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## THE CRITIQUE OF MIRROR AS AN ICON IN MAGRITTE'S PAINTINGS

Serpil Aygün Cengiz

In this paper, I will try to show how the reflectivist theory is criticized by the well-known surrealist painter René Magritte (1898-1967) within the context of the mirror icon. In fact, Magritte discusses the relationship between reality and reflection/representation in almost all of his paintings; but I have chosen only those paintings in which the reflection and the images of the mirror are used directly to criticize the reflectivist theory.

In order to clarify what Magritte criticizes through the images of the mirror, I will first discuss the meaning of the mirror as an icon.

According to Fishwick, icons are "images and ideas converted into three dimensions": "They are admired artifacts, external expressions of internal convictions, everyday things that make everyday meaningful" (FISHWICK 1970, 1). As an object which makes the everyday meaningful, the mirror as glazed glass has existed only for nearly six centuries; but as "an object which reflects", the mirror has been in our everyday life for thousands of years. The mirror has been a part of folkloric beliefs and practices throughout the ages. There is a folklore of the mirror in almost all cultures. This folklore gives birth to the cult of the mirror; as Calas explains, icons "demand a cult, a lore, a spot of veneration" (CALAS 1970, 4).

In folklore, the mirror is perceived as an object which has mainly two characteristics: the first one is that it consists the whole world in itself, and the second one is that it can reflect the reality as it is.

The mirror is the symbol of truth and knowledge both in the East and the West<sup>1</sup>. The truth and knowledge which the mirror possesses are not only about "the present time", but also about the past and the future: therefore, the mirror is used widely in fortune-telling<sup>2</sup>. In many fairy tales, like *Snow White* (in this fairy tale the wicked queen can see the most beautiful woman in her mirror because of the power of the mirror reflecting the reality) the mirror is shown as having the power to include the whole truth in itself. In many Turkish riddles, the mirror is addressed as something that is "neither on earth, nor in the sky, but everywhere" (BASGÖZ 1993, 65, 67, 68).

In the folklore of the mirror, the reflection in the mirror is the exact copy of reality. There are two Greek myths which demonstrate this: one is the myth of Narcissus, and the other one is the myth of Perseus. Narcissus cannot leave the lake where he sees his own reflection which is so beautiful. Ovid tells that even after his death, Narcissus still keeps looking at his reflection in the waters of river Styx<sup>3</sup>. This myth demonstrates that the similarity between the reality and the reflection is perfect; which is the main thesis of reflectivist theory. The other myth that is about Perseus makes it clear that this perfect similarity does not mean that the reality and the reflection are the same thing. According to this myth, Perseus wants to kill the terrible Medusa who can turn people into stone if they look at her in the eyes. In order not to be turned into a stone, Perseus uses Athena's mirror-like shield to look at Medusa, and then beheads her with his sword.

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\* Baskent University, Ankara, Turkey

<sup>1</sup> *The Herder Dictionary of Symbols* 1994, 132.

<sup>2</sup> OPIE and TATEM 1990, 253.

<sup>3</sup> ERHAT 1984, 230-231.

So, when the mirror reflects the reality, the reflection is a perfect copy of reality, but it is something different from reality. As Gasché says, reflection is the chief methodological concept for Cartesian thought, it has signified the turning away from any straightforward consideration of objects and from the immediacy of such an experience toward a consideration of the very experience in which objects are given (GASCHÉ 1986, 13).

Thus, this traditional object has become the main metaphor of reflectivist theory. It symbolises the mind, which can think over the reality and reflect it. The word "re-flectere" means "to bend", "to turn back", "to bring back". "Reflection theory" is called "Yansitmaci teori" in Turkish, the origin of the word "yansitma" is "yanmak" which means "to return" in old Turkish. So the term reflection both in Turkish and English "has optic connotations, in that it refers to the action by mirroring surfaces of throwing back light, and in particular a mirror's exhibition or reproduction of objects in the form of images" (GASCHÉ 1986,16).

Magritte objects to reflectivist theory through his paintings. Now, we will see how his paintings deconstruct the traditional meanings of mirror and reflection.

### 1. This is not a Pipe (1928-29)



The first picture I will show is *This is not a Pipe*. In this painting, Magritte clearly demonstrates that the image and the real object are not identical. "Yet the viewer's consciousness equates a likeness with the reality" (SCHNEEDE 1982, 47).

About this painting, Magritte himself says:

The famous pipe. How people reproached me for it! And yet, could you stuff my pipe? No, it's just a representation, is it not? So, if I had written on my picture "This is a Pipe", I'd have been lying!<sup>4</sup>

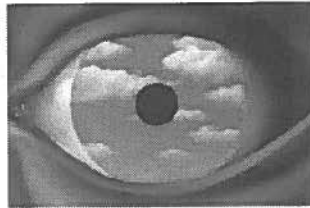
### 2. This is not an Apple (1964)



<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in TORCZYNER 1985, 71. "When Marcel Duchamp was in Los Angeles, he signed real cigars and then everybody smoked them" (GABLIK 1985, 75).

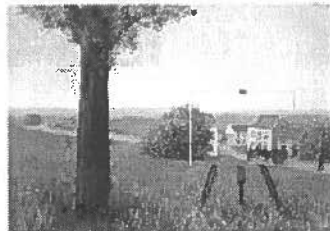
Another version of *This is not a Pipe* is *This is not an apple*. In one of his illustrations which he made in 1929, Magritte says, "[e]verything leads us to think that there is little relation between an object and what it represents"<sup>5</sup>. For Magritte, the images in his paintings are not the symbols of objects, but symbols for thoughts. In a letter to Foucault, Magritte says "only thought resembles"<sup>6</sup>.

### 3. False Mirror (1928)



The third picture is *False Mirror*. In traditional reflectivist theory, an object and its reflection in the mirror are absolutely different from each other, Magritte demonstrates with this painting that it is in fact impossible to separate the reflection from the reality. In *The False Mirror* we see an eye looking at the viewer, but can we be sure that it is looking at the viewer? In fact, what is reflected in the pupil of the eye is not the viewer but a sky with clouds<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps, as Meuris says, "you are the one who is looking through the eye at a sky strewn with clouds" (MEURIS 1988, 84). So for Magritte it is not possible to separate the reflection from the reality, the reality from the thoughts which reflect that reality, and the mirror from the reflection.

### 4. The Fair Captive (1931)



In this painting, the easel functions as a mirror and reflects the landscape for the viewer.

The Fair Captive was followed by a series of pictures that deal with the problem of the non identity of art and reality by stimulating such an identity and thereby focusing on the process of perception itself. A section on the motif in the picture and its representation in the easel painting appear congruent to each other, but in fact they are not. They are able to arouse the deceptive impression of identity because the levels of reality in the pictorial medium (reality and its image) cancel each other out (SCHNEEDE 1982, 49).

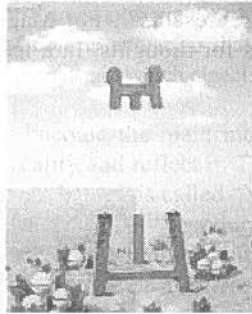
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<sup>5</sup> Qtd. in TORCZYNER 1985, 140.

<sup>6</sup> Qtd. in FOUCAULT 1983, 57.

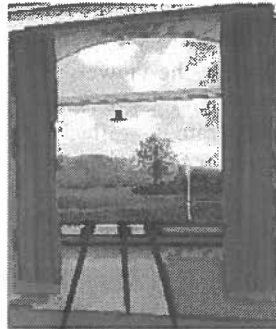
<sup>7</sup> HAMMACHER 1985, 64.

## 5. The Fair Captive (1948)



Here we again see a continuous horizon line which makes us ask questions about the existence of any seascape behind the easel painted in the picture.

## 6. The Human Condition I (1933)



Magritte uses

the picture-within-the picture motif in still another series of works that also deal with the problems of designation, i.e., the relationship between object and verbal concept, between object and image, and between verbal concept and image (SCHNEEDE 1982, 54).

Magritte says:

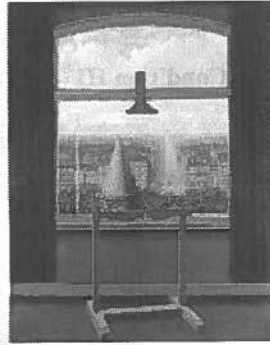
In front of a window seen from inside a room, I placed a painting representing exactly that portion of the landscape covered by the painting. Thus, the tree in the picture hid the tree behind it, outside the room. For the spectator, it was both inside the room within the painting and outside in the real landscape. This is how we see the world. We see it outside ourselves, and the same time we only have a representation of it in ourselves<sup>8</sup>.

There are two levels in this painting just like other paintings with an easel: there is a representation of reality and there is an image of a representation of reality. The difference from the previous *The Fair Captive* is the existence of a window. For Magritte the window "had the significance of the eye in the body –which is the house, and from which one observes and experiences the world" (HAMMACHER 1985,84).

<sup>8</sup> Qtd. in TORCZYNER 1985, 102.

The window in the picture is the link between inside and outside. The viewer looks through the window upon reality: "Magritte was deliberately confusing and interchanging inside and outside, proximity and distance" (SCHNEEDE 1982, 50).

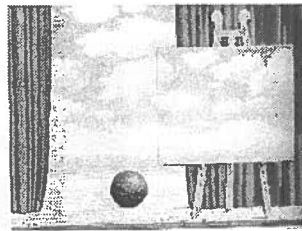
## 7. Euclidian Walks (1955)



In this painting Magritte

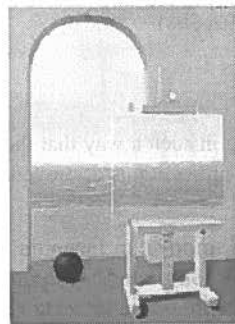
doubled up the visual ambiguity of the relationship between the picture-within-the-picture and its surroundings by making it depict what look like twin conical shapes, one of which is actually a road receding towards the horizon (SYLVESTER 1992, 298).

## 8. The Fair Captive (1965)



There is seascape in this painting. Although we expect Magritte to depict a representation of what is supposed to be behind the easel, that is, the curtain, as in his former *Fair Captive* paintings, in this one he extends the seascape into the easel instead. This shows that the relationship between reality and representation is more complicated than what the viewer thinks.

## 9. The Human Condition II (1935)

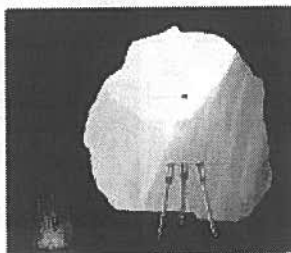


Similarly, Magritte

makes the sea seem real on the canvas and yet at the same time confers a transparency to it which exists only in the mind, for the sea on the canvas conceals the sea outside and beyond (HAMMACHER 1985, 84).

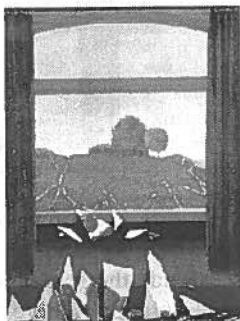
The door in the painting functions as a window as in the other paintings: it represents the eyes of Magritte and the viewer.

#### 10. *The Fair Captive/The Human Condition III* (1935)



So we can say that in these paintings the window, the door, and the cave function as the eyes of Magritte and of the viewer, and the easel functions as a mirror by its capacity to reflect. In these paintings Magritte questions the relationship between reality and its reflection. He makes the viewer wonder whether there is a landscape behind the easel. Now we will see some of his different paintings in which he claims that the reflection of reality is reality itself.

#### 11. *Free to Roam* (1933)

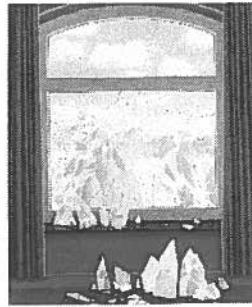


Here no inner picture is present on its easel. Here the landscape outside is painted on the inside of the window, and the window is shattered, so that bits of the landscape are littering the floor inside (SYLVESTER 1992, 298).

In *Free to Roam*,

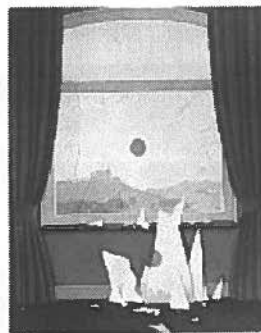
He designed the painting in such a way that the view of the landscape functions as a projection on the windowpane; the projection is destroyed, yet that which is being projected remains intact (SCHNEEDE 1982, 52).

## 12. The Domain of Arnheim (1949)



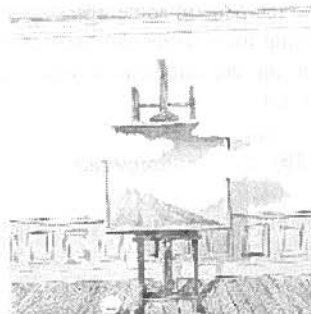
The brittle glass of the windowpane itself was doing duty as a painting, for we see on the fragments a reproduction of the actual landscape. The fact that the window is broken results in this 'true' landscape appearing through the aperture. There is no painting left, only reality. However, as in all the images of this kind, there is an additional catch: that reality, don't forget, is itself painted! (MEURIS 1988, 144).

## 13. Evening Falls (1964)



This is another version. The falling pieces of a shattered window appear as mosaic-like fragments of the landscape visible through the window.

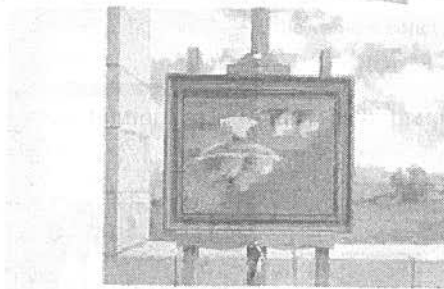
## 14. The Clouds (1939)



In this painting again there is an easel in a room. A mountainscape is seen in the easel as well as some clouds. The surprising element is that some of the clouds which have to be on the easel are also in the room, we know that they are real since they have shadows as the other objects in the room.



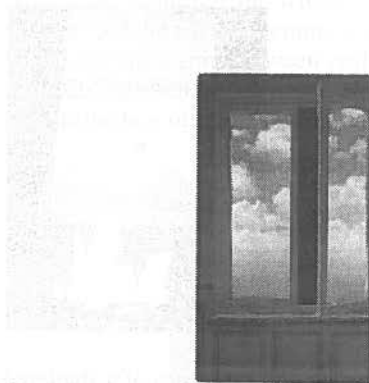
**15. The Alarm Clock (1953)**



For this painting Meuris says:

This time the easel stands outside (or almost), again in front of a landscape... on the easel, which takes up most of the picture, not only is the painting placed upside-down but it represents a still life that clearly has nothing to do with the landscape. Strictly speaking, reality and the real are both drained of all meaning. In other words, the artist is stressing that, though it certainly reproduces objects borrowed from the tangible world, his painting is nothing but a painting... (MEURIS 1988, 144).

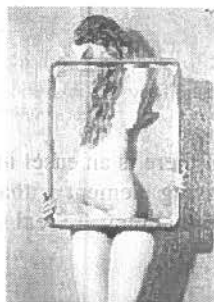
**16. The Field-glass (1963)**



In *The Field-glass*, according to Gablik,

The skyscape on the left-hand pane might be either a view seen through the glass, or a painted covering applied to the pane in some way ..., or a reflection on the glass from another source. However, the painting itself defies the logic of any of these possibilities, in that the right-hand pane, slightly ajar on the darkness beyond, simultaneously negates all these speculations (GABLIK 1985, 87).

**17. Dangerous Liaisons (1936)**

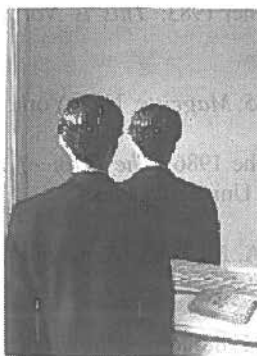


Foucault describes *Dangerous Liaisons* as follows:

The mirror functions a little like a fluoroscope, but with a whole play of differences. The woman is seen in profile, turned to the right, body bent slightly forward, arm not outstretched to hold the heavy mirror but rather tucked beneath her breasts.... The image is noticeably smaller than the woman herself, indicating a certain distance between the glass and the reflected object that contests or is contested by the posture of the woman who presses the mirror against her body the better to hide. The small gap behind the mirror is shown again by the extreme proximity of a large grey wall. On it can be clearly seen the shadows cast by the woman's head and thighs and by the mirror. From the shadow one is missing –that of the left hand that holds the mirror (FOUCAULT 1983, 51-52).

In classical Western painting, it was a tradition to depict beautiful women with a mirror. Tiziano's *Venus with a Mirror*, Bellini's *The Woman Looking at the Mirror*, Velázquez's *Aphrodite* or Memling's *Self Admiration* are the well-known examples of such paintings. I think in these paintings the mirror is used not only to reflect the beauty of the women but also to reaffirm that what is reflected on the mirror is an exact copy of the 'real' beauty of these women. In *Dangerous Liaisons*, Magritte deconstructs the view that the mirror has the power to reflect reality, and thus destroys the iconic meaning of the mirror.

## 18. Reproduction Prohibited (1937)



In *Reproduction Prohibited* we see the back of a man who is looking at a mirror and we also see his reflection in the mirror; but at this moment we are really surprised, because in the mirror we do not see the man's face as it ought to be, we again see him from the back.

The title of the painting, *Reproduction Prohibited*, "directs the viewer's attention to problems of reproduction and representation" (SCHNEEDE 1982, 104). But in his painting Magritte warns us about the complex relationship between reality and representation. He does this both by using the surprising reflection of the man and a book which is correctly reflected.

As you see the book is in front of the mirror. "[T]he title of the book lying on the mantelpiece ... is *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* by Edgar Allan Poe, who was one of Magritte's favorite writers" (SCHNEEDE 1982, 104). *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is an "adventure story, bringing the hero into trouble frequently and leading the reader into a world of illusions where nothing is what it seems"<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.poedecoder.com/QRisse/blank.html#pym1>, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2002.

As a real iconoclast, Magritte aims to make us panic when we see this reflection of the man<sup>10</sup> although the book is correctly reflected. This feeling of panic impels us to reconsider the iconic meaning of the mirror and to deconstruct the reflectivist perspective.

In Turkish, the glazing of a mirror is called *sir*. One of the connotations of *sir* in Turkish is *secret*. Orhan Pamuk, a Turkish novelist, says: "To read is to look into the mirror; the one who knows the glazing also knows the secret and passes through the mirror" (PAMUK 1993, 328).

Magritte did so.

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<sup>10</sup> PAQUET 1994, 15.

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