

**The Treason of Images:**  
**A Semiotic Understanding of the Work of**  
**Rene Magritte**

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by Teale Failla

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*First through the rich images of his painting, and  
then through his words, Magritte expresses the links  
between the two questions: 'How do symbols work?'*  
*and 'How do our minds work?'*

Douglas Hofstadter  
MATHEMATICIAN

## Introduction

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Douglas Hofstadter used Rene Magritte's paintings in his book *Gödel, Escher, Bach* first published in 1986, almost twenty years after Magritte's death, as evidence of his own theories in cognitive science. He incorporated Magritte's work in an effort to push the obviously absurd so far that it leads to totally functional conclusions on the mind, an endeavor which Magritte would have appreciated in others and shared himself. However, the Belgian philosopher would have taken issue with the term "symbols" as he always rejected the notion that his paintings contained, or were, symbols of anything. This may come as a surprise to those faintly familiar with Magritte's work, much of which is brimming with recurring iconography. Surely the lost jockey must stand for something, as if in Freudian dream analysis. Or did Magritte intend no message at all, painting absurdity as a mere means of escaping reality? Is a pipe just a pipe?

Magritte wanted to bring about new ways of understanding reality through shocking us into taking notice. One doesn't take notice of the familiar. A pipe can be seen in ways completely different from what we have expected, thus bringing about a new way of understanding our own reality,

completely within the realm of possibility, if not realized possibility. Thus, Magritte rejected a notion of a one-to-one signifier and signified form of representation for, to him, such a convention reveals nothing and can often mislead. True revelation comes from the unexpected, the unknown. But semiotics should not be thrown out completely. In fact, Magritte's intensions can be even better understood when viewing his paintings through Charles Peirce's triadic sign system. This allows for the ambiguity of his ideas and the secrets behind the objects. Through Peirce's sign system, one can appreciate even further, the mystery of Magritte.

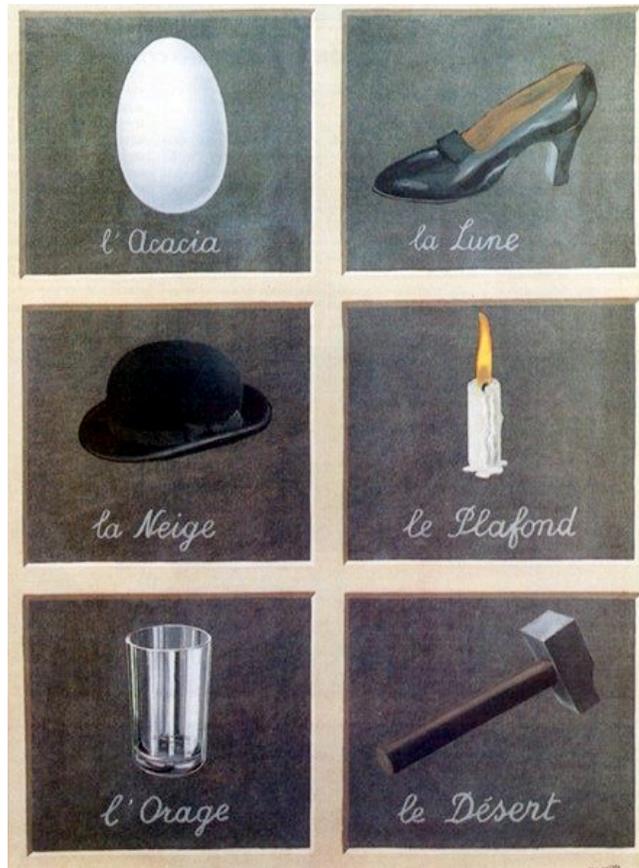
## ☞ The Signification of an Icon

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Rene Magritte is well known for his recurrent iconography in his paintings and sculptures such as the apple, the bowler-hatted man, and the pipe. This has caused critics to assign a dyadic semiotic interpretation to his artwork. The pipe for instance makes such numerous appearances in Magritte's work that it leads the viewer to ponder what the pipe *means*, or what it *stands for*, in a static Saussurean mode of representation. Yet, his paintings display a reality that was meant to exist outside of a signifier/signified definition. In his art, Magritte uses familiar objects and places them in unfamiliar positions and contexts to remind us of what could be but isn't and asks us, or gets us to ask ourselves, why this is so. Take for example the face of a man hidden by an apple in *The Son of Man* or the mislabeled pictures in *The Key to Dreams*. As a skilled painter, Magritte created intensely realistic looking images of everyday objects that are so familiar to us that we take their fundamental nature for granted and neglect to even notice them. As a philosopher, he situated these objects in unfamiliar surroundings and contexts until he revealed their new destinies. And out of these juxtapositions was not an intension to represent or reveal an idea, even the most abstract. "I don't paint ideas," he has said. "I describe



*The Son of Man, 1964*



*The Key to Dreams, 1930*

insofar as I can, by means of painted images, objects and the coming together of objects, in such a light, as to prevent any of our ideas or feelings from adhering to them.” (Gablik, p. 13) A signifier such as a painting or an icon in a painting usually signifies some sort of nameable thing or idea. No such thing exists in Magritte’s painting. It is not what the painting is, it is what it does. Magritte’s objects remind us that what exists within our own understood reality could just as easily be understood otherwise. The unknown is not necessarily the fantastic or the impossible. “[His images] represent nothing else than unborn realities.” (Gablik p. 9)

So if we are to put it in terms of semiology, Magritte’s paintings signify the unsignified, since it is what lay outside of our common understanding of reality that interested him. Symbolism was an insufficient and cheap methodology of processing his images since such an interpretation gives no new information. Something standing for something else is not only static, it can be misleading. To try to put into the symbolic order of words the meaning of his paintings is missing the point of his work manifested as such to begin with. “The meaning of [his] paintings does not reside in any literary explanation or interpretation which can be offered. They are the evidence, however, of a philosophical temperament which was continually investigating and

analyzing the structure of our common-sense beliefs and struggling to reconcile the paradoxes of existence.” (Gablik p. 11) Nothing displeased Magritte more than to hear people say that the apple represents *this* and the jockey means *that*. If the message could just as easily be said or written, then the point of it manifested as an image is lost. The same holds true for symbolism since what can be symbolized can be said/named/described/written. Linguistics and semiotics mark the easy way out of the conundrum in which Magritte places the viewer. Magritte has written:

To equate my painting with symbolism, conscious or unconscious, is to ignore its true nature...People are quite willing to use objects without looking for any symbolic intention in them, but when they look at paintings, they can't find any use for them. So they hunt around for a meaning to get themselves out of the quandary, and because they don't understand what they are supposed to think when they confront the painting...They want something to lean on, so they can be comfortable. They want something secure to hang on to, so they can save themselves from the void. People who look for symbolic meanings fail to grasp the inherent poetry and mystery of the image. No doubt they sense this mystery, but they wish to get rid of it. They are afraid. By asking 'what does this mean?' they express a wish that everything be understandable. But if one does not reject the mystery, one has quite a different response. One asks other things. (Gablik p. 11)

## ☞ The Mystery of Magritte

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Magritte did not want to communicate an idea in his head, nor did he want to escape reality or represent reality as we know it. He wanted to evoke the feeling that comes from being accused from the unknown, caught off guard from a drastic disruption of the familiar. That is not to say that his paintings lack meaning, intentionally or unintentionally. He has stated, “Whatever the strokes, the words and the colors arranged on a page, the figure obtained is always full of meaning... To want to interpret it – in order to provide some kind of freedom – is to fail to recognize an inspired image, and to substitute for it a gratuitous interpretation which might become, in turn, the object of an endless series of superfluous interpretations.” (Gablik, p. 167) But meaning does not necessarily mean one-directional information passage from sender to receiver. For Magritte, painting was poetry that evoked what he called the *mystery*. While it cannot properly be put into words since it resides more in feeling than in understanding, the mystery nevertheless has to do with the idea of something hidden, something secret. One cannot define the mystery; one has a foreboding of it. “Rather than searching unceasingly for a way to uncover secrets, what

[Magritte] had to do was above all to arouse in the viewer the intuition of something hidden” (Meuris, p. 103) “The finished picture,” Magritte wrote, “is a surprise, and its creator is the first to be surprised.” His paintings were a journey, both to view and to produce, of Socratic investigation to which there is no concrete answer necessarily to be obtained. What was important to him was an evolution of thought brought about by the journey, not the stagnant answer of the symbol. For, the answer marks the end to growth. This philosophy does not promote a departure from truth in favor of a muddled subjective perception of reality. For Magritte, as well as many other philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, mystery is inherent in the essence of truth. Magritte has written:

Mystery is there because the poetic image has a reality of its own. Since ‘inspired thinking’ imagines an order which unites the figures of the visible world, the poetic image possesses the same kind of reality as that of the universe. Why? Because it must correspond to an interest we naturally take in the unknown. When one thinks of ‘universe’, it is the unknown one is thinking of - its reality is unknown. Likewise, I create - using things known - the unknown. (Meuris, p. 112)

Through this disruption of representing the unrepresentable, signifying the unsignified, Magritte wished to liberate thought and open the way to authentic revelation. In

this way, he wanted to bring about total fulfillment from what he called the mystery or the void, that inner disruption and initial emptiness caused by the confusion of trying to nail down straightforward symbolic meaning to his paintings. But it is a void only to those who are afraid of embracing a reality outside of secure symbolic language. To those who do embrace it, the mystery is fulfillment of revelation. What appears to be true because of its familiarity can be an oversimplified and limited notion of the possibilities of experience. We can progress only so far by deliberating on manifested realities. Far more can be pondered from unrealized realities. As in scientific empiricism, we learn more from the unexpected than from what is fully expected. “Only a willful disruption of the usual certainties will liberate thought and open the way to authentic revelation.” (Gablik p. 10) We progress when we are shaken, when we are punctured, not when we are comfortable in the familiar, in the stability of one-to-one symbolic relationships. For Magritte, these disruptions are the moments of panic which count for they transcend the mediocrity of coded thought. But this presence of the mystery through indefinable confusion and revelation does not exist only in a painting or other forms of art. It can happen at any moment in life, if we are aware

enough to see it, confident enough to behold it, and brave  
enough to be moved by it.

## Peirce's Triadic Semiotic System

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Magritte clearly rejected a Saussurean semiology of representation through a signifier/signified dyad. The notion of the mystery is completely missed by such a system for there is no signified for the signifier. “The elementary feature of a symbolic order in its relation to ‘reality’ is that it always contains a surplus signifier, a signifier which is ‘empty’ in the sense that there is nothing in reality which corresponds to it.” (Zizek p. 236) But it is interesting to find that in his distaste for symbolic interpretation, Magritte’s intensions in his paintings can be understood through a triadic system of semiotics.

Charles Peirce based his sign system on a fundamental relationship of three different phenomenological states of mind, Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Firstness resides in feeling, vagueness, a state of being without reference to anything else. It is pure possibility. “[Firstness is] a state of mind in which something is present, without compulsion and without reason; it is called Feeling. Whenever we are awake, something is present to the mind, and what is present, without reference to any compulsion or reason, is feeling.” (Peirce, p. 4) Secondness is the realm of brute facts which come from a relationship that is introduced with the presence of a second

thing and resides in indexicality, specificity, or a 'thisness'. "[Secondness involves a] sense of acting and of being acted upon, which is our sense of the reality of things, both of outward things and of ourselves... It does not reside in any one feeling; it comes upon the breaking of one feeling by another feeling. It essentially involves two things acting upon one another." (Peirce, p. 4) Thirdness involves the interpretation of general patterns of law which make it possible to predict future behavior through these laws. "[It involves] thinking, learning, or of going through a process by which a phenomenon is found to be governed by a rule, or has a general knowable way of behaving." (Peirce, p. 5)

Peirce's triadic sign system is based on the triadic differentiation between Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Instead of Saussure's dyadic sign system of signifier and signified, Peirce introduces a triadic sign system of sign/representamen, object, and interpretant. The sign or representamen lies in the realm of firstness and stands for the object, which exists in the realm of secondness. The interpretant, which lies in the realm of thirdness, is a key factor in why the triad succeeds in being able to analyze Magritte's paintings where the dyad fails. The interpretant can be thought of as the interpretation that comes from the representamen/object relationship. It is the proper significant

effect, or the sign in the mind that comes as a result of an encounter with a sign representing its object. Just like thirdness, the interpretant is the mediation between the first two categories.

Such a sign system allows for the presence of the mystery Magritte was trying to evoke. The mystery is the result of the sign, the outcome, the interpretant, even though it will encompass different things for different viewers. The mystery is an interpretant, the third part of the sign, but its quality is in firstness, or pure feeling and possibility. And that is what Magritte wanted to stress more than any defined notion of what an apple means - the possibility of realities that may not be known, but can nonetheless open up new understanding of the realities which we inhabit. Magritte's paintings provide semiotic relationships that, rather than being stagnant and terminal, are relative and variable. "For a picture to represent an object, it must be part of a known system of representation, a system which classifies objects rather than one which imitates them." (Gablik, p. 131) This marks a major difference between Saussure's dyadic sign system and Peirce's triadic system.

Magritte even applied a triadic theory of representamen, object, and interpretant when describing the manipulation of three given quantities which go into his process of creating a

picture. The three given quantities are, in Magritte's own terms: "the object, the thing attached to it in the shade of my consciousness, and the light which this thing must attain." (Meuris, p. 108) In Peirce's terms, they are the object, the interpretant (the sign in the mind), and the sign/representamen, respectively. Since Magritte is the sign maker, the order is different from the usual sign, object, interpretant – corresponding to firstness, secondness, and thirdness. In his case, he starts with the object (singular), he then envisions the sign in his mind that represents that object (interpretant), and then creates the picture (representamen) from the sign in his mind.

## ☞ The Treason of Images and Peirce's Ten Signs

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From manipulating seemingly unconnected icons and juxtaposing them in unfamiliar surroundings, Magritte realized he could do the same by juxtaposing icons and words or language, on which the two fold Saussurean sign system is based. As Magritte rejected dyadic symbolism as a means to escape the questions he put forth in his paintings, so did he find language, a symbolic order, troublesome and misleading. Wittgenstein considered his own philosophy as a “battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language”. (Gablik, p. 124) Magritte also sought to illuminate the confusions and oversimplifications rooted in our familiar habits of language. As habits do, these confusions go unnoticed and lead to further confusion and misunderstanding. In communication, we can refer to objects by either denoting a name or by representing it with a picture or icon that bears some resemblance to the object. When we denote a linguistic name, “the relation between the name and the thing named is an arbitrarily established one, since the correlation between and word and the thing it stands for exists only by virtue of semantic convention”. (Gablik, p. 125) In other words, linguistic representation, as it is a form of symbolism, is

completely arbitrary and works only because there has been a conventional law or general agreement (thirdness) about its use. Here is where Magritte deals with these errors that arise from such an arbitrary structure and lead to philosophical misunderstanding. These errors have become so rooted in the familiarity of language that they have become *hidden*. And Magritte took it upon himself in his work to question such prejudice and evoke the mystery of the hidden. He has stated that there must be a “break with all the absurd mental habits which generally take the place of an authentic feeling of existence”. (Meuris, p. 112)

Magritte investigated the inadequacy and misrepresentation in symbolism and language through his series of paintings in which he juxtaposes image and word. He reduces this failure of language to single objects and their representation to make the shortfall of language all the more obvious. Peirce’s ten-fold sign system, based on the triad of firstness, secondness, and thirdness, can be used to analyze just how Magritte makes his argument on the errors of language. In *The Treason of Images*, Magritte presents an image of a pipe with the inscription below it “This is not a pipe”. In doing so, he reminds us that it is indeed not a pipe but an image or representation of a pipe. Here he shows how both symbolism and language fall short and misrepresent. He



*The Treason of Images, 1928/29*

makes the statement or dicent (sign 9), “This is not a pipe.” At first, such a statement is shocking to us since it seems to be a direct contraction. But it is only a contradiction if we error in the use of symbolic language. If we confuse the icon and the object which it represents, then the statement does seem to be a contradiction. The icon (sign 5) is the image of the pipe itself, the way Magritte has blended the qualities of color and texture with the convention of the form of a pipe to produce a very realistic likeness of a pipe on canvas. The object of course is an actual pipe itself. The tyranny of language is such that we can confuse the object and the sign and call a painting of a pipe a pipe. But if we look closer at the terms or rhemes (sign 8) used in the statement, we can clarify just what is meant by “This is not a pipe.” The first term, “This” must be defined. It could be understood as referring to the painting itself, as an instantiated icon or sinsign (sign 2) as there is only one of this particular painting that exists in the world. If I wanted to know what a pipe looked like, I could refer to this particular painting to tell me as it bears the likeness of an actual pipe. “This” could also refer to the actual object of a specific pipe. “This” refers to the image or the painting itself, as Magritte intended. Likewise, if we look at the term “pipe”, it could refer to an actual specific pipe or an image or representation of a pipe. Here it is understood that “pipe”

represents an actual existing pipe. So, to say this image of a pipe is not an actual existent pipe is correct. The two are not interchangeable even though they can be confused as such in the way language can represent in an oversimplified and limited way. Nothing can be a pipe and not a pipe at the same time.

What of the mystery of Magritte's image? It lies in the unexpected association of picture and word as well as in the perception of the word pertaining to the picture. If I had never seen this painting before and did not understand one word of French, still the mere unexpected juxtaposition of image and word would strike me. If I didn't understand what this French statement meant underneath the image of the pipe, the markings would act as a rhematic indexical sign (sign 3) since they would be perceived as markings with no kind of law or convention. They would be empty markings yet I would still be struck by their association with the image above it since such a practice is not very popular in painted images (other than Magritte's). These markings would be unintended since the creator did not intend for me to perceive these un-understandable markings as they are to me. Even though I do not perceive an intension behind the markings, I do recognize the fact that the markings have something to do with the image of the pipe. The intentional juxtaposition of the markings with

the image serves as a way for the markings to highlight or point to the image. Through the placement of the markings under the image of the pipe, the markings serve as a decent indexical sinsign (sign 4) since they point to the image of the pipe. However, it is also possible that I may recognize the words below the image as French yet still not understand what is being said since I, as the viewer, may not speak French. In this case, the statement would act as a rhematic indexical sinsign (sign 6) since I recognize these markings as a French statement, French being a convention of language.

One of the major reasons why *The Treason of Images* is so striking is the way in which Magritte painted the image of the pipe in such a realistic manner. The colors he used, the smooth texture and contours of the “pipe” – all of these qualities or qualisigns of the image help to produce a very realistic representation of a real pipe. Certainly no brush strokes can be seen. These signs help to suspend the idea that this is really just a painting, to blur the distinction between sign and object. The way Magritte made light seem to reflect off of the “pipe” in order to mimic smooth pipe-like contours and three dimensionality adds even further to the success of the image as an icon. But look further into the context of the image and we will see with what a great amount of importance Magritte held the seventh sign of his painting.

The image of the pipe is situated in an undefined, uncommitted space – full of possibility. The “pipe” seems to just float as if it is nowhere, or perhaps, anywhere. It is not being used as a pipe for there is no tobacco in it and no smoke coming from it. A sign and the object it represents never serve the same function. The image casts no shadow as a three dimensional object could. All of these attributes are laws associated with a working pipe. A working pipe could hold smoking tobacco, could cast a shadow, and would exist in some sort of definable space. The lack of these attributes point to the fact that this really is not a pipe, but a flat image. These attributes (or lack of), in that they give us information about the “pipe” and its context are dicentric indexical legisigns (sign seven) of the image.

The seventh sign is part of what distinguishes *The Treason of Images* with its younger sibling *The Air and the Song*, a further elaboration of the same concept painted thirty-six years later. This span of time shows the intensity with which Magritte questioned the logical disorders produced by language. The differences between the two paintings mark the importance of sign seven in *The Treason of Images*. If we look at *The Air and the Song*, we see an image of a pipe with the same statement below it, “This is not a pipe”. But here the



*The Air and the Song, 1964*

Seventh signs have changed. The “pipe” now casts a shadow and contains smoking tobacco; signs that this could be a working pipe. It is also no longer in an uncommitted space. The “pipe” is clearly part of a painting as signified by the frame that surrounds it within the painting itself. Actually, it is a painting within a painting. If we look closer at one of the seventh signs, we see that though this image was clearly meant to exist as part of a framed painting. The “smoke” from the “pipe” rises outside of the inner painting’s frame, thus suggesting that it could be an actual pipe. Through the seventh sign, Magritte plays with the viewer back and forth with the idea of the blurred distinctions between signifier and signified, sign and object, which can arise from both iconic and symbolic representations. In either case, the written statement remains the same. Neither of these “pipes” will ever be smoked.

The argument remains the same as well. If language is based on an arbitrary construct, then it will inevitably lead to errors in communication, thought, and understanding. *The Treason of Images* signifies this argument through the shock, confusion, and mystery evoked by stating that something is not what it is. And yet the image of the pipe calls forth the reality of the pipe. Certainly the painting of the pipe cannot be used as a pipe. But the inscription below, “Ceci n’est pas une

pipe” shows that the pipe does exist after all! Magritte reminds us of the errors which arise from unnatural arbitrary convention of language and how our reality is perfectly conceivable where we could call a pipe a boat. After all, there is nothing pipe-like in the word ‘pipe’ and a painting cannot be smoked. In fact, an image of a pipe is more like an image of a boat than it is like a pipe itself. Often we take for granted and confuse the thing and the thing that represents it. We call an image of a pipe a pipe. The distinction between signifier and signified becomes blurred. The image of a pipe with an “improper” label shocks us because we tend to be trapped in that tyranny of arbitrary words and symbols. Magritte wrote a pictorial essay elucidating further on the hazards of iconic and linguistic systems representation. It is translated on the following pages.

## *Words and Images, 1929*

An object is not so possessed of its name that one cannot find for it another which suits it better:



There are objects which do without a name:



A word sometimes only serves to designate itself:



An object encounters its image, an object encounters its name. It happens that the image and the name of that object encounter each other:



Sometimes the name of an object takes the place of an image:



A word can take the place of an object in reality:



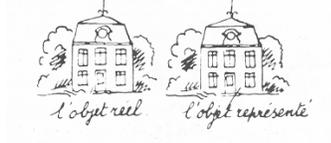
An image can take the place of a word in a proposition:



An object can imply that there are other objects behind it:



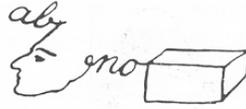
Everything tends to make one think that there is little relation between an object and that which represents it:



The words which serve to designate two different objects do not show what may distinguish those objects from one another:



In a painting the words are of the same substance as the images:



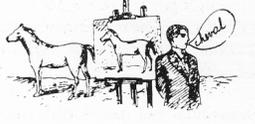
One sees differently the images and the words in a painting:



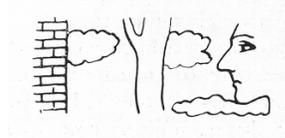
Any shape whatever may replace the image of an object:



An object never performs the same function as its name or its image:



The visible contours of objects in reality touch each other as if they formed a mosaic:



Vague figures have a meaning as necessary and as perfect as precise ones:



Sometimes, the names written in a painting designate precise things, and the images vague things:



Or the contrary:



## ✓ Conclusion

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Magritte battled the inclination for symbolic interpretation and analysis of his paintings most of his career. His objective was not to represent but to challenge, to question. He always thought of himself not as a painter but as a philosopher whose medium was paint. He rejected symbolism because he felt such interpretation missed the point of the image being an image. If he wanted to say something, he could have very well just written it down. But the symbolism he rejected was a two fold sign system where one thing simply stands in for another, revealing, evoking nothing new. It ignores the *mystery* he wanted to present, the secrets he wanted to suggest in favor of a false sense of understanding through a dyadic symbolic analysis. The surest way to rid oneself of a question is to answer it. This leaves no room for relativity or growth of signs and denies the ambiguous and uncertain nature of existence. Peirce's triadic system of signs succeeds for the very reasons the dyad fails. Where Saussure left no room for differential interpretation of signs in his unidirectional information system, Peirce's semiotic system appreciates the mystery of an image, of an experience, of pure being. It involves the semiosis of signs, allowing for growth of experience and relativity of perception. Indeed, Magritte's

paintings can be better appreciated for the mystery they induced through Peirce's ten-fold sign system. And only through a system not based in the arbitrary symbolism of language can Magritte's work truly be recognized for the mystery it evokes.

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