate the internal from the external, the view out of one's window from the larger world.

outside, and the painted picture from a past or present reality. Magritte’s window is a pictorial guide and referent, a satirical approach to an art historical cliché, and a metaphor for the phenomenon of perception. His visual statement about human perception of outside reality as a product of internal experience echoes the ideas in Theodor Lipps’s Ästhetik from 1906. Lipps’s empathy theory claims a person’s visual experience is shaped by personal history and emotional memory. The connection between Magritte and Lipps proves that even by intentionally avoiding the style of the period or the ideas of others, one cannot escape form, style, art history or critical assessment. In fact, it is necessary to be aware of the conventions to critique them effectively through painting; it is clear that Magritte recognized this and that the art historians who have written on his abilities did as well.

In 1936, Alfred H. Barr created a chart titled “The Development of Abstract Art” for the catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition, Cubism and Abstract Art (fig. 8). He classified the major art movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into stylistic categories, describing each in one or two words and illustrating its directions of influence with arrows. While Barr acknowledged many diverse categories, he named abstraction as the dominant feature of all modern art, ultimately dividing everything into geometrical or non-geometrical abstraction. Surrealism is here aligned with non-geometrical abstract art, and draws direct influence from Dadaism and Expressionism, each with their own line of influences. Barr thereby created a direct path from Neo-Impressionism in the 1890s to Surrealism’s genesis in 1924. In a formalist approach, Barr uses the chart to emphasize that different styles can be

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15 Ibid.
16 Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2006), 68.
clearly identified by artist’s technique and use of material, and that characteristics of one style
carry over into the next style, creating a clear path of artistic development. Barr’s ideas
influenced much of the formalist thought in the twentieth century regarding the development and
history of Surrealism, the prevalence of abstraction, and the relationship of modern art to older
styles. Magritte began working on the *Fair Captive* series before Barr’s chart was completed,
and so his ideas about the continuous nature of styles and the continued importance of formalism
in art history were not only timely but also progressive.

Maurice Nadeau’s 1944 account of *The History of Surrealism* treats Surrealism as a
rejection of conventional style despite an inability to escape convention. Nadeau describes the
key problem Surrealists saw with other artistic and political groups, but adds that the Surrealists
themselves also exhibit this problem: “Man makes a beautiful cage to imprison the forces of
nature; he succeeds in doing so, but does not realize that he is locking himself inside.”18
Surrealists saw other art movements as failed attempts to capture nature, but Nadeau points out
that the Surrealists, in attempting to avoid capturing nature, have trapped themselves into falsely
believing that what they paint is `more real than reality itself. His use of a Surrealist idea to
critique the Surrealists reveals that Nadeau did not believe a unilateral avoidance of style, form
or tradition could produce a genuine movement with distinct aims, as Surrealists wanted so badly
to do.

Magritte saw a similar problem with the Surrealists and consciously avoided allying
himself with the Parisian group, claiming they could not adequately define themselves: “The
term *Surrealism* gives rise to confusion, and the term *Realism* is not suitable for the direct
apprehension of reality: reality is absolute, and unrelated to the various ways of ‘interpreting’

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18 Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*. Translated by Richard Howard (New York: Collier
Magritte sought to paint reality—not an individual’s interpretation of reality or even what an individual physically sees, but rather the reality that artists fail to capture. In the *Fair Captive* series, Magritte presented the represented canvas as the “cage” that traps the artist and with which the artist fools viewers into believing he has “imprisoned” nature. In doing so, the artist has also fooled himself: he does not realize that what is trapped on the canvas is not reality, and that even an artist sees not the true objective, external nature, but a reflection of himself. Attempting to memorialize nature for continued enjoyment, the painter has only trapped himself into looking at the smaller canvas in place of reality, and thus misses the external scene that lies beyond. Magritte, however, used his painting to reveal the separation between external reality and representation. The title of the first painting in the series expresses precisely these sentiments: *La Belle Captive* (fig. 2), the beauty held captive on the canvas.

Although Surrealists believed they were transcending representability, a concept that traps the artist and viewer, they were trapped by art history no matter their style of painting. Nadeau did not mention Magritte by name in his history, but in addressing the problem of painters attempting to display their knowledge on an unavoidably limited canvas, he may as well have been challenging Magritte to continue to “solve” the problem of the window and the canvas. In truth, we cannot be sure that Magritte knew of empathy theory, Alfred Barr, or Nadeau’s history, but his parallel ideas facilitate further assessment by formalist principles.

Indeed, in a 1964 catalogue for an exhibition at the Arkansas Art Center, even André Breton, the leader of the Parisian movement on which Nadeau focuses, put aside his fickle discontent with Magritte to commend him for being the first to take a humble object and look

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from the vanishing point to everything beyond it. Magritte looked beyond the painted canvas as an object to the possibilities of teaching humans about their perceptual limitations, questioning whether we can ever break down the illusion of the canvas as an object and see reality for ourselves. Breton valued Magritte’s perceptiveness because in it he saw an affinity with psychic automatism, a technique that looks beyond the symbolic to its source in the unconscious of the artist. Magritte actively disagreed with the use of this technique, however, claiming that formal abstraction inspired by the unconscious is just as apt as representational art to trap the artist into believing a fabricated reality: “All the abstract paintings reveal only abstract painting, and absolutely nothing else.”

Magritte’s statement demonstrates his awareness of his style, its departure from contemporary trends and the impact this would have on viewers. Suzi Gablik, in her 1970 biography, showed respect for Magritte’s lack of concern with new painting techniques, naming Magritte as the only Surrealist to display a disinterest in “art for art’s sake.” She claims that those artists who seek to create a style of their own soon exhaust their technique of its fresh possibilities. Magritte’s timeless style, rather, his “faithful rendering of objects” can never be exhausted as a way to visually convey a message, and is not specific to his time period or movement. Gablik believes Magritte will never go out of style because of his formal choices, and will always be relevant even in a discussion of art outside of his lifetime: “the rigour and relevance of his thought have ultimately afforded his work more options for the future, so that

20 Breton was specifically referring to Magritte’s treatment of everyday objects in other paintings, for example his monumental hygiene items in Personal Values (1952) and his claustrophobic rooms with gigantic roses or apples barely contained inside (The Tomb of the Wrestlers, 1960 and The Listening Chamber, 1958), but this assessment of Magritte is also especially well suited to address the case of the Fair Captive series. See André Breton, “The Breadth of René Magritte,” trans. W.G. Ryan, in Magritte (Houston: University of St. Thomas, 1964).
21 Magritte to André Bosmans, August 1959, in Torczyner, 65.
22 Gablik, 101.
his full stature has not, even now, become apparent.”

During his lifetime, few critics or contemporaries would have called his style “timeless,” but rather archaic and hackneyed. It is only with consideration of his entire career, the development of his style, comparison to contemporary work, and its place in formal history that in the 1970s, Magritte’s style was deemed “timeless”.

Maurizio Calvesi connected Magritte to his Flemish and Dutch predecessors in the 1997 exhibition catalogue for *Flemish and Dutch Painting: From Van Gogh, Ensor, Magritte and Mondrian to Contemporary Artists*, and specifically to a few Northern Renaissance traditions Magritte likely drew from. Calvesi cites Felipe de Guevara’s 1560 statement in *Comentarios e la Pintura*: if one considers the Renaissance to be the rebirth of draftsmanship, the Flemish proved more influential than the Italians. Guevara also mentions that Hieronymous Bosch, as the primary Flemish example, never painted something outside of the natural world, even if altered by fantasy. His demons and distorted figures were composites of existing things, and like other Flemish painters he did not look to the past for inspiration but rather outside of his window (fig. 9). Calvesi notes that Magritte took a similar route: rather than delving into his dreams for fantastical imagery, he created mystery out of ordinary things. Unlike Giorgio de Chirico, however, whose *Song of Love* (fig. 10) ignited Magritte’s desire to paint, Magritte did not reverse the scientific notion of Italian perspective to render a world “mediated by the intellect.” Instead,

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23 Ibid.

24 For example, Renée Arb, reviewing Magritte’s 1948 show at the Alexandre Iolas Gallery in New York for *Art News*, felt that Magritte’s neo-academic style makes even his surprising subjects bland, to the point that “Magritte seems to have been left holding his own bag of tricks.” Renée Arb, “Magritte,” *Spotlight on..., Art News* 47, no. 3 (May 1948): 38.

25 The aim of the exhibit was to point out common themes in Flemish and Dutch painting throughout history, linking the techniques of the Northern Renaissance painters with those of their modern counterparts, and likewise comparing the modern painters with contemporary artists.


27 Calvesi, 102.
he maintained standards of one or two-point perspective to emphasize the formal process of 
representation and reproduction. The *Fair Captive* series certainly emphasizes, even over-
emphasizes, the idea of representation with all its weaknesses and the extent to which we rely on 
it. Calvesi considers Magritte’s approach to be a synthesis and continuation of Renaissance 
standards, rather than a satire or critique of tradition. He claims Magritte’s connection to his 
predecessors in the Northern Renaissance tradition gives his style more formal validity than a 
style that vehemently rejects all that came before it, as the Parisian Surrealists practiced.

Whether or not Magritte consciously tried to align himself with Northern Renaissance 
artists, he did acknowledge the episodic nature of art history, and seemed to think that a modern 
artist was free to borrow from any of these episodes. It is difficult to ignore the fact that Northern 
Renaissance painters so often treated the window as the hole through which to see the real world: 
consider Robert Campin’s so-called *Merode Altarpiece* or Jan van Eyck’s 1435 *Madonna of 
Chancellor Rolin* (figs. 11, 12). The window scenes in these paintings reconfigure the reality 
depicted, by bringing the past into the present, and the holy down to earth, just as Magritte’s 
window paintings blur the divide between indoors and out, real and representation.

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28 Ibid.

29 Magritte himself did not see such a strong connection between his work and that of Northern 
Renaissance artists like Bosch: “In my opinion, Belgian painting is only one episode among many in the 
overall history of art...Hieronymous Bosch lived in a world of folklore, of hallucination. I, by contrast, 
live in the real world.” See Remarks by René Magritte reported by Claude Vial, *Femmes d’Aujourd’hui* 

30 In the *Merode Triptych*, the door and window to the Virgin Mary’s private room are synonymous 
with the door to open the triptych itself, and the view out of Joseph’s shop window (fig. 11) reveals 
everyday business in a Flemish street, lending contemporary relevance to a religious tale. In the *Rolin 
Madonna*, the view out of the window behind the two subjects divides the real, external world into holy 
and secular, as well as gives us a glimpse of the artist contemplating the view he has created. See Svetlana 
Alpers, “Interpretation without Representation, or, The Viewing of *Las Meninas*,” *Representations*, no. 1 
(February 1983): 37. Alpers distinguishes between the Northern conception of the world as “being seen,” 
and the alternate view of the world as seen through the eyes of an artist-spectator. The Northern 
Renaissance examples I have given blur this distinction between objective and subjective, as do the 
paintings of Magritte’s *Fair Captive* series.
Some authors have taken a more psychological approach to analyzing Magritte's paintings about representation and human perception. In line with earlier formalist art historians, Fred Halper remarked on the concept of occlusion in vision as it applies to the *Fair Captive* series in the 1999 book *Science and Art: The Red Book of 'Einstein Meets Magritte.* Occlusion here refers to an object preventing a full, unchallenged view of another object or of the background. The *Gestalt* figure-ground theory states that the mind perceives a well-defined figure (a *gestalt*) against a less-defined background, and that both figure and ground are always visible, the existence of one necessary for the other. Even when we cannot see the background, we are aware that it exists behind the figure. Magritte subverts this entire theory with the *Fair Captive* series. Would anything be behind the easel if we moved it? If figure and ground are identical, how do we know which is which? The *Gestalt* theory, Halper mentions, also accounts for a transparent "occluding" figure that leaves the entire ground visible but makes us aware of the figure's presence in front of it. Looking at *The Human Condition I* (fig. 1), for example, one could also read the easel as transparent, so that the landscape in the background can be seen through it, rather than replicated on it.

How do we know that the easel is not holding an empty frame permitting a view of the landscape? Is it a sheet of glass resting on the easel or is it an occluding canvas? The answer, says Halper, is the edge of the canvas that remains just barely visible, indicating that we are supposed to feel as though we cannot see through the easel to the background, even if we think we know what is behind it already. Magritte took this even further in paintings like *Evening Falls, The Key to the Fields,* and the 1949 *The Domain of Arnheim* (figs. 3, 13, 14), replacing the

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32 Halper, 213.
33 Ibid.
easel with a shattered window with an image of the exterior view imprinted on it. A normal windowpane would be a “transparent occluder,” standing in the way of the background but allowing us to see it. Magritte made the existence of the transparent occluder obvious by presenting a scene in which the windowpane would actually block our view if left intact, but allows us to see only because it has been destroyed. Halper questions whether true transparency exists in the world of the *Fair Captive* series if transparency there means mirroring the view that would otherwise be revealed. This scientific approach to Magritte is an example of formalism coming full circle: the method was founded on principles of individual perception and psychology and returns to these same principles at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Eric Wargo dedicated a great deal of time to the single painting *The Human Condition* with his 2002 article, “Infinite Recess: Perspective and Play in Magritte’s *La Condition Humaine*.” He addressed Magritte’s solution to the problem of the window from multiple methodological perspectives, attempting to discover how best to interpret a painting that questions representation itself. He began, however, with formalism, considering Renaissance perspective as well as psychological theories of perception in his analysis. Wargo referred to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who notably claimed that humans experience difficulty separating internal from external actions, and that we must compare what happens inside to something outside. Wargo cited Wittgenstein’s 1933-4 lecture, published in *The Blue and Brown Books*, in which Wittgenstein stated: “I can say: ‘In my visual field I can see an image of the tree to the right of the tower’ or ‘I can see the image of the tree in the middle of the visual field.’ And now we are inclined to ask ‘and where do you see the visual field?’” Magritte seems to have been answering this question as well. Wittgenstein’s ideas about perception are especially interesting

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34 Ibid, 214.
when applied to Magritte, because the concepts of “inside” and “outside” can refer to physical as well as mental distance. The *Fair Captive* paintings illustrate an artist interpreting a landscape *outside* the room via a painting that remains *inside*, just as we understand things that happen in an external reality via the internal reality we construct in our minds. As a Surrealist, Magritte distinguished between these two realities, and made the difference obvious with physical space.

Wargo points out that Magritte had already addressed the problem of perspective and the window in the 1931 *The Fair Captive*, completed before Wittgenstein published his theory. The 1933 *The Human Condition I* can nevertheless serve as an example of these concepts because unlike its predecessor, it takes place inside a room and necessitates the window in order to create the illusion. This, Wargo claims, is a direct reference to the oft-cited metaphor of the picture plane as window onto the world, originally conceived by Italian Renaissance theorist Leon Battista Alberti.36 There is evidence to suggest that Magritte was familiar with some of Alberti’s more abstract concepts. Primarily, Alberti believed a proper way to create a picture would be to create a thinly-woven “veil” and suspend it across a wooden frame, which leaves the desired subject visible but “always presents the same surfaces unchanged.”37 Magritte claimed that during the development of his painting style, he began to see landscapes as if they were “just a curtain hanging in front of [his] eyes.”38 There is a clear connection between the use of a fabric veil to discern shapes and the mental process of converting landscapes into basic forms, and on top of this, the painted canvas in the *Fair Captive* paintings could itself be a type of “veil” that

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still allows a view into the landscape. Further, Alberti’s linear perspective is based on abstract Euclidian geometry, specifically the ideas of line, point and circumscribed plane.\textsuperscript{39} One painting from the \textit{Fair Captive} series is appropriately titled \textit{Where Euclid Walked} (fig. 15), for it not only contains the painted canvas standing in as “veil” allowing us to see the real landscape, but also a road disappearing into the horizon created by the very diagonal lines Alberti described in \textit{De Pictura}. Beside the road extending toward the “centric point” is a conical tower that at first seems a visual pun because it so closely mimics the road. However, linear perspective and optics are techniques used to create three-dimensional space, or a “view,” out of something two-dimensional, or a canvas as “window.” Therefore, Magritte’s two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional tower beside a three-dimensional disappearing road is a testimony to both the importance of Renaissance theory, and Magritte’s ability to employ these techniques within the context of modern painting.

On top of this, Wargo asserts that \textit{The Human Condition I} draws from Leonardo da Vinci’s later reinterpretation of one-point linear perspective. Da Vinci thought that if one looks from anywhere but the single perspective at which the vanishing point seems correct, one will only encounter confusion.\textsuperscript{40} This is incorrect because once an artist creates a geometrical one- or two-point perspective grid and fixes it to a surface, changing positions will not upset the illusion of space created by a two-dimensional image. Leonardo’s mistrust of the peephole technique is important, however, for it led to the development of more complex forms of perspective, as well as established the idea that a painting is a single viewpoint projected over the canvas.\textsuperscript{41} Wargo mentions Leonardo’s interpretation because it helped the concept of fixed perspective to become

\textsuperscript{39} Edgerton, 123.
\textsuperscript{40} Wargo, 51.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.; See also John White, \textit{The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 278-80.
so universal in Western art that it has been expanded into a way of seeing the world, of transforming the objective to the subjective as an expression of individuality. 42

Wargo interprets the transformation from scientific single perspective to perspective as an identity-creating social tool as an evolution, similar to Heinrich Wölfflin’s theory on evolving perception. Wölfflin believed that human perception actually evolves over time, causing us to continually assign new meaning to things we see. Therefore, Wölfflin thought, all change in interpretation is due to a physical change in the process of perception. 43 This seems especially relevant when considering the possibility of Magritte’s easel as a “trap” for viewer and artist alike (as Nadeau suggested.) Magritte certainly recognized a change in perception and perspective over time: in the Fair Captive series he acknowledges the point at which the artist believes he is capturing the one true point of view, but moves past this himself. Magritte realized that the best an artist can achieve is replication, and that the individual artist’s interpretation matters little in comparison to the expression of an original idea seen from a new perspective.

Wargo sees the easel in The Human Condition I as the Renaissance peephole through which we are forced to view the landscape beyond: we want to change viewing positions to make sure we are not missing anything, but the slightest shift would ruin the illusion. 44 He says this is due to the primary function of an image being to distribute one point of view over the entire canvas, so that once in place, only one correct configuration exists and moving will not change our view. 45 Wargo compares this emphasis of one correct viewpoint with Magritte’s belief that getting an audience to understand an idea is too difficult to attempt. Therefore, the purpose of art,

42 Wargo, 51.
43 Hatt and Klonk, 74.
44 Wargo, 53.
45 Wargo compares the easel here to yet another Northern Renaissance element: the anamorphic skull in Hans Holbein’s The Ambassadors (1533), which only seems correct from a contrived angle. The viewer must reconsider The Ambassadors from a distance, almost as an afterthought in leaving the gallery, in order to see the skull correctly. Ibid., 54.
according to Magritte, should not be to evoke multiple interpretations and reactions but should be for the artist to communicate an idea, if only for himself. Magritte argued that art history is full of styles that misguidedy focus on the view of the beholder, but that the beholder’s understanding should never take precedence over the artist’s communication of an idea. Given this, it may seem illogical to think that Magritte would have intended for viewers to read all of these meanings into the easel, as this would assume the viewer could recognize and understand his references. However, the easel is a metaphor for Magritte’s awareness of the impossibility of reconciling artist intention and viewer interpretation, and his choice to avoid an attempt to make the disparities any less jarring. Magritte presents the bizarre and impossible situations of the *Fair Captive* series as if they were painted from life. He renders his subjects recognizable but does not reveal his reasoning or intention, leaving viewers to arrive at their own conclusion, whether it coincides with Magritte’s or not.

Both the content of the paintings and their titles contribute to Magritte’s message. Wargo describes *The Human Condition* as “the dream of a picture actually mirroring reality so accurately that its own material presence is effectively obviated, while in the same stroke revealing just how precarious or contrived this dream actually is, the monumental artifice required to sustain it or the rather far-fetched conditions under which it is possible.” Following this, the actual “human condition,” says Wargo, is what Norman Bryson has called the naïve “natural attitude” with which we want to believe that what we see on a canvas is true, just as we want to believe that words can accurately describe concepts (another of Magritte’s favorite “problems”). We must blindly trust that the landscape is behind the easel, just as we must

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46 Magritte followed with the idea that attempting to create an image that viewers can fully grasp is fruitless unless one uses cinema, which has the singular capacity to convey movement. See Jacques Meuris, *Magritte* (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2004), 151.
47 Wargo, 55.
48 Ibid.
blindly trust any artist to reveal to us some aspect of reality on a canvas. Wargo believes Magritte is not merely being sarcastic in claiming that the landscape existed inside and outside at once, but that what Wittgenstein said was true: all perception is a combination of what is inside and outside of us at the moment.\textsuperscript{49}

Given all of this, what then can we say about the prevalence of formalist analysis of the \textit{Fair Captive} series in the latter half of the twentieth century? Clearly, formalism remains consistently important for art historians. During Magritte’s career the emphasis on formalism as a way to analyze avant-garde art began with Alfred Barr and continued with the work of Clement Greenberg. Nineteen of the paintings and gouaches that make up this series were completed before Greenberg’s major 1955 work, “‘American-Type’ Painting,” but as with most themes in Magritte’s oeuvre, he continually revisited the “problem of the window” throughout his lifetime. Greenberg certainly would look at Magritte differently than many of the critics mentioned here, as he famously preferred Abstract-Expressionism as a symbol of American individualism and freedom. Magritte’s forms, rather than convey raw emotion, serve to create a mysterious and surprising image that facilitates the liberation of the mind from the arbitrary vocabulary (both visual and verbal) to which we are accustomed.

Greenberg claimed, however, that while painting started the shift toward modernism earlier than other art forms, it needed to “overhaul” more conventions in order to make it continually valid in an increasingly rational world.\textsuperscript{50} It seems Magritte was aware of this need to overhaul and to appeal to rationality: he utilized the conventional language of representation, but all the while contradicted convention and posed a challenge to the rational mind. Greenberg wrote, “the devolution of tradition cannot take place except in the presence of tradition,” and that

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 55.

“major art is impossible...without a thorough assimilation of the major art of the preceding period or periods.”51 Magritte not only challenged tradition in the presence of tradition, but his style incorporated and challenged more recent trends as well, even the abstraction of which Greenberg was fond.

Once Magritte established his representational style, he did not change it to match other trends in the art world, and he repeatedly expressed his resentment of abstract dream imagery and paranoia-criticism as applied by Salvador Dalí and other Surrealists. In fact, Magritte changed his style from Futurism and Cubism to the academic realism for which he is known. He identified five stages in the development of his style, effectively giving a formal analysis of his own stylistic history. First, he began the “investigation into movement and rhythm” in a general sense, which resulted in free forms and colors in the composition, followed by “relationships between objects and their shapes” in which Magritte attempted to convey the essence of objects instead of only forms.52 Objects thus incited a “feeling of an abstract existence,” despite “the image we have of them in real life where they are concrete,” as Magritte considered the interplay of two-and three-dimensional figures.53

While his traditional style has received a lot of focus, it would be a mistake to consider Magritte’s beginnings in abstraction irrelevant to the rest of his career. In 1980, Roger Rothman compared Magritte’s paintings from the 1920s to those of Wassily Kandinsky, Jean Arp and Joan Miró.54 Magritte’s affinity with Miró is especially visible in a few of Magritte’s “blob” paintings (see figs. 16, 17). Futurism and Cubism helped Magritte to essentially capture the world he saw on a canvas (literally to hold the fair view captive) and then “to find out what its plastic elements

51 Greenberg, appears in Ross, 236.
52 Meuris, 153.
were." Although he realized early on that capturing a view would serve little purpose other than to experiment with forms, even Magritte was not above the flawed assumption that representation could equal reality. At that point, Magritte focused on shapes and dimensions, where "despite the shifting tightness of natural detail and shade," he began to see the landscape "as though it were but a curtain" in front of him, and he grew "skeptical of the dimension in depth of a countryside," regarding scenes as two-dimensional façades.

It would seem that abstraction should remain important to Magritte judging by this attitude, however he changed direction within the next sentence of his account: "In 1925 I made up my mind to break with so passive an attitude." He regarded abstraction as passive because the discovery and mutation of forms could not sufficiently communicate the mystery of the universe. In order to convey this mystery, Magritte preferred a style that clearly revealed the identity and essence of objects, something he believed was possible without adherence to a specifically modern formal technique.

He thus detoured into a stage he described as "resurrecting the unsettled world," which eventually led the way to "investigation in favor of a mysterious realism," in which he vowed only to paint objects with their "visible details." Magritte noted that an important first example of this is The Window of 1925 (fig. 18): a telling choice, for it demonstrates his interest in the theme of the window and connects his self-described development of formal techniques directly

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56 This is the "flaw" that Maurice Nadeau attributed to the artists of the Parisian Surrealist group. See Nadeau, 47.
57 Magritte, "La Ligne de vie," appears in Rothman, "A Mysterious Modernism," 228. Although I had used this quote to argue for Magritte's awareness of Alberti's method, it also demonstrates his knowledge of abstract painting and his ability to synthesize both representational and non-representational painting techniques.
58 Ibid.
59 Meuris, 153.
to the *Fair Captive* series.\(^{60}\) Alfred H. Barr had categorized Surrealism as non-geometric abstraction, but Magritte dabbled in both geometric and non-geometric abstraction in the development of his style. Rather than rejecting abstraction from the beginning, however, he passed through it to arrive at a different style.

Jacques Meuris, whose 2004 monograph includes Magritte’s analysis of his own style, read Magritte’s ultimate arrival at a traditional style as a precursor to “anti-painting,” a concept that artists like Joseph Beuys embraced in the 1960s and 1970s, and which denied painting as a legitimate art form. Although Magritte still used painting as a medium he had begun to consider the “image”—a word usually reserved for lowbrow visual culture at the time, but which could effectively describe the canvas and easel in the *Fair Captive* series.\(^{61}\) Magritte synthesized Renaissance and modern thought without directly quoting another artist. Although not technically anti-painting, the *Fair Captive* paintings present a sophisticated critique of tradition.

Rothman concedes, “the notion that Magritte’s works are best understood in terms of what they depict, rather than how they are depicted has, more than any other notion, determined the subsequent course of scholarship on Magritte.”\(^{62}\) However, Rothman disagrees with this rejection of formalism, and instead thinks that considering the impact of Magritte’s early career on his later career will reshape our view of Magritte. Rothman wants viewers to consider that perhaps Magritte was not just moving away from abstraction but moving through it differently. The popularity of abstraction in the interwar period precludes Magritte ignoring it altogether. Thus, his use of an academic style is a purposeful critique of modernism itself, requiring

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\(^{60}\) Ibid., 154.

\(^{61}\) Meuris denies that Magritte’s highly unpopular “Renoir” period, in which he adopted the brushwork and color palette of Renoir to paint bucolic scenes distorted by vulgar detail, could be considered anti-painting because it demonstrates knowledge of art history and interpretive skill. However, there is no reason to conclude that others of Magritte’s paintings, namely those in the *Fair Captive* series, do not also demonstrate such an awareness of art history. Ibid., 136; 143.

\(^{62}\) Ibid.
knowledge of modernism in order to convey its message. Magritte was better qualified to create pictorial critiques of modernism and abstraction because he had used these techniques himself. In landscapes, and especially in the *Fair Captive* series, Magritte chose sky blue because he was representing the sky, not because he wanted to show off the paint color. He was aware that his contemporaries would have chosen a blue for its color, but consciously chose the faithful depiction of the sky over any personal expression: Magritte thereby created a new modernism out of the old.

In a second article published in 2007, Rothman described Magritte’s use of an academic style as the ultimate violation of his subjects and of the style. Rather than highlight their beauty, as a traditional academic style would typically do, Magritte turned the things he depicted into just *things*. Using the example of *The Rape* (fig. 19), a classical nude female torso positioned so as to appear as a woman’s face, Rothman claims that the perfect use of the classical nude violates the woman depicted all the more because Magritte has equated her naked body with her face. In so doing, Magritte has also violated the style by pointing out the objectification of females prevalent in the classical tradition. Magritte similarly objectified the easel in the *Fair Captive* series. He rendered the easel in a "dry" academic style that emphasizes the way it passively refers to an external reality, and therefore he distanced himself from both academicism and mainstream modernism.

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63 Ibid., 229.
65 Rothman, “Against Sincerity,” 311. Surrealists also tended to objectify women or emphasize their reproductive organs (although probably with more Freudian concepts in mind than would have had Magritte), and Magritte participated in this often enough that it is difficult to argue that he was definitively admonishing the trend. In *The Rape*, however, it seems Magritte is simultaneously participating in and critiquing this practice.
66 Ibid.
Rothman thus concludes that Magritte’s “manifestly uninventive style of painting is not simply a rejection of avant-garde values but rather a reengagement of them from the other side.” Other art historians had shown an appreciation for Magritte’s imaginative application of avant-garde principles within a traditional aesthetic. Greenberg had made a similar point in his 1955 discussion of the ways to overhaul convention in painting effectively, and Wargo had echoed Greenberg’s sentiments: “It would be a mistake to see any questioning of perspective—in art, history, or theory—as straightforward conceptual or cognitive liberation, without also seeing how independence from some constraining influence can only be articulated through that influence.” Magritte had to use perspective, realism, and abstraction in order to present an effective pictorial critique of these formal elements.

Wargo’s assessments were written in 2002, and Rothman’s in 2007; they had seen the full arc of the Pop movement, Photo-realism and Conceptual Art, styles that make Magritte’s challenge to modernism seem tame. Wargo and Rothman may therefore have been seeking a connection between Magritte’s approach and the conceptual artists’ conscious critique and rejection of the conventions of art history. Although art historians typically mention Magritte’s contemporaries’ distaste for his use of a “traditional,” “academic” style, Magritte in fact demonstrates a knowledge and synthesis of existing techniques, “traditional” and “modern” alike, and art historians have indeed recognized this even before Magritte’s influence on Pop and Conceptual Art. While Barr, Nadeau and Greenberg did not speak directly of Magritte, they influenced the scholarship on Magritte in later years. Soon after Magritte’s death in 1967, Gablik and others began to thoroughly examine the mysterious artist and his style. The fact that most studies of Magritte’s treatment of the painting-within-painting discuss formalist principles,

67 Ibid.
68 Wargo, 64.
especially in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, demonstrates that his appropriation and critique of styles did not go unnoticed. This is important for both understanding his individual works and for connecting his work to a greater chronology of artists. Critical recognition of his formalism plays just as important a role as Magritte’s artistic intent in the continuing dialogue about him.
III.

Magritte’s Human Condition: A Psychoanalytical Approach

Despite Magritte’s infamous statement, “I despise my own past and that of others,” psychoanalysis is the most frequently applied methodology in considering his work. This disclaimer about his past was probably intended to express his disapproval of psychoanalysis as an approach to art and of the Bretonian Surrealists’ use of dream imagery and Freudian symbols. Nevertheless, Magritte’s recollection of his mother’s suicide, accurate or not, has provided material for much psycho-biographical analysis. Though this method may seem better suited to such obviously sexualized images as The Rape or Homage to Mack Sennett (figs. 19, 20) it can be applied in productive ways to the Fair Captive series. At first glance, one could view a canvas in front of a window or landscape as markedly impersonal. Historians applying biography, psychobiography and by extension psychoanalysis to the Fair Captive series would strongly disagree, claiming that sexual desire and repressed memory are present even in images without human subjects. With psychoanalysis, one can reveal the biographical references present in this series, as well as the reasons for Magritte’s denial of his past and rejection of human representation in the series.

Eric Wargo considers not only Magritte’s personal history but also his connection to a “collective past” common to all humans. He asserts that the sublime and our inability to understand catastrophes and disasters disturbs our ontological security, and sees evidence in The Human Condition I (fig. 1) for this bewilderment in the face of nature. Wargo refers to the epic stormy seas of Romanticism that convey the powerlessness of humans, but claims that rather than the powerlessness of adults against nature, Magritte illustrated the powerlessness of children

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70 Wargo, “Infinite Recess,” 62.
against a world run by adults. The sublime in *The Human Condition* is the existence of parents as experienced through the eyes of a child suffering from the “decisive existential perils of childhood.”71 As children attempt to define and understand complex objects in their world, the discoveries that objects can signify more than one thing and that objects can be removed from sight but not gone forever can be challenging. The misunderstandings that arise and the alternate explanations that children make for these phenomena lead to insecurity and a tendency to identify with something outside oneself.

Suzi Gablik also wrote of this deference and insecurity in her primarily biographic account published in 1970. She noted the resemblance between Magritte’s iconic bowler-hatted man and the painter himself, who was known to wear an identical bowler hat and suit to match his unusually unassuming life.72 Furthermore, Wargo argues that not only does the bowler-hatted man resemble Magritte, but that the “self-effacing, chameleon-like easel picture” featured in the *Fair Captive* series does as well.73 Although art historians are often reluctant to connect Magritte’s titles to his subjects, Wargo believes that in the case of the *Fair Captive* series, there are reasons to do so. He interprets Magritte’s definition of the “human condition” as “to not want to be seen, or rather, to prefer to be identified with something other, something ‘behind one’s visible self.’”74 Donning his bowler hat and adopting the guise of the stereotypical petit bourgeois Belgian man, Magritte avoided public recognition as an artist and also the perceived duty of the modern artist to make visible the results of his personal introspection.

Ellen Handler Spitz, in 1994, read the lack of movement in Magritte’s figures, the lack of cohesive narrative or chronology, and the lack of resolutions to the problems presented in his

71 Wargo, 62.
73 Wargo, 65.
74 Ibid.
paintings as a denial of his own past. The *Fair Captive* series lacks figures but also movement or a resolution to the problem, and in fact the attempt to conceal the discrepancy between the canvas and reality caused a problem of its own. Perhaps in stopping time and refusing to complete the narrative, Magritte made these paintings into types, just as he modeled his life after the type of the bourgeois nineteenth-century artist. By assuming an identity, he demonstrated his power as an artist to create characters and alter reality.

One could even take this further and connect Magritte the artist/creator with God the creator. Mary Mathews Gedo’s 1994 psycho-iconographic reading of his imagery uses Magritte’s obsessive religious behavior as a child—from crossing himself hundreds of times in a row to feeling extreme guilt for minor failings—to explain his use of the dove motif. A dove appears in the *Fair Captive* series in multiple versions of *The Domain of Arnheim* (e.g., fig. 14) in which a distant mountain takes the shape of a bird’s head. This immortalization of a symbol Magritte used for himself perhaps indicates a desire to stop time, to blend into nature, to become a type rather than a living human with a real past. The dove is an obvious metaphor for the Holy Spirit, but Gedo says Magritte also saw himself as a Christ figure in early life. This association is interesting, as in Magritte’s life it is not the mother who watches her son die but just the opposite. Spitz also mentioned this twist on the Biblical story, relating it to *The Spirit of Geometry* of 1936/1937 (fig. 21), in which a mother holds a baby boy, but the baby’s head has been transposed onto the mother’s body, and vice versa. This is an uncannily fitting illustration for the reversal of roles at play, and Spitz suggests that it also signifies the level of co-dependence between mother and child.

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77 Gedo, 181.
78 Spitz, 24.
In fact, even before Magritte adopted his academic style, he conveyed his struggle of willing himself to live and to create an identity for himself. One of Magritte’s early paintings, *The Difficult Crossing* (fig. 22), features a threatening storm but also an essential component that ties it to the *Fair Captive* series—a window. Gedo reads the stormy background as a reference to a stormy childhood and to the same feeling of helplessness that Wargo indicated children feel in an adult world, particularly one full of unstable adults. She claims the unstable adult in question, Magritte’s mother, is symbolically depicted in the wooden *bilboquet*: a composite chair leg, chess piece, and tree trunk, fragile and barely able to stand on its own. The title, *The Difficult Crossing*, quite literally refers to a difficult crossing from childhood to adulthood, or from infancy to autonomy, a “crossing” that Magritte never fully completed. If we read the dove on the table at center as Magritte, per Gedo’s interpretation, the severed hand trapping it could be the violent death that trapped him where he was, preventing him from developing further or from making the “difficult crossing” to autonomy and security in adult life. Like the *Fair Captive* series, this painting can only symbolically refer to Magritte’s mother as there are no humans present, other than the severed hand.

That Magritte vividly remembered his mother’s body as it was recovered from the Sambre River precludes a total lack of female influence or presence in his work. Ben Stoltzfus argues that although invisible to us, a human is present in both *The Fair Captive* and *The Human Condition*. The easel has replaced the traditional nude reclining in front of a seascape in two 1935 versions of *The Fair Captive* (e.g., fig. 23). The woman is held captive on a canvas when represented nude on the seashore, just as the seascape is now held captive on Magritte’s painted easel, the scene at large is held captive in a painting, and the painting is held captive in a frame.

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80 Ibid.
and on a gallery wall. Stoltzfus claims that Magritte’s choice of subject matter defines the woman as inspiration, as a muse. The “woman as muse” is another biographical trope of the artist with power to create. Magritte’s muse was his wife, Georgette, whom he married at age 22 and to whom he remained faithful. He often cited her as the reason he changed painting styles or pursued certain subjects. While in *Attempting the Impossible* (fig. 24) he paints her into life, in *He Doesn’t Speak/He Isn’t Speaking* (fig. 25) he claims that she is the true genius behind his work, and that he speaks only through her. He simultaneously creates and is created by Georgette, building his identity around her because he is unable to face a separate identity for himself.

That Spitz, Gedo, Updike, Wargo and Allmer wrote in the 1990s or later is relevant given the rising popularity of post-Freudian psychoanalysis as a method in recent years. The specific post-Freudian psychoanalyst most pertinent to the discussion of this series is D.W. Winnicott. His final work, *Playing and Reality*, explores the intermediate area between internal and external reality, and problems that arise when a child fails to understand fully the distinction between the two. Winnicott claims that children use objects to transition from the internal to the external, and that attitudes toward objects form attitudes toward the world, toward others and toward oneself.

Art historians typically look for evidence of Sigmund Freud’s concepts of fetishism and castration complex in Magritte’s works, largely because other Surrealists consciously solicited this type of analysis. Eric Wargo avers that rather than give an “authoritative and simplistic” diagnosis of Freudian concepts to the *Fair Captive* series, we must consider Winnicott’s object-

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81 Ben Stoltzfus, “Magritte’s Smoke and Mirrors: Reading, Writing, and Art-Magic.” In *Collective Inventions: Surrealism in Belgium*, edited by Patricia Allmer and Hilde van Gelder, 93.
82 Stoltzfus, 93. A notable example was Magritte’s “vache” period, which was highly unpopular and economically unsuccessful, but which Magritte claimed to have abandoned because Georgette disliked it. See Jacques Meuris, *Magritte*, 185.
83 Winnicott was a child psychologist who focused on the development of creativity and imagination.
relations theory when analyzing Magritte’s use of perspective, which in itself is a search for the aforementioned ontological security and awareness of one’s environment.⁸⁴

In *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott asserts that children search for the self by manipulating objects around them, and that a proper balance must be achieved between control over the object and realization that one cannot control things external to oneself.⁸⁵ He stipulates that if an artist searches for himself by manipulating objects alone, he has already failed to discover the truth of himself: his finished creations are static and cannot rectify his “underlying lack of sense of self,” which requires not only creation of but submission to objects.⁸⁶ The use of objects must be flexible; a person must control and be controlled by objects, as well as realize his simultaneous power and vulnerability, in order to achieve true autonomy. The reflection of one’s behavior in play, either by another’s actions or by self-realization, constitutes the personality, or an intermediary between the human and external world common to all.⁸⁷ Without proper development of this intermediary area, a person cannot appropriately participate in social life or creative activity.

A picture is an intermediary between the internal world of the artist and the external world he attempts to capture. The easel and canvas in Magritte’s *Fair Captive* series present a view external to the artist, but in fact this view is still the internal reception and manipulation of the outside world by the artist’s intellect. Winnicott specified that even when children “create” toys out of household items, they are not truly creating but in fact changing their perception and reaction to an existing object. A child will attempt to master anything they are presented with, failing to consider objects as external entities that exist with or without the child, and thus they falsely believe themselves to be omnipotent. Toys, said Winnicott, do not come from nowhere.

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⁸⁴ Wargo, 50.
⁸⁶ Winnicott, 55.
⁸⁷ Ibid., 64.
but from children’s ideas about existing objects. In fact, the object needs to exist on its own before the child encounters and manipulates it in order for playing to take place.\(^{88}\) It is not difficult to see how Magritte’s easel and canvas are toys in this fashion: if the canvas had not already existed as a surface on which to paint, and the easel had not existed as a place on which to rest a canvas, then Magritte’s metaphor for human fallibility, and the Fair Captive series’ “play” on the canvas, window and landscape, could not exist.

Freud had addressed the function of toys in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, in which he described his grandson’s game of fort-da (meaning “here-gone”) in which a child perceives an object to be there, then suddenly vanished, and finally returned to him. This is a game a child can play alone, using a particular object and covering it up with something like a blanket. Freud related this specifically to sexual development, connecting the game to the child’s desire to control his mother’s attention.\(^{89}\) Winnicott also describes the process of turning mundane objects into toys: when children miss something or someone that is not present, they use mundane objects as “transitional objects” or substitutes for the real thing. These games give a child mastery over their solitude by teaching that just because the object or person is out of sight, it has not necessarily been destroyed. When the mother takes place in this hide-and-seek, the child learns to cope temporarily with the absence of the mother, by first suffering in her absence and then experiencing relief with the rediscovery of her face. Wargo wrote that this phenomenon teaches the child “acceptance of paradox, holding contradictory ideas simultaneously.”\(^{90}\) The easel in The Human Condition plays hide and seek with the viewer, simultaneously revealing and blocking the landscape behind it, leaving us as confused as children unaware of the “secret” to

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\(^{88}\) Winnicott, 71.


\(^{90}\) Wargo, 59.
the game. We are unsure whether the landscape has been destroyed altogether, is presented to us in reality, or is just hiding in the distance exactly as we see it on the easel.

Winnicott’s object-relations theory deals with children learning to behave autonomously not just in the external adult world but also in terms of autonomy from their mother, whom they originally believe to be part of themselves. Problems in establishing independence and the ability to act creatively can be closely linked with inability to separate one’s own identity from that of the mother. Accordingly, the easel as transitional object takes on a new meaning for Magritte. The intellectual puzzle of whether the landscape is inside or outside, present or absent behind the easel, is similar to the way that Magritte realized his mother was dead but refused to accept this truth, and struggled to contain her on the canvas without fully confronting his past.

Mary Mathews Gedo reminds us that it is not just the event of Magritte’s mother’s suicide that affected his development, but also her depression, despondence and bizarre behavior prior to her death that Magritte must have witnessed during his formative years.91 As a baby, Magritte felt himself as part of his mother, and remained connected to her longer than he should have because he did not have the “good enough” mother that Winnicott describes. The “good enough” mother will foster autonomy in the child and discourage the child from depending on her constantly, but Magritte’s mother seems not to have done this. Accounts detailing Magritte’s mother’s favoritism toward him reveal this unusual attachment.92 Just as his mother was present but not really there for him in terms of developing a healthy relationship, the canvas and easel are present in the Fair Captive series but may or may not portray the truth about the outside, and may or may not be essential to our view of the landscape. The suffering Magritte’s mother felt

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92 Winnicott, 109.
before her suicide still plagued Magritte in his adult life, and because he remained connected to her, he also felt extreme sadness and lack of purpose frequently throughout his life. 93

This lack of purpose and confidence due to his mother not being “good enough” to allow Magritte to develop while still maintaining a tangible presence in his life raises the question of “where” Magritte was when painting the *Fair Captive* series. Winnicott claims that people are often “inside” experiencing psychic growth, but also live “outside,” in the external shared reality of society. 94 The space between the mother and child during early years of development determines the rest of one’s cultural life, and consequently someone like Magritte who never learned the appropriate spatial relationship from his mother will live “inside” even when participating in “outside” activity. 95 This introspection begins during the “mirror-stage,” a term coined by post-Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan for the moment when a baby discovers himself in the mirror as a separate entity from the rest of the world. Lacan and Winnicott had similar ideas about the necessity of discovering oneself as separate from the mother in order for a productive social and creative life to develop. If one cannot be sure that his mother loves him, he will turn to self-love to compensate, using his image in the mirror as a stand-in for her love. 96 Magritte seems to be stuck in a transitional phase, neither fully connected to nor separated from his mother, and so wavers between introspection or self-reflection and denial of himself.

Gedo provides visual evidence for Magritte’s failure to get past the transitional stage with paintings created at the same time of the early *Fair Captive* paintings. Both *He Doesn’t Speak/He Isn’t Speaking* (1926) and *The Secret Double* (1928) (figs. 25, 26) feature split androgynous faces, perhaps representing Magritte and his mother as one figure and also a forcible separation from his mother before young Magritte was prepared. If Magritte thought of

93 See Magritte, “Varieties of Sadness,” In Torczyner, 72-75.
94 Winnicott, 105.
95 Ibid., 100.
96 Ibid., 113.
himself as connected to his mother, her death would effectively split him as well. The *grelots*, or eerie sleigh bells, inside of the bust in *The Secret Double* seem to Gedo evidence of Magritte’s own uncertainty about his sexual identity.\(^{97}\) Further, *The Spirit of Geometry* from 1936/7 (fig. 21) illustrates Magritte seeing himself in his mother and vice versa, an indication that he did not completely differentiate his identity from his mother’s. His mother’s mental illness and suicide halted his sexual development, and consequently he attempted to reconcile a bisexual identity with an asexual one devoid of any love. Because his mother was unable to love him correctly, he could not picture himself as autonomous and therefore could not love himself either.

The androgynous and hermaphroditic figures in his later paintings also indicate Magritte’s reliance on his mother and on Georgette. By merging male and female identities into one figure, Magritte claims his mother and Georgette as a part of him, unwilling to live as a person on his own. *The Daydreams of a Solitary Walker* (fig. 7) features the bowler-hatted man with his back turned, symbolizing Magritte turning his back on his past, but also a nude corpse that could be male or female.\(^{98}\) While it would be easy to say that this represents Magritte’s mother’s dead body as Magritte saw her for the last time, it could also be a mixture of himself and his mother, a personage that no longer exists after her death. The bowler-hatted man could also be turning his back on his own androgynous identity and attempting to ignore the part of him that died with his mother. Spitz claims that Magritte also illustrated his inability to separate himself from his mother with the *Fair Captive* series, and particularly with *Evening Falls* (fig. 3), which features the external landscape actually imprinted onto the shattered windowpane. She writes that for Magritte, the title is not just a pun, but rather an actual area of confusion for him. The evening of his mother’s suicide *falling*, or occurring, is equivalent in his mind to the evening

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\(^{97}\) Gedo, *Looking at Art from the Inside Out*, 199.

\(^{98}\) Spitz, 29.
falling, or crashing down like the window in the painting. Magritte is the true victim of the suicide, as he is the one left to suffer from his mother’s absence. Living without his mother was especially traumatic since he had not created a distinct identity for himself apart from her.

In a sense, Magritte experienced his own death when his mother died. Because he was clearly still living, this caused him to develop an attitude of denial toward death. The Fair Captive series indicates this denial, as the easel denies our view of the outside and yet we instinctively deny that this representation could be hiding a truth we do not want to see. Wargo thus compares the easel to Jacques Lacan’s sublime object, the object whose “various abstract meanings obscure the traumatic impact of its material presence—a presence which stands in the way of nothingness or nonbeing.” The sublime object is similar to Winnicott’s transitional object, for it fills the void left by a missing person or thing in a child’s life. The existence of a transitional object is productive to the child as it helps them enter the adult world, but the existence of a sublime object can be negative because it represents something that may not actually be there and facilitates denial of death or emptiness.

As a sublime object, Magritte’s easel comforts the viewer, because we do not need to consider whether anything at all lies beyond, we can simply look at the easel and tell ourselves that it presents what is also behind it. Wargo cites John Berger and Jean Clair in suggesting that if there is nothing at all behind the easel, we may further comfort ourselves by believing that the composition creates a two-dimensional puzzle (another child’s game) in which the easel fits exactly into its place so that everything lies flat on the picture plane. With this interpretation, there is no “beyond,” only what we can see at once. Wargo also detects a parallel between Magritte’s easel and Magritte’s psycho-biography: he claims that this denial of the paranoia of

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99 Spitz, 41.
100 Ibid.
101 Wargo, 58.
102 Wargo, 58.
absence can also mean a denial of death, a refusal to think about what comes after one's worldly life. This may have resulted for Magritte in an acceptance of the comforting view that perhaps death is a continuation of life. If Magritte could believe that his mother "lived on" after death, then he need not suffer the loss of part of himself.

Even if it leaves out obvious death imagery and human figures, the *Fair Captive* series can be interpreted as an account of Magritte's relationship with his mother. Magritte denies that paintings can truly represent or stand in for people, and therefore refers to humans in his titles but purposely leaves them out of the composition. After suffering the loss of his mother and the repercussions of stunted identity development, he may have felt that a painting without human presence was a fitting self-portrait or autobiographical image.

Winnicott found that the child's first instinct toward an object is to destroy it, in order to escape harm from it. This desire for security and control of the external world leads to fantasies of destruction in which the child-actor always survives encounters with the unfamiliar. The *Fair Captive* paintings demonstrate aggression in their destruction of the landscape. Thus, the series becomes a fantasy of Magritte's control over objects. Destroying human presence as well as the view of reality behind the easel, Magritte mastered the situation and survived his mother's absence and his memories of her suicide. Winnicott's object-relations theory distinguishes between an initial stage in which infants believe all objects to be a part of them, and a later stage in which they realize objects are external to them, similar to Lacan's mirror stage in which infants discover their reflection in the mirror outside of themselves. Magritte's impulse to destroy his memories, the view into the landscape and the image of his mother suggests that he was trapped between these two definitive stages and instead conceived of objects as external to himself, but still under his control.

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103 Ibid.
Although I argue that Winnicott’s theory is most influential to early twenty-first century scholarly interpretation of the *Fair Captive* series, it would be incorrect to suggest that art historians have abandoned Freud. A key component of Freud’s theory that has been applied to Magritte is the castration complex: when the young boy discovers his mother does not have a penis, he assumes she has been castrated and fears for his own castration. This idea is not in opposition to Winnicott’s object-relations theory because a young boy who perceives all external objects to be part of him would naturally assume all humans have the same genitalia. Post-Freudian art historians tend to look for examples of fear of genitalia or displacement of genitalia to another body part in modern art. To justify this application, Gedo and Sue Taylor, in a 2000 article, mention Magritte’s obsessive devoutness, guilt and nervous behaviors, and speculate that he took place in excessive masturbation immediately following his mother’s suicide, qualifying these as strategies for denying that his mother was gone. Masturbation is a bisexual and auto-erotic fantasy, with it one can believe that he/she is self-sustaining, as Magritte may have wanted to believe after separation from his mother.

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104 Sue Taylor, in her 2000 article “A Shine on the Nose: Sexual Metaphors in Surrealism,” addresses a particular manifestation of the castration complex in Surrealist art. Freud coined the term *glanz auf der nase*, or “glance on the nose” after interaction with a patient who received erotic gratification from displacing the genitals to another body part. The lexicography stems from the English word for the head of the penis (glans), the similarity in physiognomy between the penis and the nose, and the patient’s tendency to displace his genitalia to his nose. Freud believed this displacement arose from the patient’s castration complex: in order to prevent castration or to provide an alternate solution, the patient had taken to considering other body parts to be his genitalia. The key example for Taylor’s argument is Magritte’s untitled drawing from 1948 in which a man’s nose morphs into a penis, which ends in the bowl of the pipe he smokes. It is as if Magritte were purposely illustrating a glance on the nose and “smoking your own pipe,” a metaphor for masturbation. See Sue Taylor, “A Shine on the Nose: Sexual Metaphors in Surrealism,” adapted from “Loving and Loathing the Father.” In Hans Bøllmer: *The Anatomy of Anxiety* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 100.


106 Adams, 197-8.
The *Fair Captive* series clearly demonstrates Magritte's tendency toward displacement and denial of his own sexuality. The easel denies the viewer the privilege to see the landscape, the composition denies the legitimacy of the easel as an accurate representation of nature, and the series as a whole denies human presence. According to Taylor, the series also denies the artistic tradition of reclining female nudes from which it derives its influence. The paintings in which the easel stands on the shore in front of a seascape refer to the tradition of female nudes reclining in front of seascapes, but discount the sexuality of the imagery by replacing the female with an easel. The easel seems to take on the submissiveness, passivity, and demureness typically associated with reclining nudes as it defers to the landscape beyond it. In fact, Magritte followed the tradition during the same period that he was actively breaking it: in 1936, he used his wife Georgette as a model for *Bather Between Light and Dark* (fig. 27), a female nude reclining in front of an open window revealing a seascape. It seems he had this image and others like it in mind when he placed the easel in what is typically the woman's place.

Freud wrote about scopophilia, or pleasure in looking, which is what compels us to look at art. Magritte was continually drawn to his own “problem of the window” and revisited it because he was mystified by the dual existence of the window and the easel. What motivated Magritte to create so many versions of the image and what makes these images popular among audiences is the unseen latent content, which to a Freudian psychoanalyst would be a hidden or displaced phallus, or another symbol of sexual desire. It is gratifying to figure out what Magritte is “saying” with these paintings, because the natural view we should have is displaced onto a canvas, even if it does not resemble or stand in for a phallus. Ellen Handler Spitz has pointed out

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107 Taylor, 111.
that obstructing objects may appear harmless but may hide something bad. We want to know what is hidden without sacrificing the ability to cover it up and “conquer” it when we feel overwhelmed. Magritte’s series illustrates this instinct because it incites curiosity about what exists behind the easel, but if the landscape does not correspond to the painting, viewers would want to cover it back up to perpetuate the flawless appearance.

Eric Wargo argues that with all the connections to be drawn between the *Fair Captive* series and scopophilia, we cannot ignore the Freudian concepts of fetish and castration, and specifically Freud’s reading of blindness in *Oedipus Rex* as a metaphor for castration. The linear perspective in the painting provides for the possibility of elongation of the visual field into infinity. Extending the orthogonals to the vanishing point used to create this perspective would result in a conical phallic image. We cannot see to infinity however, because the easel is blocking our view: it has cut the phallus and “castrated” our “visual pyramid.” This is especially noticeable in *Where Euclid Walked* (fig. 15), because the roof of the tower presents conical phallic imagery which is mimicked by the disappearing street. Wargo qualifies that this interpretation of perspective in the *Fair Captive* series is not entirely satisfying because it does not consider the picture as an object, a weakness that most psychoanalytical approaches share.

Spitz read the denial of the view not as a metaphor for castration but as evidence of Magritte’s Oedipus complex. Given that Magritte never fully developed independence from his mother and allegedly dealt with her death through auto-erotic fantasies, eventually replacing her with another woman, one could speculate that he exhibited the “positive constellation” of the Oedipus complex, though at an older age than what Freud specified. Magritte repressed his love

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109 Spitz, 47.
110 *Oedipus* blinds himself when he discovers that he has killed his father to marry his own mother, and therefore the blindness/castration punishment corresponds to incestuous love. See Spitz, 19.
111 Wargo, 57.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
for his mother and displaced it to his wife Georgette, who acted as a mother and kept him on a regimented schedule for painting. If the *Fair Captive* is a way for Magritte to deny his past and to preserve a memory that he wants to see instead, we can think of the “Fair Captive” as Georgette. He lost his mother and so clung to his wife, attempting to preserve her forever in paintings. Spitz corroborated this interpretation with evidence from contemporary child psychology studies that found that a traumatic event in youth can lead to extreme attachment to one person later in life, and “defensive blindness” to prevent overwhelming emotion.\(^{114}\) Childhood trauma such as the loss of a parent creates a need for constant attachment to one person, a propensity for early marriage and often a lack of creativity.\(^{115}\)

The first two of these attributes seem to apply to Magritte’s relationship to Georgette, but Spitz also suggests that Magritte’s final choice of painting style demonstrates a lack of creativity in its reversion to traditional realism. Spitz points out that Magritte was unwilling to portray objects in any way other than how they look, which could be proof of this “defensive blindness,” of an unwillingness to consider alternate possibilities or appearances.\(^{116}\) I have previously argued that his choice of academic painting is actually an effort to critique both traditional and modern painting, and I find Spitz’s argument for Magritte’s lack of creativity to be unfounded.

A more appropriate way to account for Magritte’s desire to hold Georgette captive on the canvas is a second aspect of Jacques Lacan’s concept of the “mirror stage.” When a child first discovers his own image in a mirror, he perceives himself to be a distinct entity, although this is a misrecognition of the child’s “fragmented body.”\(^{117}\) Humans are split between the conscious


\(^{115}\) Ibid.

\(^{116}\) Ibid.

and unconscious, but the image of a manageable self defends against this instability.\textsuperscript{118} The child perceives his mirror image to be separate from his body, and continuously looks for "the I" outside of himself.\textsuperscript{119} The mirror stage "decisively projects the formation of the individual into history" and thus adult sexuality as it is a product of how one sees oneself in others.\textsuperscript{120} Magritte must have seen himself in Georgette, just as he previously saw himself in his mother. Therefore, as he preserves Georgette on the canvas, he also preserves his own external identity.

These hypotheses about how to apply Freudian interpretations to the \textit{Fair Captive} series are strengthened when we consider the post-Freudian work of Lacan and Winnicott. For example, Winnicott posits that a lack of creative activity is perceived as a sickness, and without the ability to create, a person will feel no desire to live. Winnicott's conception of creativity refers to all action a person is able to take that affects the external world, and so it includes more than just painting.\textsuperscript{121} From a young age, Magritte experienced powerlessness against reality because of his inability to control his mother's mental condition and therefore may have experienced problems developing creativity. A traumatic event will not stop the creative process entirely, but may displace the creativity into another area of life. Perhaps for Magritte, his creative processes after the loss of his mother led to the displacement of his modernist ideas into a traditional painting style. Rather than characterizing Magritte's style as uncreative, as Spitz did, one could instead analyze his style as a reexamination of convention that allowed him control over the ideas he could express while still providing guidelines for how to depict his subjects.

A full psychoanalysis of Magritte would include everything from Freud, Lacan and Winnicott to modern child psychology, although it is nearly impossible to prove that Magritte thought or experienced any of the phenomena discussed. It is also worth noting that almost no

\textsuperscript{118} Hatt and Klonk, 186.  
\textsuperscript{119} Lacan, 4.  
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{121} Winnicott, 65-7.
literature on the psychoanalysis of Magritte or his psychobiography appeared until well after his death, and that a large concentration of this material came out in the 1990s and after 2000. Psychoanalysis has been discredited in the field of practical psychology, but it remains popular in the social sciences and humanities. Although opposed to psychoanalysis, Magritte was well aware of his contemporaries’ conscious alignment with it. Just as he passed through formal abstraction, remaining in touch with its principles to arrive at an opposing style that effectively (if not obviously) critiqued it, perhaps he occasionally inserted Freudian motifs in order to critique this method as well. The “blindness” and castration created by the easel cutting through our visual field could be a commentary on the “blindness” of artists and art historians alike when they insist on seeing sexual content and childhood insecurities that may not be present. Again, we cannot be sure Magritte intended this, but art historians often simultaneously apply psychoanalysis to his works and mention his denial of it, just as they often write off his academic formal technique while focusing on his conscious rejection of abstraction.

Magritte did more than talk about the problems of following Freud; he carried out a blatant satire of fellow Surrealists and psychoanalysis in the *Art of Conversation* series (1950-52). Allmer et al. described the postcard-style paintings as a deliberate mocking of the clichéd nature of psychoanalysis. This series ranges from tame to outright insulting. *Art of Conversation IV* (fig. 5) portrays the “typical” dream imagery as a rock formation spelling out “rêve,” as if dreams were a landmark for sightseeing. Two bowler-hatted men inaudibly discuss the sculpture, since Magritte found the discussion and interpretation of dreams to be useless in the creation of art.122 *Art of Conversation III*, on the other hand, features a bull stabbed between the eyes and the title “Espagne,” which certainly was intended to mock the Spaniard Salvador Dalí and his

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detestable paranoia-critical method (fig. 28). The bull also symbolizes the minotaur in the “labyrinth” of the Surrealists’ collective mind—a reference to the complicated webs of associations that result from Freudian dream interpretation and also to the Surrealist journal Minotaure, to which Magritte contributed but seems to criticize nonetheless.

Freud warned against the use of symbols and dream imagery in art, as a conscious attempt to facilitate the psychoanalysis of one’s own production defeats the purpose. Magritte seemed to agree and publicly censured the use of “schematizations” that narrowed and oppressed Surrealist art. However, considering Magritte’s willingness to dedicate several canvases solely to mocking the psychoanalytic method, we can deduce that he had accepted the impossibility of escaping interaction with psychoanalysis, despite his feelings for it. Therefore, psychoanalysis remains an important method for discussing Magritte. I argue that it is especially important for paintings that do not contain overtly sexual themes, words or iconography. Finding connections in less predictable places that can relate to Magritte’s biography, his use of formalism and other methods lends validity to the application of psychoanalysis to his work.

Art historians often focus their psychoanalytical treatment of Magritte on the work of Freud, but in the Fair Captive series, the work of D.W. Winnicott and Jacques Lacan proves more useful. The Freudian concepts discussed only become relevant to these non-figural paintings after examination of Winnicott’s theory of object-relations. Magritte’s failure to achieve autonomy from his mother helps explain his displacement of repressed sexual desire. Denial of both human presence and the “real” landscape in the series was not merely a different

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123 It is difficult to avoid associating the bull in modern art with Picasso, and while Allmer argues that the Art of Conversation series takes aim at the Parisian Surrealists, Magritte may also have intended for the stabbed bull to be a critique of Cubism, a style that he experimented with in his early career but strayed far from in his later career. Magritte said of the development of modern art that it “ended with Picasso.” (See Torczyner, 68). This could be interpreted either as distaste for Picasso or for those who came after Picasso that failed to continue his innovative trend.

124 Allmer, 110.

125 Allmer, 108.
form of sexual repression, but an aggressive reaction toward an external reality he could not control. Certainly, Magritte's sexual development was affected by his mother's suicide, but the sexual repercussions are symptomatic of his larger problems with identity formation and mastery of his surroundings as explained by Winnicott and Lacan.
IV.

The Key to Deciphering the Fields: Semiotics and Structuralism

Magritte’s word paintings, in particular *The Treason of Images* (fig. 4), lend themselves so perfectly to semiotic and structuralist analysis that at first glance the method might seem irrelevant for the *Fair Captive* series. However, the emphasis on representation and image creation in these paintings, even if they do not contain words, still speaks volumes about signs and symbols. It was not, however, until the advent of postmodernism in the 1960s and 1970s, that Magritte’s paintings became important to the ongoing dialogue about signs in imagery.

Despite the fact that critics did not use semiotics and structuralism during his lifetime, there is clear evidence that Magritte was aware of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and his theories. He referred to many of his works as attempts to solve “problems,” and to the *Fair Captive* series as the “solution to the ‘problem of the window,’”126 indicating that he was familiar with de Saussure’s ideas about the distinction between signifier and signified, and the arbitrary nature of words.127 Saussure established that words act as signifiers for objects but qualified that “there is nothing in common in essence between a sign and that which it signifies,” instead, words are matched up with objects for convenience.128 The easels in Magritte’s *Fair Captive* series are signifiers for the landscapes they depict, and also for the art historical traditions Magritte critiqued. Magritte could have signified landscape painting as a technique in several ways, but he chose the painted easel as his signifier. He was aware of Saussure’s important clarification that language (and therefore also the language of painting) does not merely reflect

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social reality but creates it. Realistic representations of landscapes have determined how we think about representational art, and Magritte used this very language to suggest a new mode of thought.

In 1970, Suzi Gablik described the *Fair Captive* paintings as a coexistence of a dual reality. When Magritte painted a painted easel in front of a painted landscape, he made no clear distinction about which part of the composition was real. The window in *The Human Condition* (fig. 1) allows the viewer to see the outside, but also functions as a door because it brings the outside in, in the form of a painted landscape. In *The Human Condition* of 1935 (fig. 29), the window has been replaced with an arched doorway, which fulfills the same dual function of window and door. The window/door also blurs the distinction between past, present and future. Are we inside the room now and about to go outside, or is the outside equivalent to the past and the inside the internal image we have created in the present? Just as words can stand for multiple objects at once, Magritte’s compositions can signify multiple realities.

Semiotics reigned as the dominant form of discussion for Magritte’s works in the 1970s. For example, in 1973, Uwe M. Schneede analyzed the 1931 version of *The Fair Captive* as having two levels to the composition: a representation of reality in the painting as a whole, and an image of a representation of reality on the smaller canvas. Both levels are contained within a likeness created by a painter. Schneede links this to the trend of questioning representation that began with the Dada movement and continued with the Surrealists. He claims that even in Surrealist paintings and collages with multiple fragmented layers that symbolize a layered reality, “art and reflection” do not take place on different levels. Reflection is part of the process

129 Hatt and Klonk, 203.
130 Gablik, 98.
132 Schneede, 49.
of creating art, and multiple realities in one image serve to make this visually obvious.\textsuperscript{133} Schneede concluded that these paintings are “the result of systematic thinking about the function and possibilities of depiction, about two-dimensional and illusionistic representation, and about the interrelationship between the various planes of reality that can be generated by pictures within pictures.”\textsuperscript{134}

Whitney Chadwick also addressed the multi-layered meanings at work in Magritte’s paintings in a 1979 article, “René Magritte and the Liberation of the Image.” Chadwick claims that \textit{The Human Condition I} is about a dialogue between seeing with the eye and seeing with the mind, and that it is unclear whether we could possibly observe this scene in reality, or if we should understand it as fabricated.\textsuperscript{135} Magritte saw perception as an internal activity. Therefore, the viewers’ struggle to delineate the boundaries between inside and outside, reality and imagination is integral to their viewing of the image.\textsuperscript{136} Further, Chadwick argues that the \textit{Fair Captive} series is best considered in its entirety, because images “will retain a consistent referent but derive the greater part of their communicative power from their relationship with other images (as words derive part of their meaning from their relationships within a sentence).”\textsuperscript{137}

Twenty-six years later, in a 2005 exhibition catalogue for the BA-CA Kunstforum in Vienna, Ulf Küster also noted multi-layered metaphors in the series, and took a literal approach to decoding the signs in the 1948 version of \textit{The Fair Captive} (fig. 23). Emphasizing again the dichotomy between inside and outside, external reality and internal perception, Küster claims

\begin{footnotes}
\item[133] Ibid., 55.
\item[134] Schneede, 61.
\item[136] Chadwick, 12.
\item[137] Ibid., 13.
\end{footnotes}
that the easel has a fluctuating identity, just as humans do. Next to the easel appears a spontaneous burst of flame symbolizing the ephemeral nature of life. The large boulder opposite the easel signifies the gravity and seriousness of existence. Together, the three signs signify humankind and our conception of existence. The painted easel as a sign has what Saussure called syntagm and associative relationships with other signs. Syntagm means that the easel refers to and adds to the meaning of the two signs appearing with it, but also that it refers to what one would see if the easel were not there: the landscape, real or fictitious, that exists beyond. This hypothetical scene is in the same plane as the easel because both the easel and the sight it covers up are part of the same sign system. The easel exhibits Saussure’s associative relationship because it also refers to sign systems outside of the painting. In this case, the easel has an associative relationship with the tradition of representational painting itself, and consequently with the external reality outside of a representation in general. Therefore, the easel should call to mind what it basically stands for—the landscape beyond, but also what it stands for in the history of art.

Magritte’s fascination with the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified inspired him to create the Fair Captive series and to critique historical trends in art. Magritte’s painted canvas as a sign conjures images of landscapes but also images of images, and the process of image-making. These concerns were shared by the Pop and Conceptual movements, and remain important today, which helps explain Magritte’s lasting impact on art. Art historians apply semiotics to Magritte, and especially to the Fair Captive series, in an effort to connect him to contemporary artists.

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139 Küster, 132.
140 Adams, 138.
141 Ibid.
Most notably, Suzi Gablik compared Magritte’s distinction between the real object, the painted representation of an object, and the mental image of an object with Jasper Johns’ *Flag* (fig. 30). Johns painted a two-dimensional representation of something that is already two-dimensional, just as Magritte had painted a two-dimensional representation of a two-dimensional landscape painting. Comparisons between Johns and Magritte are particularly effective because both artists drew inspiration from Saussure, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Charles Sanders Peirce, who focused on the relationship of language to thought and of thought to the real world. Gablik probably chose Peirce’s theory to connect Johns to Magritte because it accounts for a broader range of meaning than does Saussure’s dualistic system. Peirce expanded the sign system to include icon, index and symbol. The icon is similar to Saussure’s signifier because it resembles something that actually exists. The index does not visually resemble the object but provides evidence of it, and the symbol stands for the actual object and all of the associations that come to mind with it.

Johns’ Flags are icons because they resemble real flags and symbols because they refer to the real flag and all the associations or emotions a flag evokes. However, they are not indices because they do not reveal evidence of an actual flag’s presence, just an image of it. An American flag is a symbol because it makes us think of the fifty states, patriotism and other abstract concepts not visually represented with the flag. By fusing an icon with an existing symbol, Johns created a multi-layered image that facilitates contemplation about more than just the images of American values a flag conjures. Magritte’s *Fair Captive* paintings have a similar effect. The paintings are indices of the artist’s presence, primarily because we know only an

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142 Gablik, 96.
143 Ibid., 117.
144 Hatt and Klonk, 209.
145 Ibid.
146 Ibid.
artist could paint something so realistic and precise. The composition is an index for the unknown artist character in the narrative, because we see the easel and the subject of the artist’s attention. The paintings are also symbols because they motivate a debate about representation and the amount of freedom allowed an artist. Individual paintings from the series are not icons for anything in the real world, but the painted canvas within the painting is an icon (or pretends to be) for the landscape behind it. We are unsure whether the painted canvas is an accurate icon for that landscape, and thus Magritte succeeds in getting the viewer to question the truth in art.

Art historians continue to connect Magritte to his successors. In a 2007 exhibition catalogue for *Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images*, Roberta Bernstein compares Johns’ flags to Magritte’s pipes (e.g. fig. 4). She builds on Leo Steinberg’s 1972 argument that Magritte presented a two-dimensional imitation of a three-dimensional object, but that Johns took this idea further because the flags are a life-size two-dimensional rendering of an already two-dimensional object. Bernstein mentions that Johns was inspired by Magritte’s work, and owned a gouache and pencil drawing of the 1948 *The Human Condition* himself. She claims that both artists were interested in “the problem of the window,” and saw the canvas as a window onto the world, whether or not it reveals the truth. Johns chose to experiment with this by layering canvases, rather than painting with illusionism.

By producing three-dimensional paintings, which are typically considered two-dimensional, Johns framed his artwork in a novel way. It is this tendency of Pop artists to frame previously unacceptable subjects as art, and to use frames or canvases to direct our attention to the process of art-making, that best explains why semiotics and structuralism are used to connect

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147 Roberta Bernstein, “Making Thoughts Visible,” in *Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images*, edited by Stephanie Barron and Michel Draguet with the assistance of Sara Cochran (Ghent: Ludion, 2007), 111.
148 Bernstein, 114.
Magritte to his successors. It is the *Fair Captive* series’ use of frames that has provided the most useful material in this analysis.

Even titles are a type of frame. Magritte’s poetic titles invite discussion because they typically do not correspond with what appears in his images. Drawing from Charles Sanders Peirce’s theory of icon, index and symbol, Stephen Bann asserted that titles are indexical hints to how paintings should be viewed, and Bann’s theory is crucial to understanding the levels of framing at work in Magritte’s *Fair Captive* series. He noted a shift in titling patterns throughout time, from instructional titles that direct the viewer’s attention to specific aspects of the painting, to titles that do not seem to match the painting at all.\(^ {149} \) Magritte’s titles often fall into the latter category. An “indexical” title contains its own associations and mental images that may not appear on the canvas.\(^ {150} \) Because titles such as *The Human Condition*, *The Fair Captive* and even *The Domain of Arnheim* (a title taken from an Edgar Allen Poe story) do not echo what appears on the canvas, they produce a mental image different from the painting itself. Magritte’s paintings are signs for real world objects, while the titles are signs for mental images. Those mental images are in turn icons representing something in the real world (because a mental image is one person’s conception of something and not the only possible image of the object).

Although the titles of the paintings in the *Fair Captive* series are as important for the significance of the images as the visual attributes of the easel and the window, many art historians choose not to analyze Magritte’s titles separately because of their deliberately confusing nature. Magritte did not always come up with his titles on his own, but asked advice from his group of friends, which included poets and musicians sympathetic to the Belgian Surrealist movement. As a result, the titles of his paintings cause the viewer to think about

\(^ {149} \) Hatt and Klonk, 211.

\(^ {150} \) Ibid.
meanings different from those the image alone would suggest. Most titles in the series, including *The Fair Captive, The Human Condition, Where Euclid Walked* and *The Domain of Arnheim* (though to a lesser extent *The Key to the Fields* or *Evening Falls*) suggest human presence or influence although no figures appear in the paintings. From this we can infer that Magritte intended to comment on human nature or an artist's attempt to capture human qualities. Without considering the titles, we may not reach that conclusion.

In a 2007 account of the collaborative Belgian Surrealist group, *Collective Inventions*, Ben Stoltzfus wrote that Magritte thought that titles should not “teach” about the painting, but be a surprise. The *Fair Captive* titles certainly do not reiterate what we see in the composition but offer a surprise about Magritte's purpose for creating the painting. He relied on a select few titles for the twenty-four similar optical illusions in the series. This redundancy stresses that no matter how an artist portrays a landscape, it is still just a portrayal and not reality. Paintings are nothing more than two-dimensional signs representing something that either exists in the real world or in an artist's mind. Therefore, Magritte's titles should be nearly as important in a semiotic analysis of the *Fair Captive* series as the images themselves. They do not distract from the purpose of the image, but rather surprise the viewer with the real meaning.

Magritte spoke in great detail about titles and words in his images in his famous 1938 lecture, “La Ligne de Vie.” He said that although “everything tends to make one think that there is little connection between an object and that which represents it,” whether this be word or image, “it is possible to create new relationships between words and objects and to bring out certain features of language and of objects that are commonly overlooked in the everyday

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151 Ben Stoltzfus, “Magritte’s Smoke and Mirrors: Reading, Writing and Art-Magic.” In *Collective Inventions*, 86.
process of living.” Like Saussure, he believed that words and images had merely arbitrary
connections to the real objects they replaced, but that they often served to make us reconsider the
real object by presenting it in new ways. Even more than pointing out connections that we tend
to overlook, a title that may seem unrelated to its painting “projects us into a world of ideas and
images, draws us towards a mysterious point on the horizon of the mind, where we encounter
strange marvels and come back loaded with them.” Magritte saw his titles as indices for things
not represented on the canvas, and believed that images and titles together could create an
elaborate system of symbolic meaning for the image.

Magritte also utilized words within paintings in order to direct the viewer toward his
meaning. This is Not a Pipe, Michel Foucault’s 1968 essay on the infamous pipe in The Treason
of Images, examined Magritte’s use of language within painting and argued that the words in the
image facilitate a dialogue about language and meaning itself. In his translator’s introduction to
the essay, James Harkness likened Magritte’s over-use of a representational style to his use of
words, claiming that both emphasize that images are not real objects. Harkness iterates that while
the arbitrariness of words seems obvious, separating words from the essence of the object is not
easy in Western culture. He mentions the Judeo-Christian belief in God’s use of the spoken word
to create the world, and the fact that when describing what we see in a painting, we inevitably
use the word for the object represented. This point works especially well when considering
The Treason of Images, but we can also apply it to the Fair Captive series. A painting-within-a-
painting leaves us unable to describe what we see as simply “a landscape.” We can only describe
a painted easel in front of a scene intended to seem real but ultimately rendered by an artist as “a

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153 Ibid., 21.
154 James Harkness, translator’s introduction to This is Not a Pipe by Michel Foucault. Edited and
painting of a painting of a landscape.” The Fair Captive series therefore is part of Magritte’s attempt to counteract the assumption that words and objects are inextricably linked.

It is useful, however, to explain Magritte’s painting-sign dialectic in terms of language. In 1980, Randa Dubnick treated the Fair Captive series as a multi-layered metaphor. Contained within the first layer is the concept of the painting as a window onto the world, which she describes as the ultimate metaphor in art.\footnote{Dubnick, 418.} Dubnick claims that Magritte took this metaphor further than the Renaissance conception of painting as a window, but delved into the “meta-linguistic” by assigning different meanings to the painted easel than those assigned to the overall painting itself. The coexistence of the painted canvas with the alleged view into the world and the window with the actual view into the world, however obstructed, creates a “meta-linguistic metaphor for the relationship of art to reality.”\footnote{Dubnick, 418.} While the painted canvas stands for art, the window stands for reality, and Magritte juxtaposes these two symbols to suggest that art does not and cannot reflect reality accurately. Both the painted canvas and the window are necessary in the composition for this complex metaphor to work.

Dubnick writes that Magritte’s Fair Captive series also functions as a metonymy, and that his artistic choices contribute to its effectiveness. In order for the canvas to represent “art” effectively, it must contain a recognizable attribute of art, and a representational, realistic painting style is a logical choice for this. Likewise, the use of painting and not sculpture, collage, or other possible media, was necessary for an examination of the arbitrary connection between painting and reality. The painted canvas must be part of a larger painting in order for it to stand in for “art” and by extension for the painting to serve as the “window” onto the world. Therefore, the entire composition, including the attributes of the painted canvas and the window, is a

metaphor for the tension between art and reality, and a metonymy for representation and the impossibility of truly re-presenting something without arbitrariness.

Moving beyond the titles to the actual images, semiotic and structural analysis reveals several other levels of framing at work in Magritte’s *Fair Captive* series. Meyer Schapiro was particularly influential in the examination of visual framing in art. In “On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs” published in 1969, Schapiro discusses the different meanings that the “vehicle” or technique, and “fields” such as lines, frames, and backgrounds, add to a painting. He claims these variations of the ‘medium’ constitute the poetry of the image, its musical rather than mimetic aspect.157 Magritte believed that “an image is none other than itself,” and so did not concern himself with abstraction or popular stylistic practices, but focused instead on portraying things as they actually are.158 Schapiro notes that the field and vehicle “owe their development and variety in great part to their service in representation,” for if they did not contribute to representing an object, we would not notice or value them.159 The field or ground as distinct from the figure or subject of the painting plays an important role, because it frames what we are meant to focus on.160 Schapiro writes that artists throughout history have exercised a choice in framing their work, and that even with abstract art, the entire picture we see is “a segment of space excerpted from a larger whole.”161 Magritte therefore did not deviate from tradition or from his contemporaries in choosing a

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159 Schapiro, 30.
160 Schapiro refers to medieval manuscript illustrations in which figures extend beyond the painted architectural or decorative boundaries, and notes that as viewers we find this unusual because the frame tells us not to look anywhere but inside of it. See Schapiro, 12.
161 Ibid., 32.
section of a landscape to portray, but took the process further and selected an already selected scene to frame the act of framing itself.

The fact that Magritte represented a scene on a canvas is the most basic level of framing at work, because the artist’s selection of a subject partitions off what the viewer will see and discards what they will not. On top of this, Magritte included an open window through which the viewer is meant to see the landscape, and which draws attention to the frames present in everyday life as we constantly choose what to look at and what to ignore. The *Fair Captive* paintings are narrative in that Magritte steps back from the typical role of the artist to reveal what another unknown artist has chosen to represent on the canvas. An emphasis on framing and an interpretation of the *Fair Captive* series as a painting about frames combines semiotic analysis of meaning and also post-structuralism as it turned its focus back to the role of the artist rather than the role of the viewer as interpreter.

Ellen Handler Spitz describes a way in which the subject of the series serves as the frame, without the help of the background or “field.” She notes that the easel is itself a type of frame, as it supports the canvas, which the artist uses to frame a scene for the viewer to examine. Magritte’s canvas frames a window, which in turn frames the scene that the painted canvas attempts to frame. The easel is not very prominent in any of his compositions, however, and typically the canvas blends into the scene so that only the very edge and the legs of the easel act as the “frame.” In this way, the easel is a subtle frame that functions as a frame typically does, to defer to the subject inside of it.

In the catalogue for *Magritte and Contemporary Art* at the University of California-Los Angeles, Thierry de Duve points out that from the 1930s on, Magritte’s “compositional

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162 Spitz, 50.
163 Ibid.
framework” was vertical, frontal, and either contained a window on a wall or mimicked it with vertical bands of background space. This indicates an interest in framing because this type of composition resembles a window, the ultimate frame, and also makes the figure/ground distinction clear as a frame is meant to do. De Duve clarifies that rather than a confining diorama box, an attempt to squeeze reality into a contrived space, the vertical and frontal orientation serves as a “comforting stage.” The idea of the stage being comforting goes back to the theme of denial of reality or of the possibility of one true reality. On stage, nothing is expected to be real, just as in Magritte’s paintings, the artist’s vision and the viewer’s interpretation do not need to match up. Spitz also mentioned that other paintings, those with similar elements of the *Fair Captive* series but lacking the window and painted easel combination, feature curtains drawn back to further emphasize the idea of a false truth or a play on the stage of the canvas. Magritte’s composition tells us that framing is a dramatic production in which the window or easel as frame is akin to a stage, though we should not expect to see the truth.

What we see inside of a frame or on a stage creates our ideas about those things represented, even if we are meant to acknowledge that they are contrived. In this way, one could also apply a semiotic reading using Rosalind Krauss’s ideas about the distinction between signs, labels and objects. With “In the Name of Picasso,” published in 1985, Krauss argued that images do not reflect a view of the outside world, but rather create our view of the world. She wrote that art history as a discipline began due to the deficiency of the belief that all art is mimetic, and the curiosity about connotative, rather than simply denotative or representational, meanings of

164 Thierry de Duve, “This Wouldn’t Be a Pipe: Magritte and Marcel Broodthaers,” in *Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images*, 96.
165 Ibid.
166 Spitz, 50.
167 Hatt and Klonk, 206.
images. Krauss used Picasso's collages (e.g. fig. 31) to claim that true signs do not act as labels, they are "a function of absence rather than presence...a coupling of signifier and immaterial concept in relation to which...there may be no referent at all (and thus no thing on which to fix the label)." Magritte's paintings within paintings are true signs because they do not merely label the landscape behind them but refer to something that may not really be there. In collages, Krauss wrote, "the field is thus constituted inside itself as a figure of its own absence," meaning that with the application of different materials, the figure-ground split is indiscernible. Because Magritte has "pasted" a painted easel on top of a landscape painting, he has created a sort of collage within a painting, rendering the figure-ground distinction between painted easel and nature in the Fair Captive paintings completely ambiguous. Just as Krauss read Picasso's collages as representations of the process of representation, one could read Magritte's easel as a representation of the way we look at things. Krauss also argued that images are polysemic, that is they refer to different things in different contexts, because semiotic meaning is inherently unstable. In the context of the Fair Captive paintings, the painted canvas resting on an easel refers to the process of image-making and interpreting, but taken out of this context, the easel would mean something quite different.

As I have argued earlier, the Fair Captive series is a synthesis of formal principles from various historical periods. Krauss recognized that a viewer can never definitively conceive of all possible meanings of a sign, and so trapping images into a historical moment causes us to forget what is important about them: the formal elements.

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169 Krauss, 33.
170 Ibid., 37.
171 Ibid.
172 Krauss, 35; Hatt and Klonk, 208.
173 Hatt and Klonk, 208.
explanation for Magritte’s academic painting style. His straightforward, representational paintings are not specific to the historical moment in which they were painted, leaving them open for further consideration of the formal elements and his representation of representation itself, a sign that continuously refers to new things as we move through art history.

James Harkness, in the introduction to *This is Not a Pipe*, described the problem of Western painting as the tendency to believe that a painted thing *is* the thing itself. This “problem” is exemplified by the *tromp l’oeil* paintings of the Northern Baroque, which not only refer directly to the original object but intend to trick the viewer into believing the painting is not a representation but the object itself. 174 It may seem that Magritte’s representational style revisits this excessively realistic convention, but Harkness notes that Magritte’s choice of subject matter in particular creates a “mimetic overflowing,” reminding the viewer that no matter how realistic the painting appears, it could not be the real thing. 175 In *The Human Condition*, for example, the painted landscape matches the “real” landscape too well for it to be true, thus providing a “mimetic overflowing.” 176

Because Magritte believed that “a painting is none other than itself,” Harkness asserts that the paintings follow the “antilingualistic program of modernism” forged by Paul Klee and Vasily Kandinsky. 177 While these artists used abstraction to say that a painting is a painting, apart from language, realism or metaphor, Magritte used literalism to say the same thing. Harkness found, and Eric Wargo and Roger Rothman would later agree, that Magritte was unique in using literalism to undermine literalism. 178 The “mimetic overflowing” serves to remind viewers that a painting can *look* literal but cannot *be* literally anything but itself. Saussure

174 Harkness, 8.
175 Ibid.
176 Ibid.
177 Ibid., 9.
178 Ibid.
had taught that signs tend to have merely an arbitrary connection to that which they signify. Magritte wanted to tell viewers that paintings are arbitrarily associated with the reality that they represent, yet he did not make this statement in the abstract way that Klee and Kandinsky had, nor in Picasso's way of mixing media in a collage. Instead, Magritte emphasized the arbitrariness of painting as a sign system by using the very arbitrary representational style, and in the opinion of Harkness, often over-using it to clarify his intentions.

If verbal and visual representations, no matter how realistic they seem, are insufficient replacements for real things, where does that leave Magritte as an artist who creates representations? The deconstruction movement in art historical scholarship that followed post-structuralism turned its focus away from the individual artist and toward subjective interpretation of the viewer, in the process de-constructing the meaning that took place in creating an image. Roland Barthes advocated the "death of the author" in his 1968 deconstructionist essay. He claimed that in historical writing, "book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after... In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text..." Barthes' idea can be applied to modern art as well, and in fact abstract and conceptual art facilitate the viewer's interpretation much more than do Magritte's academic narrative compositions. Barthes believed that an author cannot express himself without using existing words and ideas, and "that the inner 'thing' he thinks to 'translate' is itself only a ready-form dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely." Taking this approach, it would seem that Magritte's paintings cannot tell us anything new because he has used traditional painting techniques, and even his startling subject matter must be expressed in unoriginal terms. While Barthes' argument is important in deconstruction and the

180 Barthes, 146.
interpretation of some of Magritte’s contemporaries, and while critics of Magritte have certainly described his style as unoriginal, I do not think the “death of the author” is an effective way to analyze Magritte’s oeuvre.

I have argued that Magritte’s academic painting style is not due to a lack of creativity. Magritte constantly searched for new ways to communicate the central idea of the *Fair Captive* series. The fact that a viewer could not associate any of the *Fair Captive* paintings with something existing in the real world means that the presence of Magritte as artist is necessary to call our attention to the relationship between art and life. Jacques Meuris wrote in 2004 that Magritte did not believe the viewer’s interpretation to be superior to that of the artist. If one wishes to cater to the viewer, Magritte thought, cinema was the best solution because it was the only medium that could truly convey movement. 181 In accordance with this idea, Patrick Roegiers, writing in a 2005 exhibition catalogue *Magritte and Photography*, points out that *The Fair Captive* and *The Human Condition I* are like photographs in that they only show a piece of the whole landscape. 182 Magritte seems to be saying with his deliberately selected, cropped and hidden landscape that a painting can never reveal the whole truth, and so a painter should not attempt to do so. Magritte as the artist knew what happened before and after the image he created, but because painting can only convey a static moment in time, Magritte did not feel compelled to divulge this information or to encourage viewer interpretation.

Taking a similar approach, Renée Riese Hubert’s 1979 article, “The Other-Worldly Landscapes of E.A. Poe and René Magritte,” compares the Edgar Allen Poe story “The Domain of Arnheim” with Magritte’s painting of the same title (fig. 14). The main character in Poe’s story aspires to have a garden more perfect than what nature can offer, and so invests all his time,

money and energy to erase all traces of nature’s influence. He does not realize that his efforts are futile because not only could he never out-do nature, but by aiming for perfection he will never be satisfied with his own work.\textsuperscript{183} While it may seem that Magritte’s painting has nothing to do with Poe’s story at first glance, The \textit{Pair Captive} paintings demonstrate a futile effort much like that of Poe’s character. Man’s influence is obvious—the easel frames the painted representation and the painting blocks the view to the real landscape, diminishing its beauty. On top of this, the window frames the real landscape, so that the landscape cannot be experienced without the influence of man. Despite these efforts, the painted easel is unnecessary because it imitates nature so well that we may as well look at the real thing.\textsuperscript{184} Hubert asserts that while Poe presented (or framed) a story about a man attempting to capture and outdo (re-frame) nature, Magritte’s paintings emphasize that neither the artist nor the consumer notices the repetition of the frame in painting.\textsuperscript{185}

Magritte uses other techniques to emphasize frames in the series: in \textit{Evening Falls} (fig. 3), for example, the broken glass with the landscape imprinted on it draws attention to the window as frame. Further, writes Hubert, the symmetrical rectangles we use for windows would hardly ever appear in nature. Hubert notes that neither the shattered piece of glass nor the rectangular window can accurately depict the entire landscape, just as an artist’s selection of a subject will ultimately leave many things out. The narrator of Poe’s story begins with a similar dilemma: neither a detail nor the “general view” can tell the whole story.\textsuperscript{186} Magritte’s use of both the window and the easel as frame, as well as Poe’s title as a frame, draw attention to the role of the artist in framing. The artist instructs us in what to look at and how to look at it.

\textsuperscript{184} Hubert, 72.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
Framing directs the viewer's focus, and Magritte's compositions draw our attention to the very idea of framing, but beyond this, Magritte made the frame itself the subject of his images.

Taking a comparative approach to Magritte's framing, Suzi Gablik suggested that the *Fair Captive* paintings are an extension of a historical dialogue begun in the Renaissance about various ways of understanding the world through art. The first step was the invention of linear perspective, and more recent developments include the idea that paintings are objects themselves with no reference to the natural world or to art history, such as the canvases of Frank Stella.\(^{187}\)

With photography, imitating nature became unnecessary, and artists have thus looked for new methods of representation that do not require mimicry. While the Cubists denied perspective and attempted to add pieces of reality into art through collage, Magritte responded without leaving the traditional art of painting.\(^{188}\) Gablik supports Harold Rosenberg's claim that with Pop Art, "the work of art became more and more 'a thing added to the world of things rather than a reflection of things that already exist,'" and cites Jasper Johns' *Flag* as an example of the turning point in making art that was "looked at rather than into."\(^{189}\)

Although Magritte did not create three-dimensional "paintings" or incorporate everyday objects into his work, his *Fair Captive* series can be considered an early step toward conceptual "anti-art." Magritte took away the "artistic" subject in painting, and rather than present a landscape, presented the process of representation that goes into a landscape painting, just as the Pop artists emphasized the process and technology of their works. The *Fair Captive* series thus tells us that an artist can use old methods of representation, yet frame subjects so as to communicate something entirely new. An inability to escape the language of painting did not mean Magritte could not reveal an unusual idea to an audience, and he therefore placed more

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\(^{187}\) Gablik, 76.  
\(^{188}\) Ibid., 76, 93.  
\(^{189}\) Ibid., 93-4.
emphasis on his vision and his role in framing than on viewer's understanding. Because of this, the most effective way to apply semiotics, structuralism or deconstruction to Magritte is to combine the ideas of several theorists and to analyze the *Fair Captive* series as the "solution to the problem of the window," and likewise the solution to the problem of the role of the artist, the frame, the process of image-making and interpretation of images.
V. Conclusion

After examining René Magritte’s *Fair Captive* series through three methodological lenses, it may seem that any method is applicable with enough contrived evidence. This is certainly true, and art historians have not limited themselves to formalism, psychoanalysis and semiotics in their discussion of Magritte. A study of the historiography of other methods may yield different results: a feminist approach, for example, may understand the painted canvas matching the landscape to be an emblem of the male gaze, making the *Fair Captive* series an authoritative assertion of male dominance rather than a progressive critique of style.\(^{190}\) Likewise, an analysis of any other series in Magritte’s body of work would require the use of different methods and the emphasis of different material.

That being said, my examination of three major methods reveals certain patterns in art historical scholarship on Magritte. During his lifetime, historians applied formalism and biography most frequently. Shortly after Magritte’s death in 1967, historians began to apply semiotics and structuralism, as these methods were particularly popular during the 1970s and seemed a logical choice given the similarities between Magritte’s iconic imagery and the Pop movement’s emphasis on the process of creating art and the use of signs and symbols. While biography has always been important in studies of Magritte, post-Freudian psychoanalysis became popular in the 1990s and early twenty-first century. I advocated the use of Winnicott’s object-relations theory for interpreting the *Fair Captive* series, as I found that the concepts in the post-Freudian analyses were aligned with Winnicott’s ideas. Moreover, Winnicott’s focus on

\(^{190}\) Mary Mathews Gedo and Ellen Handler Spitz take a post-Freudian psychoanalytical approach but elements of feminism are present, especially as they focus on Magritte’s highly sexualized, objectified females or female body parts—which are also found throughout the art of Magritte’s contemporaries.
early development of creativity and autonomy is more relevant to the series in particular than Freud's castration complex and stages of sexual development.

If formalism is the one method applied at the beginning of any analysis, it is not only because a formal analysis is necessary at the beginning of any art historical study, but also because it is the method that remains relevant no matter the current trends in scholarship or contemporary art. The *Fair Captive* series is a group of paintings about the process of painting, of seeing and interpreting art, of an individual artist's attempt to identify with his creations, and of the artist's affect on a viewer's conception of reality. Because of this, formalism, or the study of different ways of seeing and ways of identifying what we see, is essential to a proper understanding of this series of paintings and gouaches.

That psychoanalysis was used after Magritte's death is significant because he openly objected to his contemporaries' catering to it,\(^{191}\) and could have discounted any interpretation claiming that the *Fair Captive* series had an underlying sexual meaning. His mother's suicide, the event that led most art historians to apply this method, and what seems to appear no matter where one looks among Magritte's paintings, should perhaps be reconsidered from a realistic standpoint. Magritte undoubtedly suffered from the loss of his mother and likewise from her behavior before her suicide, but it is unlikely that he saw her body pulled from the Sambre River over a week after her drowning. His account of this event cannot be corroborated with fact, and the chances are slim that a fourteen-year old grieving son would be present as the police discovered his mother's body. Art historians using psychoanalysis insist that whether he actually saw her corpse is irrelevant, it matters that he believes he did. But if we think about the importance of seeing and of the dichotomy between reality and imagination in the context of this

\(^{191}\) See Magritte, Letter to Louis Scutenaire and Irène Hamoir, March 12, 1937. In Torczyner, 80.
series, we must concede that overtly sexual imagery and clear references to Magritte’s childhood are not visible, and therefore not necessarily present.

The use of semiotics and structuralism as methods was motivated by the similarities between Magritte’s paintings and those of Pop and Conceptual Artists working at the end of his career and after his death. While all images are signs for systems of meaning that exist outside of what is immediately visible, semiotics is most readily applicable to Magritte’s word paintings. Further, Magritte’s assertion that the artist alone has the power to frame an image and therefore our perception of reality, and his lack of concern for whether viewers understood his message, makes structuralism a difficult method to apply.

Even when applying other methods, aspects of formalism are always present in an analysis of the *Fair Captive* series. In fact, the strongest arguments to be made with any methodological approach relate to perception, style, and the process of image-making. With psychoanalysis, Freud’s concept of scopophilia or pleasure in looking refers to the individual’s experience in viewing a painting, while Magritte’s supposed need to defer to other people and control how he and others viewed his past stems from an image of himself developed in childhood. I also argue that to effectively apply semiotics and structuralism, one should focus on the use of the window and easel as frame and on Magritte’s portrayal of the process of art and reality construction. However, framing is intimately tied to seeing and perception.

Although formalism is an old methodology, it is a lasting one, and art historians today look for ways to connect neuroscience and art. They are chiefly interested in what happens in the brain when a person looks at art, although this is difficult to discern. Information about what areas of the brain are active is not information about what a person thinks of a certain artwork.\(^{192}\)

This goes back to Theodor Lipps’s empathy theory, which states that each person will bring a different emotional memory and psychological viewpoint to viewing images. It may be possible one day to discover what makes a person respond a certain way to art, because knowledge of which areas of the brain are activated can lead to knowledge of what types of actions are taking place in the brain. For example, Cela-Conde et al. found that the prefrontal cortex “is selectively activated in humans during the perception of objects qualified as ‘beautiful,’” which means aesthetics may be perceived by a particular processing system. What complicates these studies is that a person may consider an artwork beautiful, but not as “artistic” as another, or vice versa.

Some neuroscientists believe we should focus on beauty in art, while others argue that the artistic quality of a painting or sculpture is completely divorced from aesthetics. While these studies may not be directly connected to the *Fair Captive* series, they may point to a scientific explanation for art historians’ continued fascination with Magritte, and for the series’ popularity. Magritte’s academic style is beautiful in the traditional sense, and while we may not be able to measure how “artistic” these paintings are to viewers, we could record their preferences and look for indicators of this in brain activity: While a neurological approach to art perception is certainly a twenty-first century adaptation of the ideas of formalism, it proves that this old method is still necessary in considering Magritte’s work, particularly as it demonstrates aesthetic principles that cause measurable activity in the brain.

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193 Hatt and Klonk, 68.
195 See, for example, V.S. Ramachandran, “Review: Beauty or Brains?” in *Science* 305, no. 5685, Spirit at Gusev Crater (August 6, 2004), 779.
In fact, Magritte seems to have been interested in the preferences and taste of common people, and recognized that this plays an important part in viewing art. In the introduction to *Ideas and Images*, Harry Torczyner quoted Magritte: “Women, children, men who never think about art history have personal preferences just as much as aesthetes do.”  

Although art historians have typically ignored Magritte’s ideas about his own work unless they are convenient, that anyone could enjoy Magritte’s *Fair Captive* series even without uncovering layered meanings is certain. Just as traditional formalism continues to reveal new information about the series, a neurological approach to formalism could also add to our understanding of Magritte’s iconic works.

No matter the methodological approach one takes to studying Magritte’s *Fair Captive* series, there are opportunities to connect this series to others of his paintings and to draw conclusions about his entire career. I found this series to be an integral part of Magritte’s artistic output and essential to understanding his intentions in creating art. Although it is time-consuming to get to the deeper levels of meaning at work in the series, these paintings speak most directly to what Magritte himself said about painting and the function of the image. Whether we interpret *The Fair Captive* to be Georgette or a metaphor for the conventional nude, whether we interpret *The Human Condition* to be a desire to maintain control over our surroundings or a tendency to believe what we see in paintings, Magritte’s twenty-five part series of pictures-within-pictures still generates interest and debate. The *Fair Captive* series is about seeing, understanding, internalizing, and relating art to the external world, which is why the series and Magritte remain important to art history, no matter how styles or methods of interpretation have changed.

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196 Torczyner, 20.
Figure 1. Magritte, *The Human Condition* I, 1933. Oil on canvas, 100 x 81 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of the Collector’s Committee. (Sylvester catalogue 351)

Figure 2. *The Fair Captive*, 1931. Oil on canvas, 38 x 55 cm. Hogarth Galleries, Sydney. (cat. 342)
Figure 3. *Evening Falls*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 162 x 130 cm. Menil Collection, Houston.
(cat. 988)

Figure 4. *The Treason of Images*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 60 x 81 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by the Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection. (cat. 303)
Figure 5. *The Art of Conversation IV*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm. Private Collection. Courtesy Galerie Isy-Brachot, Brussels. (cat. 746)

Figure 6. *The Lovers*, 1928. Oil on canvas, 54 x 73 cm. Richard S. Zeisler Collection, New York. (cat. 250)
Figure 7. *Musings of a Solitary Walker*, 1926. Oil on canvas, 139 x 105 cm. Private Collection, Brussels. (cat. 124)

Figure 9. Hieronymous Bosch, Detail of *Garden of Earthly Delights*, right interior panel, c. 1500-05. Oil on panel, 220 x 389 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Figure 11. Robert Campin, Detail of *Triptych with the Annunciation*, known as the "Merode Altarpiece," 1425-30. Oil on oak panel, 64.5 x 117.8 cm. The Cloisters of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 13. Magritte, *The Key to the Fields*, 1936. Oil on canvas, 81 x 60 cm. Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Lugano, Switzerland. (cat. 411)

Figure 14. *The Domain of Arnheim*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 100 x 81 cm. Private collection, (cat. 707)
Figure 15. *Where Euclid Walked*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 162 x 130 cm. Minneapolis Institute of Arts, William Hood Dunwoody Fund (cat. 826).

Figure 16. Joan Miró, *Photo: This is the color of my dreams*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 96.5 x 129.5 cm. Pierre and Maria-Gaetana Matisse Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Figure 17. Magritte, *Lost World*, 1928. Oil on canvas, 54 x 73 cm. Kunstmuseum Winterthur (cat. 256)

Figure 18. *The Window*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 65 x 50 cm. Private collection (cat. 66)
Figure 19. *The Rape*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 73 x 54 cm. Menil Collection, Houston (cat. 356)

Figure 20. *Homage to Mack Sennett*, 1936. Oil on canvas, 73 x 54 cm. Collection de la ville de La Louviere (cat. 420)
Figure 21. *The Spirit of Geometry*, 1936-7. Gouache on paper, 37.5 x 29.4 cm. Trustees of the Tate Gallery, London. (cat. 1123)

Figure 22. *The Difficult Crossing*, 1926. Oil on canvas, 80 x 65 cm. Private collection. (cat. 84)
Figure 23. *The Fair Captive*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 54 x 65 cm. Private Collection (cat. 641)

Figure 24. *Attempting the Impossible*, 1928. Oil on canvas, 116 x 81 cm. Courtesy Galerie Isy Brachot, Brussels (cat. 284)
Figure 25. *He Doesn’t Speak*, 1926. Oil on canvas, 75 x 65 cm. Arlette Magritte. (cat. 94)

Figure 26. *The Secret Double*, 1927. Oil on canvas, 114 x 162 cm. Centre Pompidou, Paris (cat. 164)
Figure 27. *Bather Between Light and Dark*, 1936. Oil on canvas, 89 x 116 cm. Private Collection (cat. 406)

Figure 28. *The Art of Conversation III*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 50 x 65 cm. Etat Belge, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Verviers (cat. 745) bookmarked black and white
Figure 29. *The Human Condition*, 1935. Oil on canvas, 100 x 73 cm. Private Collection, Monte Carlo. (cat. 387)

Figure 31. Pablo Picasso, *Bowl with Fruit, Violin and Wineglass*, 1912. Pasted papers, gouache and charcoal on cardboard, 65 x 49.5 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, A.E. Gallatin Collection.
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