René Magritte, *Personal Values*, 1952, oil on canvas, 31½ x 39⅜ in. (80 x 100 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (artwork © Charly Herscovici, Brussels/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photograph provided by Banque d'images, ADAGP/Art Resource, New York)

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Secret Agency: Magritte at MoMA in the 1960s

Toward the end of his career, in 1965, René Magritte is reported to have asked with mock surprise, "Do the Pop artists claim me? Excuse me, but I think Pop is window dressing, advertising art."[1] One is tempted to think the dismissal ironic, in light of Magritte's own close collaboration with advertising and commercial display. Magritte's ambivalence about Pop was well-known; the art historian Sarah Whitfield describes Magritte's attitude as "a total rejection" of Pop art.[2] In another interview of 1965, Magritte said, "Yes, I know I'm called the father of Pop art . . . but Pop art is nothing but a version . . . of good old Dadaism . . ."[3] Elsewhere he asked, "Are we permitted to expect from pop art anything more than sugar-coated Dadaism?"[4] It seems that the problem for Magritte was not a lack of formal connection, but that Pop's seemingly uncomplicated repackaging of Dada resulted in the sublimation of the avant-garde's original values. Despite the artist's disavowals of the quality or necessity of Pop art, critics in the 1960s continued to cite Magritte's oeuvre in concert with the characteristics and strategies of the new movement. For example, in one of the first articles on Pop art published in an art magazine, Max Kozloff wrote, "When Rosenquist paints a metallic scoop of ice cream, or Dine a flesh-colored tie, for instance, they are pulling down magical curtains over identity which Magritte had been 'photographing' all during the fifties."[5]

In part, we can use Magritte to explore the consequences of being "claimed." Not only did Magritte's reception change with the introduction of Pop aesthetics in the 1950s and 1960s, as I will demonstrate, but the reinterpretation of Magritte was part of an even broader reconsideration of the modernist narrative as a whole. The formal similarities that critics saw between Pop art and Magritte in particular, and Dada and Surrealism more generally, made evident the necessity of accounting for movements that did not conform to the dominant narrative of modern art as it had been presented up to the 1960s. Moreover, the consistent characterization of Magritte as a secret agent in the 1960s seems to hint at a hidden (and yet openly stated) subversive agenda that has not been analyzed, or even acknowledged, in Magritte scholarship. Tentatively articulated at first, these ideas pointed toward a shift in American art criticism, as many critics in the 1960s abandoned the narrow terms of formalism and instead began to assert the social and political dimension of the avant-garde. Despite the attempt of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) to tame Surrealism's unruliness through aesthetic values, by the end of the 1960s, Surrealism proved to be a major force in rewriting the history of modern art.

Thanks to Pop art, the terms in which Magritte's paintings were discussed shifted from the surreal to the everyday. Not only did the banal come into fashion in the early 1960s, but the new saturated reality as depicted in Pop paintings and collages began to seem a bit like the Surrealist dream. In the 1950s, critics accused Magritte of being a literary painter "who gives us little pictorial quality."[6] Magritte's paintings were considered "froth," or in the words of another reviewer, "droll but peripheral."[7] By 1961, Magritte was "a master of twentieth-century fantasy," according to a critic for the *New York Times*, but just four years later, in 1965, fantasy had been replaced by the everyday, and what distinguished Magritte for the same critic was "the insistent and deliberate banality of the pictorial elements he chooses to juggle."[8] Never warranting much attention in the United States

My thanks to the University of Houston for financial assistance with the images for this essay.

1. Magritte quoted in Grace Glueck, "A Bottle Is a Bottle," *New York Times*, December 19, 1965, C19.
2. Sarah Whitfield and Michael Raeburn, *René Magritte: Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 3, ed. David Sylvester (Houston: Menil Foundation, and Antwerp: Fonds Mercator, 1993), 132.
3. Magritte, remarks reported by Claude Vial, 1965, quoted in Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Harry N. Abrams: 1977), 68. In another interview Magritte singled out Jasper Johns's work: "The humour of Pop Art is rather 'orthodox,' it is within the reach of any successful window-dresser: to paint large American flags with one star more or less does not require any particular freedom of mind and does not present any technical difficulty." Magritte interview for Belgian television program "Dieu est-il pop?" January 20, 1965, quoted in Sarah Whitfield, *Magritte* (London: South Bank Centre, 1992), 17.
4. Magritte, quoted in Suzi Gablik, *Magritte* (1970; New York: Thames & Hudson, 1992), 73.
5. Max Kozloff, "Pop Culture, Metaphysical Disgust, and the New Vulgarians" (1962), rep. *Pop Art: The Critical Dialogue*, ed. Carol Anne Mahsun (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989), 21.
6. Cyril Connolly, 1956, quoted in Shattuck, "This Is Not René Magritte," *Artforum*, September 1966, 32. Though Magritte's paintings were sometimes praised for their technical facility, an emphasis on technique carried a rather retrograde stigma at this time, for it was associated with the academic tradition rejected by the avant-garde.
7. "Bored Funnyman," *Time* 61, no. 5 (February 2, 1953): 53; and Thomas B. Hess, "René Magritte [Janis]," *Art News* 53, no. 2 (April 1954): 43.
8. John Canaday, "Magritte-Courbet," *New York Times*, October 22, 1961, C15; and Canaday, "Art: Retrospective for René Magritte," *New York Times*, December 15, 1965, 42. Some critics drew the comparison between Magritte and Pop by reversing the positions, describing Pop art as an irrational treatment of the prosaic.

prior to the 1960s, recent art now cast Magritte's work in a contemporary light. Even James Thrall Soby, a persistent supporter and collector of Surrealism, admitted, "Of all modern artists whom I misjudged badly in my youth, the one about whom I feel most repentant is . . . René Magritte. I wrote in my first book on art . . . that his paintings 'wear thin, like puns too often repeated.' I don't understand how I could have been so wrong . . ."[9] In fact, Soby was mistaken; he had entirely failed to mention Magritte in his 1935 book, and wrote of him only later.[10]

When, in December 1965, *René Magritte*, a major retrospective of eighty-one works by Magritte, opened at the Museum of Modern Art with Soby as codirector of the exhibition, nearly every review discussed Magritte's significance for Pop art, even as the reviewers commented on his bourgeois demeanor.[11] Magritte came to the United States for the first time on the occasion of the opening, posing in front of his paintings dressed, as was so often the case, in his trademark suit and bowler hat.[12] Though American museums held large exhibitions of Magritte's work in 1960 (eighty works at the Dallas Museum for Contemporary Art and Houston Museum of Fine Arts), in 1962 (retrospective at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis), and in 1964 (more than one hundred works at the University of St. Thomas, Houston, and the Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock), none of these shows traveled beyond the Midwest.[13] We can credit MoMA's ability to create cultural buzz for the active solicitation of its 1965 Magritte show.[14] Indeed, so many museums wanted to host the MoMA exhibition that the directors had to turn many away. The exhibition traveled to the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University (where William Seitz, formerly of MoMA, had just begun his tenure as director), the Art Institute of Chicago, the Pasadena Art Museum (at the request of Walter Hopps, who had recently curated the 1963 Duchamp retrospective), and the University Art Museum at Berkeley (at the request of Peter Selz).

By 1966, when the show toured the country, the reexamination of Magritte became part of a larger trend in art criticism that found in Dada and Surrealism a precedent for the art that emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s. Lecturing at several venues of the exhibition, the historian and literary critic Roger Shattuck offered new interpretations of Magritte to eager audiences—around eight hundred heard his lecture on the Berkeley campus.[15] Shattuck's lecture appeared as an article in *Artforum*'s special issue dedicated to Surrealism, published in September 1966. The magazine's cover, designed by Ed Ruscha, exemplified the dialogue between Surrealism and contemporary art. In the mixed-media collage, *Surrealism Soaped and Scrubbed*, the word "surrealism" rises dynamically off the page in straightforward typeface. The letters contrast with the bubbles and the whimsy and elusiveness associated with them. Light catches the bubbles, in some places underscoring their physical, if momentary, materiality, but in other places the bubbles are flattened to soapy abstractions that, pressed against the blue-green background, look almost reptilian. There is a play here not only with transparency and opacity but also with temporality and transformation. Surrealism, once washed up, could be cleansed of its associations with kitsch. *Artforum* editor-in-chief Philip Leider later disowned the "Surrealism" issue, saying he considered it "terrible. I didn't see anything new in it. . . . The idea was mine, and everybody I respected laughed at it. Michael [Fried] didn't want any part of it. . . Frank [Stella] hated it. Because nobody had any use for Surrealism."[16] Senior editor Robert Pincus-Witten, however, later noted, "You musn't minimize that *Artforum*'s writers all

9. James Thrall Soby, "The Changing Stream" (ca. 1971), rep. *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century: Continuity and Change* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 220.
10. See Rona Roob, notes to Soby, "The Changing Stream," 227. Though Soby did not discuss Magritte's work in 1935, he was familiar enough with Magritte's oeuvre in 1936 to pose for a portrait wearing a bowler hat and suit jacket, standing within a picture frame, and looking very much like a figure in a Magritte painting. The quote about Magritte's work wearing thin with repeated puns instead comes from Soby's 1941 study of Giorgio de Chirico, where he writes that Magritte's "paintings are full of transformation which could not have been invented by a lesser poet. The difficulty with them is that once the transformations have been accepted and their shock absorbed, the paintings themselves sometimes wear thin, like puns too often repeated." Soby, *The Early Chirico* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1941), 95–96.
11. MoMA initially contacted Soby, who had written several books on the Surrealists, including a 1941 MoMA exhibition catalogue on Dalí, to curate the show, but he declined, citing medical difficulties, and instead wrote the catalogue text. The responsibility was given to William Seitz, credited as a curator in MoMA's "Department of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions." Seitz left the museum before the show opened to become the director of the Rose Art Museum and professor of fine arts at Brandeis.
12. Magritte often wore the bowler for publicity purposes but was not in the habit of wearing it on a daily basis; see Sotheby's, *The Remaining Contents of the Studio of René Magritte* (London: Sotheby's, 1987), n.p. After New York, Magritte continued on to Houston, where John and Dominique de Menil took the painter to a rodeo in Simonton, Texas, as part of his visit. The Menil Foundation has in its archives a series of photographs of Magritte at the rodeo in which a cowboy hat has replaced the bowler, though beyond that, Magritte makes little attempt to blend into the southwestern environment. He is dressed, as always, in a suit, and at his polished shoes stands the Magrittes' beloved Pomeranian, Lulu.
13. The shows were comparable in size to MoMA's 1965 exhibition.
14. See Dickran Tashjian, "Magritte's Last Laugh: A Surrealist's Reception in America," in *Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images*, ed. Stephanie Barron and Michel Draguet, with Sara Cochran, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2006), 57. Also in 1965, Patrick Waldberg, associated with the Surrealists, published his study of Magritte, which, in addition to Soby's catalogue, became a primary English-language publication on the artist. Waldberg, *René Magritte* (Brussels: André de Rache, 1965).
15. Director Peter Selz reported to UC Chancellor Roger Heyns, "Professor Roger Shattuck, of the University of Texas, spoke on 'René Magritte Framed' and the response was most gratifying. . . . We had an overflow crowd. After the lecture we opened the Gallery to the public and over 300 people went to visit the show." Selz letter to Heyns, October 14, 1966, Berkeley Art Museum

Ed Ruscha, *Surrealism Soaped and Scrubbed* (*Artforum* cover), 1966, chromogenic print, 11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.6 cm) (artwork © Ed Ruscha; photograph provided by the artist and Gagosian Gallery)

archives. The exact number of visitors was 32,330 for the run of the exhibition, Berkeley Art Museum archives.

16. Philip Leider quoted in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum, 1962–1974* (New York: Soho Press, 2000), 191.

17. Robert Pincus-Witten, quoted in Newman, 192.

18. See Roberta Bernstein, "René Magritte and Jasper Johns: Making Thoughts Visible," in *Magritte and Contemporary Art*, 109–23. *The Treachery of Images* was first printed in the United States in an *Arts Digest* review of the exhibition, one of the first to describe Magritte's paintings as detached and matter-of-fact, as opposed to the previous characterization of his paintings as personal dream fantasies. Robert Rosenblum, "Magritte's Surrealist Grammar," *Art Digest*, March 15, 1954, 16.

19. As Magritte offered by way of explanation in his lecture "La Ligne de Vie," delivered on November 20, 1938, at the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp: "An object meets with its image. An object meets with its

bore the heavy imprint of Clement Greenberg. And Surrealism had no existence for Clem except as something to be overcome, to be shed. The issue was an extraordinary thing, a ratification or a codification of this alternative tradition . . ."[17]

For contemporary artists, the possibilities offered by Surrealism would prove to be porous, open to investigation and reinterpretation. In the early 1960s, Jasper Johns acquired Magritte's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1935). Johns had first encountered Magritte's work at Sidney Janis's 1954 *Word vs. Image* exhibition, where, almost a quarter-century after it was made, Magritte's *Treachery of Images* was first exhibited in the United States.[18] In his word paintings, Magritte presents objects with discordant signifiers in neat compartments. Juxtaposed with instantly recognizable images, such as a clock or a jug, Magritte's regularized handwriting appears to label and thereby rename these items "the wind" and "the bird," respectively. The naming of these things is meant to appear largely arbitrary, until of course we come to a confluence of registers—the doubly referenced valise. In such a context, the association of word and image seems almost accidental, confirmation that total arbitrariness will yield some correspondence, here reframed as complete coincidence.[19] Michel Foucault later described such activity as "an art more committed than any other to the careful and cruel separation of graphic and plastic elements," but it is as much about combination as it is a separation.[20] Magritte's disjunctive sets unite objects and words in a way that undercuts discourse, not allowing them to amount to anything more substantive than their painted qualities.

René Magritte, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 1935, oil on canvas, 16⅛ x 10⅝ in. (41 x 27 cm). Collection Jasper Johns (artwork © Charly Herscovici, Brussels/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photograph by Dorothy Zeidman)

Jasper Johns, *Canvas*, 1956, encaustic and collage on wood and canvas, 30 x 25 in. (76.2 x 63.5 cm) (artwork © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY; photograph provided by Matthew Marks Gallery)

Johns's 1956 *Canvas* seems to represent a similar union of values. The painting is covered in a splotchy blanket of blue, gray, and white brushstrokes that is framed internally by a frame that is itself painted. This internal frame, in turn, is framed by the canvas that it both surrounds and is surrounded by. The elements of the work (canvas and frame) become locked in a relationship in which they are interchangeable, conflated—both are painted, both frame—and so lose their specificity. But the painting functions nonetheless. It lays bare both the infinite possibility of the image and its potential for irrelevance. There is something irreverent in a work that so thoroughly collapses the object-image relationship that the art historian Leo Steinberg early on compared to Magritte's oeuvre: "You can't smoke Magritte's painted pipe, but you could throw a dart at a Johns target . . ."[21] Looking at Johns's *Target with Four Faces* (1955), one is struck by its similarity to Magritte's painting of thirty years earlier, *The Shooting Gallery* (1925). Yet it is unlikely that Johns had ever seen *The Shooting Gallery*, even in reproduction. Nonetheless, Johns has absorbed the principles that drive Magritte's work, and he became a reference point for reevaluations of Magritte; as the critic Kozloff noted, "Now, after Johns and Pop art . . . there seems something not only more cagey and owlish in Magritte but more profound and liberating as well. . . . Magritte raises the most fruitful doubts about the conventions of painting—doubts that are now seen to have pointed toward the future."[22]

With Pop art an active site of debate in the art world of the 1960s, it makes sense that Pop was the instant point of reference when Magritte's exhibition

name. It sometimes happens that the image and the name coincide." Magritte, "La Ligne de Vie," rep. *Magritte: 1898–1967*, ed. Gisèle Ollinger-Zinque and Frederik Leen (Ghent: Ludion Press, 1998), 47.
20. Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 35.
21. Leo Steinberg, "Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art," rep. Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 42. When Johns's works were shown for the first time at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1958, his art was immediately compared to Dada; in this essay Steinberg called him "the Surrealist of naming things."
22. Max Kozloff, "Epiphanies of Artifice," *The Nation*, January 10, 1966, 55–56.

René Magritte, *The Shooting Gallery*, 1925, oil and ripolin on canvas, 30¼ x 24¾ in. (77 x 63 cm) (artwork © Charly Herscovici, Brussels/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photograph by J. Geleyns/www.roscan.be)

Jasper Johns, *Target with Four Faces*, 1955, encaustic on newspaper and cloth over canvas surmounted by four tinted-plaster faces in wooden box with hinged front, overall, with box open, 33⅝ x 25 x 3 in. (85.3 x 66 x 7.6 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York (artwork © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY; digital image © Museum of Modern Art/licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York)

opened in 1965, reigniting interest in the painter. There is a formal similarity between Magritte's literalism and Warhol's precisely rendered *Campbell's Soup Can* paintings (1962). Even as Warhol co-opts the language of commercial advertising, he asked his audience to believe that his interest in soup was personal, telling an interviewer that he chose Campbell's as his subject because "I used to drink it. I used to have the same lunch every day, for twenty years, I guess, the same thing, over and over again. Someone said my life has dominated me; I liked that idea."[23] This conflation of a banal product and personal identification inscribes Warhol's representation as sly participant in the system of commodification, but as the art historian Thomas Crow has argued, "Though [Warhol] grounded his art in the ubiquity of the packaged commodity, [he] produced his most powerful work by dramatizing the breakdown of commodity exchange."[24]

It is another breakdown of systems that drives one of Magritte's most famous paintings, *The Treachery of Images* (1929). The work presents us with a seemingly simple representational equation. It is an image of a pipe, or a representation of a pipe, or a symbolic description of a pipe, but it is definitely not a pipe. But the painted pipe is also a signal of a set of conceptions about the world to which it belongs. It is also a consumer object that had been around for centuries and, like Warhol's soup cans, not a new or particularly desirable commodity. A reviewer from 1965 noted the similarity: "Even when he paints a briar pipe with pop poster reality, Magritte capriciously adds underneath: Ceci n'est pas une pipe. . . . Wonder if Andy could get away with that on those Campbell Soup cans?"[25] We are

23. Warhol, in interview with Gene R. Swenson, "What Is Pop Art? Interviews with Eight Painters," *Art News* 62 (November 1963), rep. *Art in Theory 1900–2000*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 748.
24. Thomas Crow, "Saturday Disasters," in *Andy Warhol*, ed. Annette Michelson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 51.
25. *New York World Telegram and Sun*, December 14, 1965; the clipping can be seen in the Archive of the Museum of Modern Art, Archival record: PI. II.A.143.

Andy Warhol, *Campbell's Soup Can*, 1964, oil on canvas, 36 x 24 in. (91.4 x 61 cm). Collection Los Angeles County Museum of Art (artwork © 2012 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; digital image © 2012 Museum Associates/LACMA, licensed by Art Resource, New York)

not allowed to consume this object before us, because of Magritte's insistent reminder of the artifice of art. The glossy sheen on polished wood that meagerly attempts to model the pipe into three-dimensionality falls flat, as the streaks of whitish paint tapering at the mouthpiece cartoonishly resemble the currents of smoke that can never be sucked from the body of this not-a-pipe. This whiteness doubles as both a delineation of the solidity of the exterior and a distillation of that solidity to reveal the hollowness of the interior. As both object and image, the pipe is twice eviscerated, for such haziness operates also as a breaking-through of the bland background to infiltrate the painting's foreground (if it could even be said to have either). The image, then, pictures solid melting into air, background seeping through to foreground, and smoking apparatus being written out of existence. The pipe is both transparent and opaque in its disturbance of the expected. As it is mimed by Magritte, the pipe—ordinary, bourgeois—becomes the point from which to undermine not only the icons of the everyday but the preconceptions on which they depend.

However, if the pipe offered any potential for subversion to 1960s audiences, it remained elliptical, perhaps in no small part because the painting's content was eclipsed by the formal connections critics saw between Magritte and Pop art. Another formal issue—Magritte's appearance—also caught the attention of the popular press. For even as his work was being appreciated by a new audience, Magritte fastidiously continued to maintain the persona of a quiet member of the Belgian bourgeoisie, appearing always in his suit and bowler hat. As one reviewer wrote in 1965, "One would never suspect that Monsieur Magritte in his neat dark suit and bowler hat is an artist."[26] Indeed, Magritte's reputation as a kind of impostor was frequently reported in the press. Another critic wrote, "Magritte is

26. Florence Berkman, "Magritte Aims to Evoke Mystery of Life in Art," *Hartford Times*, December 15, 1965.

René Magritte, *Treachery of Images*, 1929, oil on canvas, 23⅝ x 31⅞ in. (60 x 81 cm). Collection Los Angeles County Museum of Art (artwork © Charly Herscovici, Brussels/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photograph provided by Banque d'images, ADAGP/Art Resource, New York)

a clever con man, and the quiet attire and the air of propriety of his subjects are part of the act."[27] Or, in the words of the cultural critic George Melly: "He is a secret agent, his object to bring into disrepute the whole apparatus of bourgeois reality. Like all saboteurs, he avoids detection by dressing and behaving just like everybody else."[28] So widespread was this notion that these words were quoted on the first page of MoMA's Magritte catalogue, alluded to by the Museum's director of publications, Elizabeth Shaw, and cited in multiple reviews.[29] Harry Torczyner, Magritte's lawyer and a collector of his paintings who acted as an intermediary between Magritte and Soby during the MoMA exhibition's planning stages, commented directly on the line: "With respect to Melly's pertinent remark about Magritte as a secret agent, one is reminded of Magritte's love for detective stories, his admiration for his fellow compatriot, Georges Simenon's (of Liège) Maigret [a protagonist in a series of detective novels] and the fact that he painted Fantômas in the early twenties."[30] Though MoMA's 1965 retrospective was, typically, apolitical, another reviewer wrote: "Like a secret agent who captures an enemy radio station in order to transmit false messages, he is most damaging when he seems to be on our wave-length. He works stealthily and primly in the effort to overthrow reason by profoundly dislocating reality."[31] By the time of the painter's death in 1967, the comment had been attributed by a friend of the artist to Magritte himself: "'He used to call himself a secret agent' . . . . 'By that I suppose he meant to allude to the contrast between his appearance and his reality. He looked like a small-town banker, but under the banker's innocent allures Magritte was a very revolutionary personality.'"[32]

The idea of Magritte as a secret agent is worth further exploration, especially in light of the fascination with espionage in Cold War America. Not only did the

27. Hennig Cohen, "The Art of Possibility," *Reporter*, February 10, 1966, 51.
28. George Melly, *René Magritte*, BBC Films, working script, 1965. It seems likely that Melly, an associate of the Belgian Surrealist E. L. T. Mesens, a friend of Magritte's, may have begun the persistent association of Magritte with a secret agent.
29. George Melly, quoted in James Thrall Soby, *René Magritte* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965), 7. In a letter to George Hellman of the *New Yorker*, Shaw writes that except for three years, "Magritte has spent all his adult life in Brussels, where he lives, so they say, in the disguise of an ordinary businessman." Elizabeth Shaw, letter to George Hellman, December 15, 1965, MoMA archives, *Magritte* exhibition, Records of the Department of Public Information II.B.459.
30. Harry Torczyner, letter to James Thrall Soby, September 7, 1965, MoMA archives, *Magritte* exhibition.
31. Stuart Preston, "Solemn Canonization of the Irrational," *Apollo* 83 (February 1966): 155.
32. Unnamed friend of Magritte quoted in John Canaday, "René Magritte, Surrealist Painter, Dies in Brussels," *New York Times*, August 16, 1967, 38.

James Bond franchise feed popular interest in spying, but the day after MoMA's Magritte exhibition opened, the movie adaptation of John le Carré's 1963 novel *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold* was released by Paramount Pictures, starring Richard Burton in an Oscar-nominated role. In the 1960s, espionage television programming became increasingly popular in the United States, with the British import *The Avengers* (1961–65 and 1966–69), *Secret Agent* (CBS, 1965–66), and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (NBC, 1964–68).[33] The May 1966 issue of *Esquire* magazine was on the theme "Spying, Science, and Sex"; the cover featured an image of a woman ostensibly sleeping, but with a third eye wide open in the middle of her forehead.[34] While the *Esquire* introduction sought to frame the secret agent as an ideal, rule-breaking hero, the media scholar Michael Kackman has noted that "the spy in 1960s America . . . [was] as much an anonymous bureaucrat and piecework technician as a superhero. . . . The spy was both the ultimate 'freeman' and a symbol of the wrenching anonymity of life as a corporatized postwar American 'organization man.'"[35] There is a curious contradiction, then, between the secret agent working undercover to overthrow the Establishment and remaining himself under the employ of a potentially comparable Establishment. The 1967 book *The Espionage Establishment*, a history of spying since World War II, takes this as the premise for a study of spying in the Soviet Union, Britain, the United States, and China. The authors assert not only that secret agencies become their own bureaucracies, but also that "there is a close relationship between the espionage establishment and what has come, loosely, to be termed the Establishment—that larger grouping of powerful men who, in any country, seem to control its affairs."[36] The question remains of course which Establishment one presumed Magritte was working for. *Newsweek* hedged on this issue, noting that "Magritte the 'secret agent' who so calmly subverts the symbols of the bourgeois life, is thus at the same time the last of the great bourgeois painters."[37] As an elderly European in the midst of American Pop art, Magritte certainly did not blend in—his staid demeanor was, by the 1960s, as dated as it was determined. A review in *Arts* asserted that if Magritte was a spy, "He is a double agent."[38]

Though several critics identified Magritte as a secret agent, the target of his subversion is never named, despite the politically loaded nature of the term. Critics recognized that some sort of deception was taking place, but seemed unable (or unwilling) to articulate its source. Perhaps in part this is because, as Magritte's friend the writer Paul Nougé believed, "The subversive act must be discreet."[39] In Belgium, Magritte was particularly close to Nougé, who was a prominent organizer of both the Surrealist movement in Belgium and the Belgian Communist Party.[40] In 1939 Magritte and Louis Scutenaire wrote,

> It must be realized that the revolutionary artist is heir to a complex of habits and troubled feelings. . . . This is why he tries to realize certain objects (books, paintings, etc.) which he hopes will ruin the prestige of bourgeois myths. . . . Let [the artist] not . . . lose sight of the fact that his effort, like that of every worker, is necessary to the dialectic development of the world.[41]

At the time, Magritte did not yet belong to the Communist party, which he joined as paid-up member in 1945, though he had been a Marxist thinker long before that. It is interesting that Magritte equates artists with workers, despite his overt embrace of the role of bourgeois burgher, a characterization that would almost

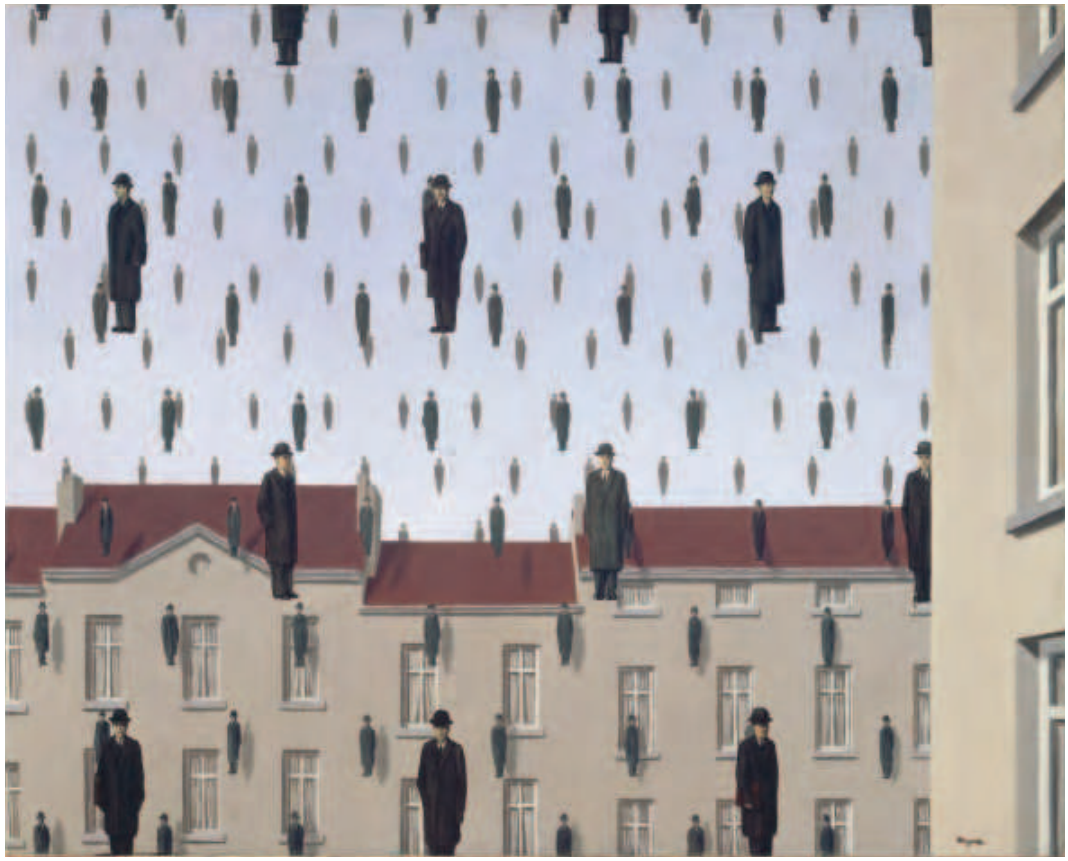
33. See Michael Kackman, *Citizen Spy: Television, Espionage, and Cold War Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxi. An *Esquire* writer maintained that by mid-1966, "Americans will be able to witness twenty-three movies and ten regular television shows based on themes of spying." Anonymous author, "I Spy for the C.I.A.," *Esquire*, May 1966, 81.
34. The open eye had long been a symbol of the Surrealists, and Magritte associated himself with the motif in works such as *The False Mirror* (1928). Four months earlier, *Esquire* had featured an unsigned article on Magritte. See "This Is Not Magritte," *Esquire*, February 1966, 100–3.
35. Kackman, xviii.
36. David Wise and Thomas B. Ross, *The Espionage Establishment* (New York: Random House, 1967), 4.
37. "The Square Surrealist," *Newsweek*, January 3, 1966, 57.
38. William Berkson, "Exhibition at Museum of Modern Art," *Arts* 40 no. 4 (February 1966): 52.
39. Paul Nougé (1932), quoted in Whitfield, 26.
40. Nougé helped found the Belgian Communist Party in 1919. His review *Correspondance*, first published in November 1924, "seized the attention of the Paris Surrealists and from then on Surrealism in Belgium was dominated by Nougé" who became a close friend and mentor to Magritte after they met in 1925. David Sylvester and Sarah Whitfield, *René Magritte: Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1 (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 48.
41. René Magritte and Louis Scutenaire, "L'Art Bourgeois," *London Bulletin* 12 (March 15, 1939): 13–14, as trans. by Lucy Lippard in *Surrealists on Art*, ed. Lippard (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 157.

Bill Brandt, photograph of Magritte with *The Great War*, 1964, photograph, dimensions variable (photograph © Bill Brandt Archive)

propose itself on photographic evidence alone, even if reviewers had not commented so consistently on his middle-class "disguise." Yet, while critics acknowledged that Magritte led a rather boring life, painting on a schedule in the afternoons, living peacefully in a suburban section of Brussels, it seems clear that they recognized this bourgeois demeanor as a subversive act.[42] Though a *New York Times* critic declared that Magritte the secret agent was "all the while preparing to blow up the Establishment"—a rather serious allegation—still, no one mentioned Magritte's socialist beliefs.[43]

In both his paintings and his persona, however, Magritte is already asking us to be suspicious of the normalcy of the bourgeois life. Photographs of Magritte demonstrate his proclivity for posing with his paintings, and we know from several sources that he often pictured himself as a surrogate within them. Aside from declared self-portraits, in which we frequently find him engaged in the act of painting, Magritte seems eager to engender the role of the man in works like *The Great War* (1964) by assuming a meta-existence in front of his paintings or, at other times, playfully acting them out. Torczyner twice wrote David Sylvester in 1969 to assert that Magritte's painting *Son of Man* (1964) was the prototype for *The Great War* (1964) and "was meant to be Magritte's self-portrait or rather a substitute for his self-portrait which he had promised me so that it might be shown in the then-planned show in the Museum of Modern Art."[44] By connecting his outward bourgeois disposition to the internal logic of his paintings, Magritte proposes that plain description is enough to convey the disquieting worldview that capitalism produces.

42. See, for example, the unsigned articles "Mystery Maker," *Time* 78, no. 18 (November 3, 1961): 67; "This Is Not Magritte," *Esquire*, February 1966; and "The Enigmatic Visions of René Magritte," *Life* 60, no. 16 (April 22, 1966): 113.
43. James R. Mellow, "Surrealism Resurrected," *New York Times*, December 15, 1968, D33.
44. Harry Torczyner, letter to David Sylvester, May 12, 1969, Menil Archives.



René Magritte, *Golconde*, 1953, oil on canvas, 31⅞ x 39⅜ in. (81 x 100 cm). Menil Collection, Houston (artwork © Charly Herscovici, Brussels/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photograph provided by Banque d'images, ADAGP/Art Resource, New York)

We have seen that a bowler-bedecked member of the bourgeoisie is prone to populate Magritte's works. Sometimes, he is the tiptoeing, top-hatted masquerader Fantômas, with whom Magritte was familiar via detective novels in which the character, a world-class criminal, perpetually evades his would-be captors through his "ability to pass unseen through matter."[45] Magritte was quite taken with the character of Fantômas, writing, "He is never entirely invisible. . . . His movements are those of an automaton; he brushes aside any furniture or walls which are in his way. . . . We do not guess, and we cannot doubt, his powers."[46] In *The Return of the Flame* (1943), Magritte appropriates the cover of a 1912 book featuring Fantômas towering above Paris in the crimson-colored sky, "far surpass[ing] Roman aqueducts and Gothic cathedrals," which appear diminutive beneath Fantômas's self-assured step.[47]

Fantômas is not a singular agent, however—repetition rules Magritte's world. In *Golconde* (1953), we see members of the bourgeoisie, weightless and oddly isolated. The painting does not, as many have assumed, depict anonymous figures, but at the same time *Golconde* projects a severe image of bourgeois alienation.[48] Unlike the worker, the bourgeoisie are not alienated from the results of their labor; they are alienated from social systems, from each other, as the individual goal of profit separates rather than unites them. There is an illusion of stability here—the regularized rows in which the men hover are straight and orderly, but such precision highlights the fact that this formation defies the laws of nature.

For Karl Marx, this masquerading marauder is the protagonist responsible

45. Gablik, 61.
46. Magritte quoted in Gablik, 61.
47. The quoted phrase is from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" (1848), trans. Samuel Moore with Engels, in *Marx-Engels Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 98–137.
48. Despite Magritte's remarks about the painting in *Life* magazine that "the man with the bowler is just middle class man in his anonymity," Magritte's friend Louis Scutenaire identified himself as one of the figures in *Golconde*. See *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 3, 206.

René Magritte, *The Sorcerer*, 1951, oil on canvas, 13¾ x 18⅛ in. (35 x 46 cm), collection info optional (artwork © Charly Herscovici, Brussels/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photograph provided by Banque d'images, ADAGP/Art Resource, New York)

for "resolv[ing] personal worth into exchange value" and "substitut[ing] naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation."[49] With his famously shocking *The Rape* (1934), which adorned André Breton's 1934 pamphlet "What Is Surrealism?" Magritte exchanges the facial features of a woman for her most privately personal and irreducible elements, a move he repeated in 1947 when he submitted a near-identical variation to a show organized by Communist intellectuals and sympathizers.[50] Naked to the world, her particular capacity for exchange is made perfectly legible. Another reduction takes place in *The Red Model*, in which a pair of dilapidated working boots have fused with the feet that inhabit them. Again, utility and humanity have merged. As Magritte describes, "The problem of the shoe demonstrates how the most frightening things can, through inattention, become completely innocuous. Thanks to the *Red Model*, people can see that the union of a human foot with a leather shoe is, in fact, a monstrous custom."[51] In the red rubble beside the boot-feet, a few coins make the transformation complete, the vestiges of Marx's "callous cash payment."[52]

The Sorcerer (1951) might also be a pun on the concept of consumption, for Magritte originally intended it to be a portrait of his dealer, Alexander Iolas, whom he asked for three photographs from which to paint.[53] The photographs however, never came, the dealer explaining, "Let's say I wait for sunny weather, I'll lose a little weight and then I'll . . . send you some beautiful photographs."[54] Magritte instead substituted his own likeness, but pictured himself with twice the usual number of arms, which both facilitate his frenetic consumption of the

49. Marx and Engels.
50. See Torczyner, *Magritte*, 56.
51. Magritte, "La Ligne de Vie," rep. *Magritte: 1898–1967*, ed. Gisèle Ollinger-Zinque and Frederik Leen (Ghent: Ludion Press, 1998), 48.
52. Marx and Engels, 5.
53. The title is perhaps also a play on the magical status of the Marxian bourgeoisie: "Modern bourgeois society . . . is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells." Marx and Engels, 5.
54. Iolas quoted in Whitfield, *Magritte*, plate 107.

meal, but also might implicate the presence of a second person—the originally intended Iolas. Rather than the idealized representation that Iolas seems to have wanted, Magritte has merged their bodies in an endless cycle of artistic production and market consumption.

While Magritte maintained his allegiance to Marxism, saying in 1935, "The Communist point of view is my own. My art is valid only insofar as it opposed the bourgeois ideal in whose name life is being extinguished," he nonetheless painted for a commercial market as virtually all artists must do.[55] Certainly deep ambivalences are brought to bear here, often expressed in Magritte's self-aware use of irony, which permeates the corpus of his work.[56] In a letter to the Communist Party, Magritte explained, "The only way poets and painters have of struggling against the bourgeois economic system is to give their work a content that rejects the bourgeois ideological values that underlie the bourgeois economic system."[57] The duality expressed in this statement embodies the idea of the secret, or even double, agent—Magritte's depiction of objects is deployed in a world where the critique of commodities risks reaffirming their intrigue and in which these artworks co-opt that intrigue in their own commodification.

Indeed, the rediscovery of Magritte's work by critics, artists, and the public led to a dramatic increase in the value of his paintings during the 1960s, when Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and other contemporary artists acquired paintings by Magritte.[58] In 1965–66, prices for Magritte's work were three times what they had been just three years prior, and eight times what they had been in 1959.[59] The rise in prices was so dramatic and so steep that it caught even those with professional knowledge of the art market off guard. For example, in 1968, when the chief curator of the Museum of Modern Art, William Rubin, wanted to buy Magritte's painting *Personal Values* (1952) for the museum, he unknowingly underbid on the painting and failed to get it. A decade later, Rubin wrote to the Magritte collector Torczyner, who had successfully bought the painting, that his mistake in not acquiring it was "one of the worst I've made in my tenure here [at MoMA]. . . . I am obsessed with the idea that somehow, some day, this picture should be in the Museum collection. There are few paintings in private collections about which I feel so strongly."[60] I propose that this painting in particular was so important to Rubin because *Personal Values* makes explicit the formal link between Magritte and Pop art, but I propose that it too speaks to Marxist values.

The painting shows a bedroom in which the accessories of daily life—comb, soap (or, perhaps, pill), brush, glass, and match—are enlarged to superhuman proportions. Magnified in size, the objects are automatically granted increased importance, as they overtake a bourgeois bedroom. Magritte recognized the reordering of value in the painting as a negotiation among society, the individual consumer, and the products at hand. Describing the painting to his dealer in New York, who had called the painting unsalable, Magritte wrote that "a comb is for combing hair, it is manufactured, sold, etc. . . . In my picture, the comb (and the other objects as well) has specifically lost its 'social character,' it has become an object of useless luxury . . ."[61] As the scale of the objects disagrees with their surroundings, the ordinary aspects of grooming become tools of societal maintenance. The breakdown of social character—the alienation of the objects from their use-value—is foregrounded by the artifacts' careful display in the bedroom, as if the private interior of a home were now a department store window, or even a museum.

55. Magritte, *Les Beaux Arts* 164 (May 17, 1935), quoted in Torczyner, *Magritte*, trans Richard Miller, 55.
56. Magritte's friend Louis Scutenaire reported a decade after Magritte's death that Magritte was "tormented by the fame which he had never sought which came to him late in life. . . . The more honours—and money—he received, the more uneasy he felt." Scutenaire "L'Invention de la vie," in *Retrospective Magritte* (Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1978), 20, quoted in Whitfield, 47.
57. Magritte, letter to the Communist Party of Belgium, 1946, trans. Richard Miller, quoted in Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, 76.
58. Rauschenberg bought *The Literal Meaning* (1929) in the 1960s. *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1, 336.
59. See *Catalogue Raisonné,* vol. 3, 137.
60. William Rubin, letter to Harry Torczyner, 1978, Museum Collection Files, Magritte general, Museum of Modern Art.
61. Magritte, quoted in *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 3, 192.

Rubin hung the painting in *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*, his first exhibition as a MoMA curator, which opened in March 1968.[62] Rubin's show attempted to address not only Surrealism's pervasive influence on contemporary art—a conversation that had been brought to the fore by MoMA's *Magritte* show two-and-a-half years earlier—but it also sought to confirm Surrealism as part of the modernist narrative. Reviewers of the Magritte exhibition had predicted the importance Surrealism needed to be accorded in the history of art: "When the history of content in modern art comes to be written—a document to be set beside the form-oriented discussions that now prevail—both Dalí and Magritte (and the Surrealists in general) should form a consequential chapter in that picaresque account."[63] Emily Genauer presciently advocated the necessity of a Surrealism show that would demonstrate how integral the movement was to recent art:

> What some museum ought to do now is stage a large, really comprehensive survey of surrealism showing how protean was this non-esthetic movement, and, paradoxically, what an enormous influence it had on esthetics thereafter. . . . Pop is also a non-esthetic, sociological expression. It, too, is a catch-all movement for many diverse talents united principally by their opposition to current cultural values . . ."[64]

Though the Magritte reviewers insisted that the content of Surrealism needed further investigation, it was on the basis of form that Rubin wanted to institutionalize Surrealism. His large-scale exhibition attempted to wrestle Surrealism into a stylistic narrative of modern art that traversed from Dada, through Surrealism, to Abstract Expressionism and, finally, Pop. At the exhibition's opening, protesters (organized by Gene Swenson) carried signs that stated "Down with Art. Up with Revolution." While in 1965–66, critics had shied away from elaborating on the subversiveness they saw in Magritte's work, by 1968, critics of *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*—Swenson, Harold Rosenberg, and Lucy Lippard among them—now demanded that Surrealism's content be analyzed in terms of social and political concerns that opened up the discourse not only about Surrealism but about contemporary art as well. Magritte's relevance for contemporary art had been founded on formal connections, but the secret agency of Surrealism proved to be its power to undermine the formalist version of modernism in which it had never fully been recognized.

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62. Rubin had begun preparing the exhibition for MoMA in July 1966, only a few weeks after the Magritte show closed, and while it was on its national tour. Rubin officially assumed the position of curator of painting and sculpture on July 1, 1967.
63. James R. Mellow, "Birds of a Feather," *New Leader*, February 14, 1966, 29.
64. Emily Genauer, "Dalí and Magritte: Pop's Papas," *New York World Telegram and Sun*, December 18, 1965.