

## A surrealist's guide to reality

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The painting above, titled *Evening Falls II* (1964), is by the surrealist **René Magritte**. It is of course a linguistic and visual joke – but it is a serious and profound one. We look at a pastoral scene through a window; but its pane has shattered. This breakage reveals that the pane was not transparent, but an opaque *representation* of the reality behind it.

**Reality?** Surely not. Being part of a picture, the 'distant' scene is itself only a *representation* ... idyllically rendered with simple poster-like graphics. We the viewer are *really* inside a room looking out of the window. **Reality again?** Surely not. We the viewer are perhaps in a gallery room looking through the 'window' of the picture frame at a *representation* ... just like the window in the painting. And you are now mentally *representing* all these layers of *representations* in your mind. **Where is the reality?** Is it shattered into broken pieces?

Welcome to reality as a **representational 'hall of mirrors'**. Dare you enter the weird and wonderful world of the surrealist's **surrealist - René Magritte?**



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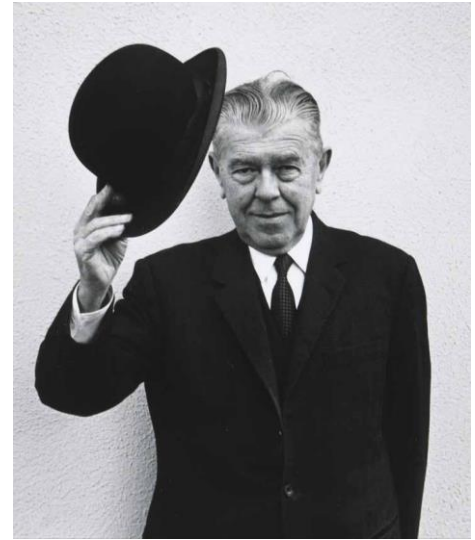
## 8

### **Appendix: Developing the epistemological picture**

The flows of information involved in our interaction with symbolic artefacts

# 1 Bonjour Monsieur Magritte

1.1 If you had been strolling along the boulevards of Brussels in the 1950s, you would scarcely notice the unassuming Bruxellois, the bourgeois gentleman dressed in a dark three-piece suit and bowler hat, walking his petite pooch. A retired lawyer maybe? A banker? Or perhaps, you might think, a senior civil servant. But you would have been wrong. Because it would have been René Magritte (1898-1967) – joker, illusionist, prolific artist ... and surrealist through and through. And of all the surrealists – so influential in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – it was Magritte who seemed to understand most profoundly the nature of the image ... the nature of representation itself and thereby the fundamental human condition. There he is in the photograph, doffing his hat, with a knowing, wry half-smile playing on his lips ... always the consummate poseur.



1.2



René Magritte, 1929, *La Trahison des Images*

Decades earlier in 1929, having returned to Brussels from a failed attempt at Parisian success as a painter, he scraped a living out of advertising design. It was then he must have stumbled upon an advertisement for tobacco pipes or maybe even designed one himself. Unlike anyone else, he used this bit of cheap ephemera to carefully paint, in his trademark laconic style, one of the most famous artworks in the world. The ubiquitous iconic meme, Ceci n'est pas une pipe (This is not a pipe) was thus created.

1.3 But highly significantly, Magritte didn't name it as that: he called it *La Trahison des Images* (The Treachery of Images), which is a strong clue as to what is going on in this work. Why did he claim that it wasn't a pipe when it so obviously was? Because it so obviously wasn't! Of course, it was *actually* a *representation* of a pipe. And the often overlooked inscribed word 'pipe'... that wasn't a pipe either. So, over thirty years before Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup cans and Brillo boxes of the 1960s or the British art-language conceptualists of the 1960-70s, what was the mysterious point being made by Monsieur Magritte, that most cerebral of surrealists?

1.4 *La Trahison des Images* – such an innocent and simple looking painting – plays with the two fundamental forms of physical representation: an *iconic* symbol (the image) versus *alphabetic* symbols (the words). The obvious banal interpretation – that the image of a pipe is not the real thing – is just the start of a descent into a maze of referential discombobulation.

## Surrealism

The artistic, photographic and literary movement mainly of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which aimed to combine dreams and waking reality into a super-realism – hence the name. The key quality of Surrealism is strangeness. Besides Magritte, luminaries include André Breton, Max Ernst, Leonora Carrington, Man Ray, Giorgio de Chirico and Salvador Dali.



## 2 Aesthetics versus semiotics

2.1 In a much quoted letter, Magritte seems to dismiss such semiotic deconstruction of his work:

“Questions such as ‘What does this picture mean, what does it represent?’ are possible only if one is incapable of seeing a picture in all its truth, only if one automatically understands that a very precise image does not show precisely what it is. It’s like believing that the implied meaning (if there is one?) is worth more than the overt meaning. **There is no implied meaning in my paintings, despite the confusion that attributes symbolic meaning to my painting.** How can anyone enjoy interpreting symbols? They are ‘substitutes’ that are only useful to a mind that is incapable of knowing the things themselves. A devotee of interpretation cannot see a bird; he only sees it as a symbol. Although this manner of knowing the ‘world’ may be useful in treating mental illness, it would be silly to confuse it with a mind that can be applied to any kind of thinking at all.”

René Magritte, 1960, in a *letter to Achille Chavée*  
<http://www.mattesonart.com/the-human-condition-1933--1935-with-articles.aspx>

### Semiosis

The process by which meaning and understanding is gained through representation, ie signs and symbols in a broad sense of those terms

### Semiotics/semiology

The study of semiosis

### Sfumato

A painting technique for softening the transition between colour hues and tones

2.2 This is a very surprising declaration from the ultimate symbolist! There are several points to make about it. Is Magritte – justifiably for an artist – saying that the viewer should focus on the aesthetics rather than the semiotics? There is some validity to this. It is too easy with Magritte’s work to jump immediately to symbolic decoding ... ie what does this or that element or relation between elements mean? One should not ignore his very distinctive aesthetic: cool, aloof, with a restrained stiffness, typified in his work *La Clairvoyance* ... as if we are peering at a toy theatre. His draughting and flat painterly technique is precise – all the elements clearly defined and painted with meticulous care. Look at the exquisite sfumato and subtle palette used in the rendering of the pipe in *La Trahison des Images*. Notice the overly careful, schoolchild-like cursive script adding to the quiet *presence* of the whole painting. Viewing a work by Magritte is entering a strangely enchanted off-kilter world, where familiar objects become imbued with a dreamlike oddity. There are intriguing juxtapositions and empty graphic spaces that evoke a tinge of melancholy, a forlorn scene frozen in time, with a feeling that something is missing. The place has been abandoned or something is yet to happen ... but somehow never will.



René Magritte, 1936, *La Clairvoyance*

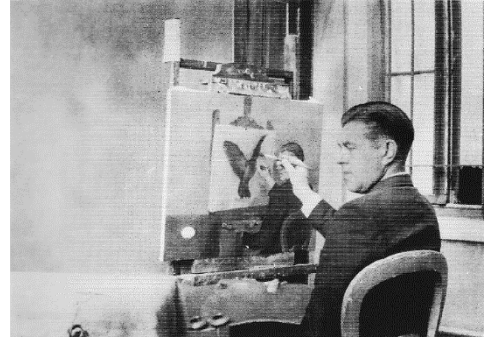
2.3

But recognising the aesthetic qualities of Magritte’s paintings does not obviate the glaring semiotic challenges they present. For instance, one can appreciate *La Clairvoyance* as beautifully weird, but one cannot ignore the serious joke contained within it: the painter in the picture, intensely studying the elementary form of the egg, is portraying it as an intricately detailed bird! And the title – always important in his work – comically refers to human foresight: the artist only studies the egg’s *present* but is depicting its *future*. It is also comedic in the absurd implication that the artist needs to use the egg as a model for his painting of the bird. This surely demonstrates that if we want to fully experience the genius of Magritte’s oeuvre, *cognitive* interpretation is a valid, indeed *necessary*, step to take after our *affective aesthetic* enjoyment. Magritte’s admonition about interpreting symbolic implications should be taken with a large pinch of salt. Remember – he was always the joker. Unsurprisingly he couldn’t resist commissioning a photograph of himself which reprises *La Clairvoyance*. He is captured painting *La Clairvoyance* in precisely the same pose as portrayed in *La Clairvoyance* itself. The artist who said:

“My painting is visible images which conceal nothing ... they evoke mystery and indeed when one sees one of my pictures, one asks oneself this simple question 'What does that mean'? It does not mean anything, because mystery means nothing either, it is unknowable.” ([renemagritte.org](http://renemagritte.org))

... was the same artist who contradictorily said:

“Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see.” ([renemagritte.org](http://renemagritte.org))

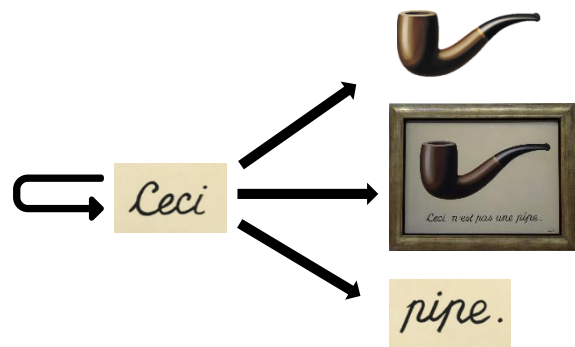


*Double self-portrait, 1936*  
(from Jacques Meuris, 1993, *René Magritte*, Taschen)

2.4

Let’s peer at what’s hidden in the not-a-pipe, *La Trahison des Images*, and brave that maze of referential discombobulation previously mentioned. The primary trio of symbols in the painting are the pipe image, the indicative pronoun ‘ceci’ (‘this’) and the article plus noun ‘une pipe’. But what does ‘ceci’ refer to? Is it the *image* of a pipe, as in our initial interpretation, or is it the whole artwork *qua* object (ie paint, canvas, wooden stretcher and frame) that is not a pipe? Or is it the scripted word symbol ‘pipe’ which is not a pipe? Could it even be reflexive – the symbol ‘ceci’ *itself* is not a pipe? And all this is just the ambiguity of ‘ceci’. There is also the ambiguity of ‘pipe’. Is Magritte saying one or all of these things are not the scripted word ‘pipe’ ... or not its referent, a real pipe? In *La Trahison des Images*, Magritte is fiendishly playing around with the very nature of semiosis – the fact that, for humans, something can simultaneously be *itself* but also be a symbol referring to and representing something *other than itself*.

The ‘meaning’ of a normal artefact, such as a real pipe, is simply itself as a functional object. But a *symbolic artefact*, such as an image or a written word, has *dual* meaning: it ‘means’ itself as an independent material object, but it also has the acquired meaning of its referent.



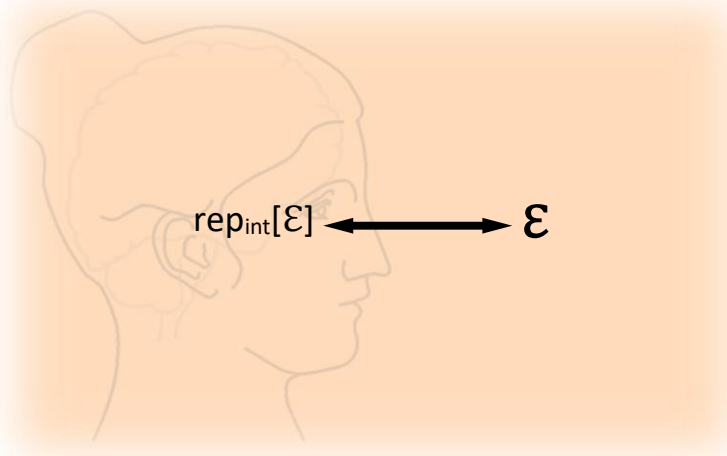
What does ‘ceci’ refer to?  
Which is not a pipe?

2.5 As if all this bathetic banality – a typical Surrealist subversion of the normal – was not enough, there is a deeper question of reference to consider. We have been assuming for simplicity's sake that a symbol refers *directly* to its referent object. This is a convenient fiction; but it cannot be what is actually happening because there is no direct interflow of information between symbol and referent. That connection requires an intervening information processing system ... a mind. This is explored in the Appendix (*Developing the epistemological picture*); but note that in our discussion of *La Trahison des Images*, we are perforce using – in the text you are reading – the very same alphabetic symbols the painting is also using to refer to the elements within *La Trahison des Images*! The final joke was that the original object used as a stimulus for the painting was not a real pipe at all: it was an advertisement for pipes ... another *representation* of a pipe! From surface simplicity to a hopeless tangle of mental convolutions ... no wonder Magritte the magician smiles mischievously.



### 3 Representation and reference

3.1 We need some epistemological meta-theory here to sort all this out. When we experience some real entity or event ( $\epsilon$ ), we *intramentally* represent it ( $rep_{int}[\epsilon]$ ). Diagrammatically this experiencing could be depicted like this:



#### Epistemology

The branch of philosophy that examines the nature of knowledge, its presuppositions and foundations, and its extent and validity. It is often counterposed to **ontology**, the philosophical account of the nature of reality itself.

#### Intramental

Referring to thought and feelings 'within' the mind/brain.

#### Extramental

Existing independently of the mind/brain.

3.2 Note that the arrow indicates the flow of information and it is two-way. Forming an *intramental* representation is a dynamic process involving the experiencer not just *passively* receiving information about  $\epsilon$  but *actively* perceptually interrogating it and frequently acting upon it via motor control of their body. This depiction applies to all animals that can internally model their external environments and not just rely on having a set of simple reflexes. Although vision is the predominant sensual mode, these mental models are formed using all available senses.

3.3 In humans, *intramental* representation can be considered as a hierarchy of informational processing levels:

- **Sensation** is the detection of a stimulus, ie how the world impinges upon us.
- **Perception** is the grouping of various sensations (not just visual) into a set – a *percept*, which can be memorised. If previous encounters have already formed a

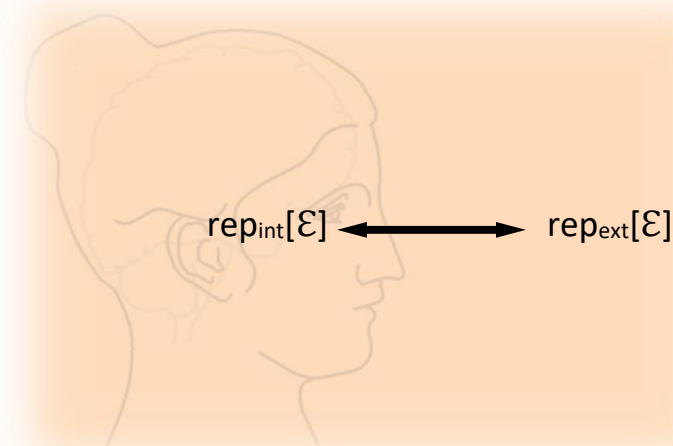
similar memorised percept, the new one can be matched with it, much like a search engine, to identify its referent.

- **Conceptualisation** is the grouping and inter-relating of percepts into an identifiable entity or event. It is at this stage that a phenomenon can be tagged with a symbol, ie named. Conceptualisation could be thought of as primarily the level for facilitating description and depiction.
- **Theorisation** is the grouping and inter-relating of concepts. This stage involves sequencing, causation, processes and time. Theorisation could be thought of as primarily the level for facilitating explanation and expression.

3.4 For example, consider a view that you are looking at during a walk. You initially *sense* a lot of different colours and shapes. But there is a familiar *perceptual* grouping of these many little green shapes clustered around jointed brown, roughly cylindrical shapes. This *percept* is familiar: it is an intrinsic part of the particular and familiar *concept* of a tree: so you recognise a tree. Then you could take this beyond the conceptual to the *theoretical* level by wondering whether the tree will soon be in its flowering season, if it is suitable for timber, etc. These representations occur so quickly that we don't normally consciously distinguish the levels. You just see a tree.

3.5 The four levels of representation are inevitable fuzzy categories. Some fields of study would require a much finer grain hierarchy. A neurologist, for instance, would need to break down the stages into successions of brain processes. A teacher might need a finer grain model for the learning of a specific concept with sequenced stages from concrete particulars to abstract ideas. But for our purposes, the four level model will suffice. For simplicity, the symbol  $rep_{int}[\mathcal{E}]$  can stand for *any* of these levels of mental representation of entity or event  $\mathcal{E}$ . This straightforward depiction of our *intramental* representation of *extramental* objects and events in the environment served adequately for millions of years of animal evolution. It still applies to us now when we observe many ordinary objects. But for some special objects – symbolic artefacts – it gets a bit more complicated.

3.6



With symbolic artefacts, their primary role is to represent ideas – to *extramentally* represent someone's *intramental* representation. For these objects we need to elaborate on our simple depiction because the observer is no longer focusing on  $\mathcal{E}$  but an external *representation* of that  $\mathcal{E}$  ...  $rep_{ext}[\mathcal{E}]$ .

3.7

This is still a very simplified model of the functioning of symbolic artefacts, but it will do for our current purposes.

(A fuller exposition is given in the Appendix.) There follows a suggested evolution of *extramental* symbolic objects, both natural and artefactual, which fills out this story of a uniquely human development. If you are short of time, you can skip it and go to the successive section – *The Human Condition*.





## 4 The evolution of symbolic artefacts

4.1 Many animals use tools to extend their bodily abilities: eg stones as hammers and sticks for poking into crevices. Humans of course have also made tools lethal as weaponry. But a stone, as a natural object that couldn't be eaten, didn't have any meaning on its own. It was merely a **token**: something which can potentially become meaningful as part of a system, but has no *intrinsic* value or meaning in isolation. Letters of an alphabet, numerals and electronic bits are tokens. Once the stone is used for bashing something, it becomes a **tool** which has significance: it enhances the user's prospects of achieving their goals. If a stone is used as a place or way marker, it now becomes a **sign**. It *refers to something else* because it indicates a specific and perhaps special place or feature in the environment. It is essentially indexical: it points to *something else*. Signs are ubiquitous among animals: monkeys' predator alert calls, birds' courtship behaviour, ants' pheromone trails indicating propitious paths to food sources, lions urinating to mark their territory, etc, etc.

4.2 Humans similarly use *bodily* signalling through gesture, but go further than that. Probably unlike any other species, they select *unrelated* objects in their environment as tokens to create signs. A marker stone has a completely *arbitrary* connection with its referent place. Its only link is in the mind of the people whose sign it is, and is strictly meaningless to others ... unless of course they acquire the marker stone's significance through learning. As tools extend physical abilities, so our *extramental* signs extend mental abilities: external objects used *in situ* for the purpose of identification, indication, navigation, etc.

4.3 However, to aid thinking even further, why not also have a 'marker' you can take away with you, to remind you and others of that place and its significance to you when elsewhere? The stone mentally connects with its referent place and can be used while considering your next journey there or some ritual that goes on there. But that simple act of moving the sign and using it for a different purpose has huge consequences. It no longer just *indicates* something else, it *substitutes* for something else. The humble stone sign has now become an *extramental* representative **symbol**.

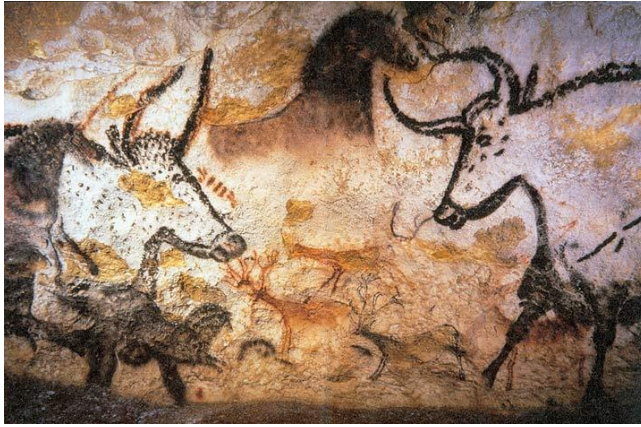


Engraved ochre from the Blombos Cave, South Africa  
c. 75,000-100,000 years old. Cf  
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26257796>

4.4 Lest we think ourselves remote from this stone-age symbolism, consider the Stone of Scone (pronounced *Skoon*), reputedly the historical throne used in the crowning of Scottish monarchs but seized in 1296 by a triumphant King Edward I of England as a spoil of war. To this day it is placed under the seat of the UK's Coronation Chair. And to some, it is still very significant! This attachment of deep significance to symbolic objects is a profoundly human trait. Symbolic objects evoke strong atavistic emotions due to cognitive association with their referents (cf eg Bruce Hood, 2009, *SuperSense: Why We Believe in the Unbelievable*).



#### 4.5



Mural paintings from the Lascaux Caves, France  
c17000 – c15000 BCE

Homo sapiens, being sapiens, was not content with using natural found objects as signs and symbols. Just as with their practical tools, they developed their symbolic tools as well. The **symbolic artefact** evolved from scratched marks on stone into all the graphics, text, photography, computer modelling, etc, which now defines our whole culture. This was a fate foretold in the beautiful Lascaux Cave art from the Upper Palaeolithic era.

For more information on ancient symbolic artefacts, consult eg these links:

- [Mayer, Vandermeersch and Bar-Yosef, 2009, Shells and ochre in Middle Paleolithic Qafzeh Cave, Palestine: indications for modern behavior, \*Journal of Human Evolution\*, Volume 56](#)
- [Henshilwood et al, 2002, Emergence of Modern Human Behavior: Middle Stone Age Engravings from South Africa, \*Science\*, 295.](#)

#### 4.6

The human ability to regard objects *metaphorically* – regarding one object as *representing* another object or event – is likely to be one of the uniquely defining features of our species and a huge evolutionary milestone. It facilitates a vastly more sophisticated modelling of the world compared with a basic animal representation of immediate particular objects in their world. With symbols acting as metaphors of a much wider world, a much grander world view is possible. This capability seems closely related to our ability to generalise (a *single* symbol representing a *whole category* of similar particulars) and to use abstraction (where a symbol represents a mental construct). Symbolic artefacts hugely enhance the promulgation of knowledge and are a *sine qua non* for societal education. Prior to the birth of the symbol, all cultural transmission was done by *proximal* observation and copying of behaviour, which was limited to the immediate vicinity. The student has to watch the teacher. But symbols know no such bounds and can spread knowledge and culture far and wide. Physical tools are extensions of peripersonal *physical* space: they become quasi-body parts in very intimate biophysical ways (cf Moheb Constandi, 2022, *Body Am I* for a neuroscientific exposition). Similarly, symbolic artefacts are physical extensions of our *intrapersonal* mental space, wherein we feel most comfortable culturally.

**Peripersonal space** defines the region of space immediately surrounding our bodies in which objects can be grasped and manipulated.

**Extrapersonal space** refers to the space beyond grasping distance, in which exploratory eye movements occur.

**Intrapersonal space** is a spatial metaphor the individual self or mind.

#### 4.7

This potted evolution of symbolic artefacts is inevitably partly speculative due to the essentially ephemeral nature of early developments. In the march of time, lines in sand, stone markers and sacred bits of organic material all disintegrate or dislocate and thereby lose all meaning via simultaneous physical and cultural entropy. Nevertheless I think it is a plausible narrative of the origins of our vast constructed semiotic world.



## 5 The human condition

5.1 In 1933, Magritte painted *La Condition Humaine*, the first of his painting-within-a-painting theme, to which he returned many times throughout his life. This seemingly simple study superficially appears as just a straightforward scene through a window. It has his trademark

deadpan aesthetic of a restrained cool palette, flat brushwork, careful draughting and a subtly sparse rendition of what the real room would have looked like. The more one gazes at it, the more one is aware of its prevailing strangeness. Something seems to be going on, but what exactly?

5.2



5.3

Soon one notices certain little graphic subtleties which reveal the beguiling visual joke of this work. Part of what appeared as a scene through a window is a canvas which exactly replicates the scene it blocks. That *trompe l'oeil* is when the representational hall of mirrors starts and makes this one of the most intellectually profound and complex paintings ever created.

Below are some pointers to a possible deconstruction of the many layers of meaning in this painting. If you want a further steer, please look at Section 6 below.

René Magritte, 1933, *La Condition Humaine*

- The painting is in a strong tradition of Western art since the 15<sup>th</sup> century development of perspective: looking at an artwork is like peering at a scene through a window. This is obviously enhanced by a frame around the picture. So as we look at *La Condition Humaine*, are we as viewers like the 'painting' in the picture: representing reality through a window?
- Is there any significance to the depicted 'painting' being *inside* a room and the scene it depicts being *outside*? Does this refer to a culture-nature divide?
- Does the *partial* depiction of the 'real' landscape by the 'painting' indicate how we perceptually and conceptually 'frame' *parts* of the world? Significantly, we are only granted a framed part of the 'real' scenery because it is surrounded by the window and curtains.
- The title of the painting *La Condition Humaine* is deeply significant. Yet there are no humans in the painting. The 'painting' in the picture is a *representation* of the 'real' scene it obscures. Is that a metaphor for the fact that we only ever experience mental *representations* of reality, not reality itself ... ie the human condition?

5.4 Here is what Magritte himself said about *La Condition Humaine*:

- "For the spectator, it was both inside the room within the painting and outside in the real landscape." (Quoted in Harry Torczyner, 1977, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*.)
- "The problem of the window led to *La Condition Humaine*. In front of a window as seen from the interior of the room, I placed a painting (canvas and easel) that precisely

represented the portion of landscape blotted out by the painting. For instance the tree represented in the painting displaced the tree behind the painting outside the room. For the viewer the tree was simultaneously inside the room, in the painting [and] outside the room, in the real landscape, [and] in thought.” (Quoted in Inga Forslund, 1965, *René Magritte, Museum of Modern Art catalog.*)



## 6 Layers of representation in *La Condition Humaine*

(with questions for discussion)

6.1 In the painting, reality seems to get further and further away in the representational hall of mirrors! Here I look at some of those ‘mirrors’, those representations within the picture, and their implications.

Q.1 We see a representation of a room looking out on a pastoral scene framed by the window.

**Are we like the room where the representation of the exterior is interior? Is the room our intrapersonal space?**

Q.2 This pastoral scene is represented and obscured by the unframed depicted picture on the easel.

**Does our perception of reality block what reality is ‘really’ like?**

Q.3 This relationship between a picture and what is depicted is represented by Magritte’s painting itself.

**So is our representation of reality like reality?**

Q.4 The painting is represented by its title: the words ‘La Condition Humaine’.

**Is representation the basic human condition?**

Q.5 The words of the title also represent and evoke concepts which Magritte wanted to be associated with his painting.

**Are words essential to understanding the painting?**

6.2 All these layers of representation are inside the picture itself; but step outside of it and consider ourselves as viewers of the painting. But actually we are not, because we are not in the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. We are dealing with a visual reproduction of it. And several textual representations referring to it. This *extramental* graphic and text (including the painting’s title) will then have their own *intramental* representations in your mind/brain as you read this paper. Any discussion about the painting or this paper (itself an *extramental* conceptual and theoretical representation) will involve *extramental* auditory representations (structures of phonemes) as participants speak to each other. And our *intramental* representations are not just positivistic: what is *not extramentally* represented can be *intramentally* represented because the hidden and missing have significance ... especially with Magritte! Our lives are epistemological ‘halls of mirrors’.





## 7 So what is a surrealist's guide to reality?

7.1 Much of Magritte's work makes a very deep epistemological point: we only *represent* the world ... mentally structure how it impinges upon us. Hence it is essentially Kantian, after Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) idealistic theory that we can only know *phenomena* (sensations, thoughts and feelings), not *noumena* (reality 'in itself'). Much of Magritte's work signals the essentially *constructive*, artificial nature of how we mentally model our world. For instance, in *La Condition Humaine*, he displays the edges of the canvas, nailed onto its stretcher and propped up by the structure of the easel. I like to interpret (rather fancifully perhaps) the easel as rationality, supporting those constructed mental representations. *La Condition Humaine* also comments on the human ability not just to represent the world, but also to represent that very process of representation ... ie *meta-representation*.

7.2 You may think 'So what?' All this is the stock-in-trade of semiotics and wider epistemology. What is Magritte contributing? Usually it's only philosophers, especially Kantians, who are fully aware of Representationalism. Most people do *not* think about their experience as a succession of representations; they just get on with their lives. Even fewer consider meta-representation. For example, not many readers of this paper would *automatically* think of it as meta-representation, but of course it is. But Magritte's work beautifully awakens its viewers, not just philosophers, to this fundamental aspect of the human condition.

7.3 Magritte's paintings lure us into thinking about this profound existential truth because their unique strangeness tickles our curiosity. As he himself said:

"Everything we see hides another thing; we always want to see what is hidden by what we see."  
([renemagritte.org](http://renemagritte.org))

No-one else has presented this fundamentally mysterious nature of reality 'in itself' in such a clever, intriguing and beautiful way as René Magritte. Humans may not be able to know what reality 'really' is, but we can 'paint a picture'. *Merci beaucoup*, Monsieur Magritte, and thank you the reader for devoting your time to my symbolic artefact.

### Representationalism

A philosophical stance which proposes that our perception and conceptualisation about the external world is not as the world is in itself, but is a representation of it. Representations need not be 'like' what they represents, but only need to structure the information which is relevant to us in a *functional way*. [Note this is very different from the notion of Representationalism in art, where it describes images that do *visually* correspond to their referent.]

Philosophical Representationalism is in the Idealistic tradition of Plato and Kant in that external reality is regarded as not directly accessible but only via the internal representation of it. It is a common stance in psychology, neuroscience and much philosophy.

**There are a million stories in epistemology and aesthetics.  
This has been one of them.**





# 8 Appendix: Developing the epistemological picture

## An informational model of our use of symbolic artefacts

“Only thought can resemble. It resembles by being what it sees, hears, or knows; it becomes what the world offers it.”

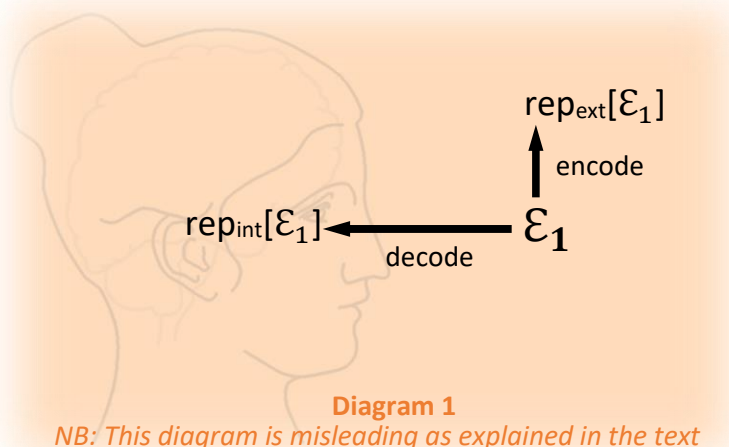
René Magritte ([renemagritte.org](http://renemagritte.org))

8.1 We interact with any entity or event ( $\mathcal{E}_1$ ) in our environment using different levels of *intramental* representations: initial *sensations* are structured into *perceptions*, which are structured into *concepts*. These concepts can then be articulated into *theories* featuring time and causation. Intimately entwined with these *cognitive* representations is how we feel about them, our *affectual* representations which determine their salience ... what existential significance we attach to those *cognitive* representations. Thus we *decode* information from the *extramental* world.

8.2 All animals with sufficiently complex nervous systems do this to some extent, but humans go further by deliberately *encoding* their *intramental* representations in the *extramental* world. The resulting symbolic artefact is itself an independent *extramental* entity ( $\mathcal{E}_2$ ) which can deliver information to be decoded by other people, so they can construct their own percepts, concepts, theories plus attendant affect. This is the process governing all cultural transmission, especially education.

8.3 For illustrative purposes in the exposition below, I have used the situation of an artist doing a still life painting of an object. But the processes involved apply to all the types of representation – image, text, diagram, computer model, etc. In the diagrams (used for simplification and clarity) the artist’s head is shown by a line drawing, the outline of which contains the *intramental* ‘space’ of her thoughts and feelings. Outside her head is the independent *extramental* world. If the *extramental* object is the entity  $\mathcal{E}_1$ , then her *intramental* representations of the object (all her percepts, concepts and theories about it, plus her affectual responses to it) are  $\text{rep}_{\text{int}}[\mathcal{E}_1]$ . Her painting, an *extramental* symbolic artefact, is  $\text{rep}_{\text{ext}}[\mathcal{E}_1]$ . So the process of creating her painting (or any other symbolic artefact) would now look like Diagram 1 below:

8.4



The arrows indicate the *main* flow of information. In practice, observation is an informational two-way street with the observer not just passively receiving information but also actively sending information externally via motor control: manipulating the object for perceptual interrogation.

8.5 Unfortunately Diagram 1 implies that there is a *direct* flow of information between the object  $\mathcal{E}_1$  and its *extramental* representation  $\text{rep}_{\text{ext}}[\mathcal{E}_1]$ . Which of course is *not* the case. There is *no* information flowing *directly* between the object and the painting of it. (There would be a direct flow if the representation were a photograph, video or any artificial image production.) The act of reference is performed *in the mind of the artist* not between two independent *extramental* entities. The flow of information is via the artist’s *intramental* representation of

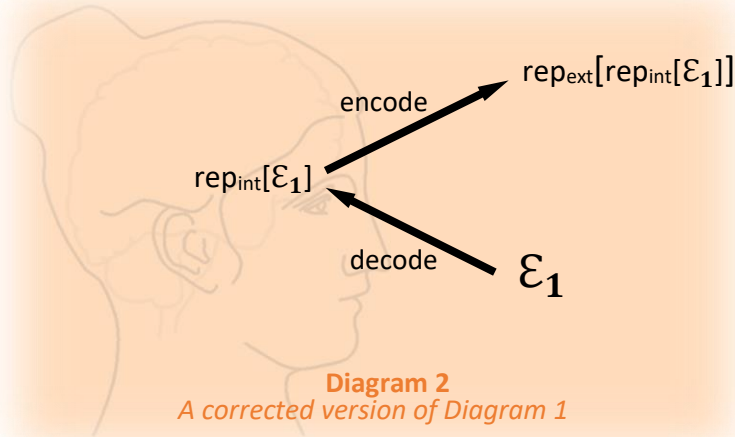
$\epsilon_1$  (her mental image of the object) which is then used to encode the *extramental* representation of  $\epsilon_1$ ; ie  $\text{rep}_{\text{ext}}[\epsilon_1]$  – her painting.

8.6 This means that the painting is more coherently considered as a representation of her *inner thoughts and feelings* about the object rather than the object *per se*. Hence

$$\text{rep}_{\text{ext}}[\epsilon_1] = \text{rep}_{\text{ext}}[\text{rep}_{\text{int}}[\epsilon_1]]$$

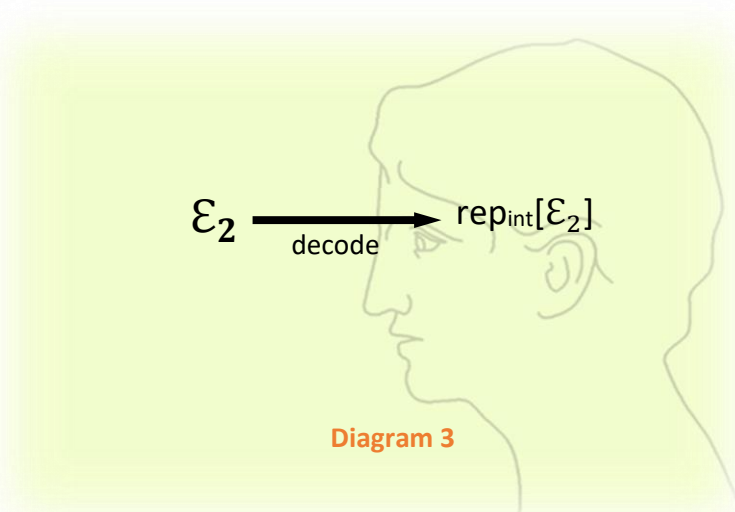
So the process should look like Diagram 2.

8.7



So what happens when the artist finishes her picture and sells it to a buyer? He, the buyer, looks at his *extramental* painting as a new object –  $\epsilon_2$ . And forms his own *intramental* representation of the painting –  $\text{rep}_{\text{int}}[\epsilon_2]$  – as shown in Diagram 3.

8.8



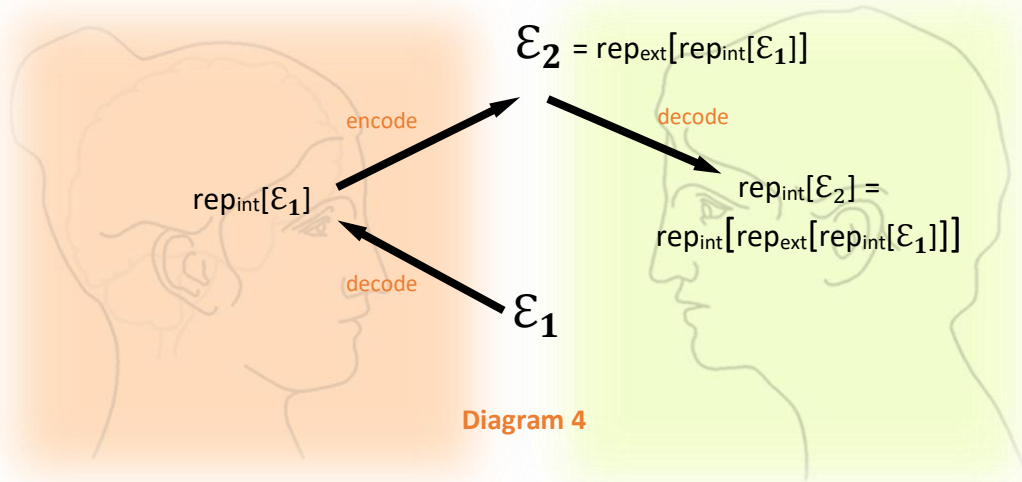
Of course  $\epsilon_2$  is actually the artist's *extramental* representation of  $\epsilon_1$ ; or more accurately her *external* representation of her *intramental* representation of  $\epsilon_1$ . So

$$\begin{aligned} \epsilon_2 &= \text{rep}_{\text{ext}}[\text{rep}_{\text{int}}[\epsilon_1]] \\ \text{and the buyer's intramental representation of his picture, by substitution becomes} \\ \text{rep}_{\text{int}}[\epsilon_2] &= \\ \text{rep}_{\text{int}}[\text{rep}_{\text{ext}}[\text{rep}_{\text{int}}[\epsilon_1]]] \end{aligned}$$

8.9

We can see the many refractions the original information about  $\epsilon_1$  has gone through in the chain below and in Diagram 4, which combines artist and buyer.

$$\begin{aligned} &\epsilon_1 \\ &\downarrow \text{ decode} \\ &\text{rep}_{\text{int}}[\epsilon_1] \\ &\downarrow \text{ encode} \\ &\text{rep}_{\text{ext}}[\text{rep}_{\text{int}}[\epsilon_1]] \\ &\downarrow \text{ decode} \\ &\text{rep}_{\text{int}}[\text{rep}_{\text{ext}}[\text{rep}_{\text{int}}[\epsilon_1]]] \end{aligned}$$



**8.10** Each coding stage necessarily involves deletions and additions, which can be made for benign reasons (simplification, clarification, expressivity, etc) or malign reasons (disinformation and mendacity through dissemblance). One hopes the last representation displayed in this informational chain (which is not necessarily the end of the chain) contains sufficient accurate information about  $\epsilon_1$  for the buyer (the person doing the *intramental* representing), but inevitably  $\text{info}[\epsilon_2] < \text{info}[\epsilon_1]$ .

**8.11** This rather abstruse model lays out the process of *extramental* representation: the encoding and projection of *phenomenal* thoughts and feelings into our *physical* environment. It reminds us of several key points about living in the semiotic soup of our human culture:

- Our knowledge of *extramental* reality is via constructed *intramental* representations of that reality.
- Most of our knowledge is *indirect*: information refracted many times through *intramental* representations in different minds.
- Ensuring 'truth' at each transmission of information requires normative rules governing coherence, accuracy and ethical acceptability. After tens of thousands of years, we've got them in science, mathematics, logic, etc. Elsewhere, we're still struggling to achieve them.





Your notes