

Beyond Symbolism: Film, Art, Culture

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“The mind loves the unknown. It loves images whose meaning is unknown, since the meaning of the mind itself is unknown.”

-René Magritte

### **Introduction**

The critique of visual art has always consisted of a fallacy of translation: to put into linguistic context that which was meant to exist outside of language. Most of our existence can be put into words for we live within our language, we think through our words and communicate through arbitrary symbols. But how much of our existence is missed by linguistic constructs and goes unrepresented? Is what is unrepresented nonexistent? Where language fails, art intercedes. It is the unique ability of art to represent the qualities, the mysteries that defy linguistic restraints and present the unexpected, the unknown; the unrepresented.

When we encounter a film or a piece of art, either it makes an impression on us or it does not. It may make a positive impression, a negative impression, or as quite often happens, we don't quite know what to make of the impression it has made upon us. Internally, we may be content to simply behold that impression, that change it has created within us; the way it has made us stop in our tracks and take notice. But externally, if we are asked why we like or dislike a piece of art, we feel compelled to start by asking what it means. What are the meanings behind these images; what do they represent? By conjuring up an answer (*the answer*) to such questions, we appear to display a kind of 'proof' that we understand the artwork, what it represents and what its message is. Only then may we feel justified in offering our personal opinion about the piece: I know what this means, therefore I justify why I like it. Critics study long and hard to be able to give an authoritative viewpoint on such matters. They learn what certain techniques come to embody, and what images come to symbolize.

Symbolism: this has been the tool used for understanding art and media. In the European tradition of Saussure's linguistic structure, this involves a one to one signifier/signified relationship, the symbol and what it represents. This is a seemingly reasonable if not superficial approach to understanding art and media as it is how we understand the very world in which we live. We use symbolism to navigate through our daily lives, not only to read a newspaper or understand road signs, but to merely understand what we see, to place it in a context and indeed to place ourselves somewhere in the context of our surrounding environment. We use symbolism to understand not only our environment, but ourselves within it. We use it so often, almost every moment in fact, that we are rarely even aware of it. We don't normally think of symbolism when recognizing a flower from the grass. And yet there was a time when we had no understanding of what a flower was. Is it even possible to have a concrete thought that hasn't been codified into words? Given that symbolism is so ingrained in our daily lives, it seems reasonable enough that we should use this same understanding to perceive art as well.

And yet, what is the purpose of art? Does art merely reflect our own lives, our own reality; to comment on the world in which we live? Perhaps. But then, why art? Cannot language suffice in this area? Is art not also meant to show us realities other than our own, to represent a reality outside of the status quo, to challenge the status quo, to challenge our known symbolic reality? Art is meant to represent what is outside our everyday understanding of reality, to offer the unfamiliar, to provoke us out of our stupor of acceptance. A meeting of the logical and the sensual mind producing a more all encompassing perception of experience is how Nicholas Roukes describes the concept of art synectics. Roukes offers synectic thinking as a creative way to combine imagination and logical symbolic thinking to transform our ideas of the commonplace into new and unusual art forms. Doing this involves a letting go of our over-dependence on the rational symbolic

grid we have placed over cultural experience and be open to “unthought-like thoughts”.<sup>1</sup> Synectic thinking “appeals to the integrated brain: to the intuitive intelligence that stems from our emotional and psychological makeup, and the logical and more rational brain that allows us to ‘nail down’ feelings and perceptions into hard facts and tangible structures.”<sup>2</sup> A meeting of the symbolic and non-symbolic mind.

Symbolism works is on a basis of acceptance and use. We know that green means go because the more we use that symbol, the more reinforced and accepted it is. To rely on a symbolic structure like verbal language to challenge the symbolic structure in which we live seems a fallacy. Such is the purpose of art, to represent what falls outside of that structure, to represent what is meant to exist outside of symbolic understanding.

This is a difficult concept to grasp; for, even to grasp a concept, to understand it is to have a symbolic understanding or representation for it. So, is it even possible to grasp what falls outside of symbolism let alone represent it? If our cognition indeed relies solely on symbols, then how do we perceive, let alone understand, something outside of that construct? This is quite a paradox, to understand without the tools with which we use to understand; to conceive art outside of a symbolic, *this* means *that* system. But we cannot rely exclusively on language to form an understanding of art, something that is meant to represent what is outside of language, outside of symbolism. After all, if what is represented on film or canvas or clay could just as easily be said or written, then art would not exist. In her article, *The Cognitive Umbrella*, Karen Hamblen questions the idea that cognition is synonymous with symbolic understanding, or simply, ‘understanding’. For, the way we conceive of understanding or grasping a concept is through a net of verbal constructs. Can we say we understand something without going through the process of converting our internal

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Roukes, *Art Synectics: Stimulating Creativity in Art* (Worcester: Davis Publications, Inc., 1982), v.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

experience into words? And when we do make that codification, is something not lost in the translation? She cites David Perkins who wrote, “Cognition, or ‘knowing’ is too easily construed as solely a matter of words and their silent manipulation.”<sup>3</sup> Hamblen favours understanding cognition as an “umbrella” concept which encapsulates verbal and nonverbal (non-symbolic) knowledge modalities, comprising a more holistic world view. Conversely, she says, “when cognition is equated exclusively with verbal knowledge, nonverbal knowledge modalities are delegitimated, and the arts are rendered of peripheral concern.”<sup>4</sup> This shows a fundamental understanding that cognition in the arts incorporates non-symbolic perception, an understanding outside of verbal constraints.

Yet, as these sentences are formed and read on the page, another paradox emerges. How do we write about what is meant to exist outside language? Can we do art justice when contemplating it in a written form? And how do we put into language how art represents what words cannot? Is it even possible to go beyond symbolism when analysing film and art in a linguistic construct? Many art theorists have struggled with this same question, for it is critical that we face the non-symbolic when looking at art that is meant to touch our senses as well as our minds. Numerous theorists from Roland Barthes to Slavoj Žižek to René Magritte have written on this elusive subject of the non-symbolic across multiple art forms and media. This will be an investigative journey through various theories which aim to present an objective way of perceiving the non-symbolic. In doing so, the aim is to account for the existence of this concept in western cultures so beholden to symbolic structures. What is the thread that ties these independent theories together? In traversing this somewhat unstable ground, we must steady ourselves by asking: how can we go beyond symbolism in perceiving film, art and indeed the very culture in which they exist?

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<sup>3</sup> David Perkins, *The Arts and Cognition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 2. Quoted in Karen A. Hamblen, "The Cognitive Umbrella," *Studies in Art Education* 24, no. 3 (1983): 177.

<sup>4</sup> Karen A. Hamblen, "The Cognitive Umbrella," *Studies in Art Education* 24, no. 3 (1983): 177.

### Beyond Symbolism in Film

In his essay, *The Third Meaning*, Roland Barthes describes three levels of meaning which exist in film, even though all three might not, and rarely are, present at all times or in every film. The first level of meaning, Barthes calls the informational level. At this level, the film reveals the basic message of the story: who are the characters, what is their relation, what is the setting, and what is taking place. He uses as an example a still from Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible Pt. 1* (fig. 1) in which two courtiers pour gold pieces over the head of the unaffected newly crowned Tsar. At the informational level, we absorb what was just described: the setting, the characters, the action, the expression. We understand it as part of the story and what will take us to the following scene.

The second level for Barthes is the symbolic level. We know what is happening in the scene from the informational level, but what is the deeper significance behind the objects and actions we see? Gold is a sign of wealth. The pouring over the head signifies an act of baptism of the new Tsar, but a baptism of and by wealth and greed. In its action, this baptism does not cleanse the figure of the Tsar but seems to distort and hide his identity, a foreshadowing of things to come. The informational and symbolic are always diegetic, even if indirectly and with controversial significance. For instance, the signified phallus is an ever recurring symbol throughout the films of Hitchcock and exists whether or not the viewer recognizes or validates it. One may dispute the idea that the cane which Jimmy Stewart's character, Scottie, uses in *Vertigo*<sup>5</sup> is a phallic symbol, but an understanding of the cane symbolically adds depth and a new level of understanding to the character, only as it pertains to the story. There is no desire to assign a statement detached from the diegesis or theme here. This second level of meaning in film which is a complete closed sign containing a signifier representing a signified, Barthes names the *obvious*.

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<sup>5</sup> *Vertigo*. DVD, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1958; New York: MCA Universal Home Video, 1998).

For many film viewers, the symbolic level marks the depth of their conscious perception and even that can be heavily debated. But Barthes presents a third level of meaning within film that can be objectively perceived. This next meaning, however, cannot be coded. Its home is in feeling rather than language. It is not present in nor is it concerned with the diegesis, but it lurks below, it punctures through, it hovers above the signified of the obvious. It is what he calls the *obtuse*. It is a subversive detail, hidden by the *obvious* level of the diegesis, yet it breaks through that symbolic structure as a “penetrating trait.”<sup>6</sup> It is non-diegetic and yet allows us to come into complete connection with the time, the space, and the characters of the film, as if the barrier between perceiver and perceived has been dissolved. It is this indefinable detail, this quality that not only can’t be described but is before and above description. “The obtuse meaning is not in the language system (even that of symbols).”<sup>7</sup> Symbols stand for something in reality. If the *obtuse* cannot be named, if it cannot exist in language, that is because there is nothing named that corresponds to it. It is greater than language for it is outside what we know as reality. Symbolism simply uses signs rather than words. The obtuse lay outside the reach of both. “If the obtuse meaning cannot be described, that is because, in contrast to the *obvious* meaning, it does not copy anything - how do you describe something that does not represent anything? [...]The *obtuse* meaning is a signifier without a signified, hence the difficulty in naming it.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Barthes calls this level of perception the *Third Meaning* for, like what it signifies, it must go without linguistic title or inadequate description.

This structure of a third level of meaning or representation is significant for two reasons. For Barthes, it is a departure from the two levels of meaning typically perceived in film. But it is also a departure from the typical enclosed dyad we see in Saussure’s

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<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning,” in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 57.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

signifier/signified model of semiology, on which many twentieth century linguists and philosophers built their theories, including Barthes.<sup>9</sup> Barthes senses that a stagnant one to one relationship between signifier and signified is not sufficient in encompassing the whole of film perception; that there is experience that goes missed by the symbolic structure. There is a remnant, a leftover piece outside of symbolic grasp, “the third, the one 'too many', the supplement [one's] intellection cannot succeed in absorbing, at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive.”<sup>10</sup> This is the third component which eludes us yet holds us, makes us stand at attention and desire to know it. What accounts for the presence of this detail that strikes the viewer and why does it strike us so?

For Barthes, the third meaning lay in the dynamics of the seemingly uniform courtiers in the scene from *Ivan the Terrible* mentioned above. The scene is not really about these two presently insignificant characters and yet the colour of the image comes from their opposing and incongruent traits: the thick makeup, the oafish nose, the uncaring bored manner of the one, defying the fair, distinguished, diligent manner of the other. This kind of electricity which erupts does not really affect the story in any graspable way. “Obtuse meaning is discontinuous, indifferent to the story and to the obvious meaning (as signification to the story).”<sup>11</sup> In fact, it is immediately understood that the scene did not have to transgress in this manner. In the level of the obvious, it could have just as easily been that the two courtiers matched each other in every way so as not to be given a second glance and the scene would outwardly go on just the same. But it did happen that way, and that is what touches the audience, what makes them sit up and take notice. That is the significance, the *signifiance*, referring to the signifier that is left open, empty: a signifier without a signified. And as quickly as it appears, it is gone from the screen, like a phantom. This is why Barthes insists

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<sup>9</sup> Paul and Litza Jansz Cobley, *Understanding Semiotics* (Cambridge: Icon Books Ltd., 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Barthes, "The Third Meaning," 54.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

that its presence can only be analyzed through stills of a film. This fleeting incidence Barthes insists does not consciously come from the filmmaker, nor does it come subjectively from the viewer. It comes from within the image's richness, brought about from a certain detail which doesn't quite fit in an expected way. The unexpected disrupts the viewer and yet a deeper connection between image and viewer is formed. A visual poetry emerges which Barthes insists is not subjective but can be shared among viewers.

In fact, Barthes claims the obtuse can be shared among a wider array of viewers than even the symbolic can, because the obtuse exists outside not only language but culture as well. The level of the symbolic is heavily reliant on cultural norms. We navigate culture through symbolism. When we enter new and different cultures than our own, we can feel somewhat lost because we don't understand how things work, what the rules are, what certain things mean. Symbols take on new signification, and understanding signs of a culture is what is needed to navigate it, to become part of it. But, given enough time in a new culture, one learns the rules of the game and soon enough, the new signs become somewhat inherent, like second nature. This is how symbolism thrives both in film and culture, through use and repetition. So, people from different cultures may not perceive symbolic meaning in a film in the same way, as certain signifiers may signify different things in different cultures. However, the obtuse exists outside of symbolic and thus cultural meaning. "[...] The obtuse meaning appears to extend outside culture, knowledge, information; analytically, it has something derisory about it: opening out into the infinity of language..."<sup>12</sup> Since the obtuse is not beholden to cultural or linguistic parameters, it can be perceived more objectively by viewers cross culturally.

Even though the third meaning is outside descriptive language, Barthes goes on to attempt to describe this "indescribable" presence. He gives another name to this unnameable

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 55.

thing and calls it the *filmic*. The filmic is what remains after language fails and thus can only be found in the Third Meaning. “The filmic is that in film which cannot be described, the representation which cannot be represented. The filmic begins only where language and metalanguage end.”<sup>13</sup> Anything that can be described, criticized, or written about in a film falls under the obvious. For, anything we can describe with words lay within our linguistic understanding of reality. That which falls outside of representation is the obtuse or the filmic; and for Barthes, that is what makes film unique. Why put on film something that can just as well be written? That is the essence of film for Barthes, to represent what verbal language and symbolism cannot, hence the term “filmic.”

Barthes gives special signification to film as the only place where the filmic, and thus, the obtuse can be found. “[...] The specific filmic...lies...in an inarticulable third meaning that neither the simple photograph nor figurative painting can assume since they lack the diegetic horizon...”<sup>14</sup> However, the obtuse itself exists outside the diegesis, so why is the diegesis critical to the obtuse? And how does Barthes come to the conclusion that a photograph or a painting cannot tell a story? Both can have a setting, characters, action. They can absolutely have a story, even if it is told in part subjectively by the viewer. An example can be found in a photograph which Barthes later analyses in *Camera Lucida*. *Nicaragua* (fig. II) photographed by Koen Wessing in 1979 tells a story of the devastating after-effects of rebellion through the ruined streets, collapsed buildings, political graffiti, armed soldiers and amongst it all, the nuns who most likely roam the streets to clean up the mess with their charity toward the suffering. Here is a still frame that tells a story just as moving footage could. As for the figurative painting, it would be quite difficult to argue that the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel doesn't tell quite a story.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 66.

It also seems ironic at best when Barthes claims that the filmic, the essence of film, can only be analysed through a still of the film, through a photograph. It is contradictory to the fact that film is a time based medium and yet supposedly its essence lay only in a timeless still of the film. One of the characteristics of the opposing courtiers Barthes draws upon in his example in *Ivan the Terrible* is their described manners, one diligent, the other bored. These duelling demeanours are much easier to sense within the moving frame than the still one. In unearthing the third level of meaning, Barthes makes unnecessary restrictions in how it may be perceived and by limiting its presence to only film. In fact, Barthes contradicts himself on this subject in his own writing on photography in *Camera Lucida* which will be examined later in this chapter.

A paradox emerges when discussing this Third Meaning, this presence that cannot be described. How do we discuss and critique the existence of something that exists outside of the system of language and symbols? If the Third Meaning can be objectively perceived, then how do we communicate that idea with one another? Do we not need language in order to communicate, to express ideas and wants? Not necessarily. It may be a systematic way to communicate, but not the only way. In a film, sometimes more can be said in a look than in an entire page of monologue. In reality, more can be understood through a lover's eyes than his words. As John Berger wrote about how seeing comes before language, "When in love, the sight of the beloved has a completeness which no words...can match."<sup>15</sup> So although we may have an over-reliance on verbal language as a primary mode of communication, it is not the only way. In fact, the need to communicate outside of language is in part why film and art maintain such importance in culture. There are some ideas, emotions and experience that

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<sup>15</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1990), 8.

will not survive verbal translation and must remain unrepresented, unaltered - pure. As Barthes reminds us, "We do without language yet never cease to understand one another."<sup>16</sup>

Although Barthes gives examples of where the Third Meaning can be found in film, he does not give an adequate explanation as to why it is there and how it is that we perceive something that is not related to the story, and yet leaves such a striking impact on the viewer. It is a subversive presence, one that could easily be missed and probably not perceived by all. Even though Barthes insists that the Third Meaning can be objectively perceived, that does not mean that all viewers will perceive it, just as not all viewers will pick up on symbolic inferences placed purposefully in the film. So how do we account for this extra presence, this empty signifier, this remnant that verbal language cannot codify? This is a question that will arise throughout this investigative journey.

Barthes described the Third Meaning in terms of a signifier without a signified. In other words, something we perceive on screen that stands for nothing in our symbolic reality, the reality that we are accustomed to, that we have codified in order to navigate in a more efficient and understandable way. But there is nothing understandable per se about the Third Meaning. It is not there to be understood, for to understand something, to know something is to have a symbolic representation for it which allows us to categorize and store it away in our minds. But the Third Meaning is outside of that cultural structure. In fact, the word *meaning* is a bit of a misnomer, a paradox even, because the Third Meaning has no tangible meaning. When we say x means y, we are simply replacing the signifier with the signified. But the Third Meaning, the obtuse, has no signified; it is a signifier left open, empty, for what it represents exists outside of symbolic reality. Slavoj Žižek introduces a concept that, like the Third Meaning, reaches beyond symbolism to represent what is intangible, unknowable, unrepresentable.

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<sup>16</sup> Barthes, "The Third Meaning," 61.

Žižek employs Lacan's notion of *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz*<sup>17</sup> in terms of the film diegesis, unlike the Third Meaning which Barthes insists is not part of the film's narrative. It is an object or signifier on screen that stands in for something that we are not allowed to see, something or someone that is barred from the diegesis on screen. And yet their presence is felt. Though we may never see the characters excluded from the screen, they still serve to motivate the characters that we do see. Žižek uses an example from *The Lady Vanishes*<sup>18</sup> where punctuating traces of the vanished Miss Froy can be seen on screen even though she herself cannot. Most of the film takes place aboard a train for London. The main character Iris makes a friendly acquaintance of kindly older lady, Miss Froy, as other passengers around them look on, clearly acknowledging the two women. Iris falls unconscious due to an earlier incident where she gets hit by a falling flowerpot (meant for Miss Froy). Once she wakes up, she notices Miss Froy has gone. She asks the other passengers in her compartment where she has gone but they try to convince her that no such person exists. Miss Froy has seemed to vanish without a trace. Iris continues to search for the vanished lady with her companion Gilbert, but the passengers and crew, for varying purposes, lie to them and try to convince Iris she had been hallucinating from the bump on her head. At this point, the audience cannot see Miss Froy either. In Žižek's terms, Miss Froy has been excluded from symbolic diegetic reality we see on screen, her existence repressed by her fellow travellers. Yet, as in psychosis, what is repressed, what is excluded from symbolic reality will at some point break through it.

As the Third Meaning breaks through the symbolic meaning in the form of a "penetrating trait,"<sup>19</sup> so does *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz* break through the symbolic reality of the screen and appear as a detail, a signifying trace of the repressed. In the film, Miss Froy

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<sup>17</sup> Translated literally, this means Performance Representative.

<sup>18</sup> *The Lady Vanishes*, DVD, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1939; Los Angeles, CA: Delta Entertainment, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Barthes, "The Third Meaning," 57.

breaks through the symbolic diegesis and manifests as a symbol, the name Froy written on a dusty glass window (fig. III) and the label of a particular tea brand, Haniman's, which Froy had brought onto the train. Although she doesn't appear on screen through much of the film and her very existence is denied, Froy's reality breaks through the symbolic reality of the visual plot: "What is excluded from reality reappears as a signifying trace (as an element of the symbolic order...) on the very screen through which we observe reality."<sup>20</sup> Yet the reality of the character, though not represented on screen by an actor, serves to motivate the characters on screen. Iris and Gilbert search for Miss Froy, the desired object, while the other passengers try to convince them of her non-existence, an allusion to the void of the empty signifier.

As the existence of Barthes' Third Meaning is fleeting, so much so that Barthes claims it can only be perceived through a still frame, so is the existence of *Vorstellungs-Reprasentanz* on screen. In a moment of doubt, Iris looks at the glass window to see the name Miss Froy had herself marked on the window. But as soon as she notices it, the train enters a tunnel and the name can no longer be seen. Similarly, as the train cook dumps rubbish out of the window of the moving train, Gilbert momentarily sees the Haniman's tea label stuck to the window before it flies away for good. Rather than concrete signs that can be gathered together, these representations appear and disappear, almost like a ghostly presence, escaping any kind of permanent tangible form. That is what we're dealing with, the intangible, that which escapes symbolic reality but returns to puncture through it as a fleeting detail; that which escapes symbolism, escapes definition, for we are in the presence of what cannot be defined or fully grasped with words or symbols. This is the presence which "eludes the symbolic grasp and persists as a non-symbolized stain, a hole in reality which

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<sup>20</sup> Slavoj Zizek, "In His Bold Gaze, My Ruin Is Writ Large," in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. Slavoj Zizek (London: Verso Books, 1992), 238.

designates the ultimate limit where ‘the word fails’.”<sup>21</sup> Miss Froy is repressed from the symbolic reality of the screen, so her reality returns in the form of a signifier, *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz*, which fills out the void of the excluded representation.<sup>22</sup>

Everything we see on screen is a representation for something. The film image, like any image, is a sight which has been recreated or reproduced.<sup>23</sup> This includes characters as well. As the screen works within the symbolic realm, within the signifier/signified structure, what is not allowed to appear on screen is not part of that symbolic reality. Yet, what is repressed from symbolic reality will break through it as the obtuse breaks through the obvious and appear as a signifying trace of the repressed. Žižek’s notion of *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz* represents that which has not been allowed to be represented on screen. Miss Froy is barred from the screen, so her reality emerges in the form of a pulsative stain: a tea label, a name on a dusty window. These objects act as a replacement for the character image barred from the symbolic reality of the screen, “the signifier which acts as a representative – a trace – of the excluded (‘repressed’) representation, in this case the representation of Miss Froy, excluded from the diegetic reality.”<sup>24</sup> Once again, we see how the film experience, as in reality, does not fit neatly into the one to one signifier/signified relationship. There is always something left over. “The elementary feature of a symbolic order in its relations 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,”<sup>25</sup> a signifier without a signified. *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz* is that surplus signifier, a representation for what has not been allowed to be represented on screen, a representation for the unrepresentable.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Žižek, "In His Bold Gaze, My Ruin Is Writ Large," 238.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 236.

A well known filmic device that is used purposefully to represent the unknown, the unrepresentable, is the MacGuffin. A MacGuffin is any object that drives the storyline, the characters and their motivations, yet has no intrinsic value or relevance to the story in and of itself. It's not important to the plot what the object actually is, it's important what it does: it motivates the actions of the characters, both within the story and with regard to other characters. The MacGuffin might be a briefcase, government documents, or a hidden secret. It's the object of everyone's desire. It might even be ambiguous in identity. In fact, as the struggles and motivations of the characters play out through the film, the materiality of the MacGuffin, what it is represented by on screen, declines in importance and can be all but forgotten by the conclusion. It doesn't matter to the audience what the MacGuffin is. Through their suspension of disbelief, the audience accepts its importance because the characters do. Whatever it manifests as, whatever the signifier, the MacGuffin serves as the object of desire, the secret to uncover.

Hitchcock is credited with popularizing both the term and its usage in film.<sup>26</sup> Ken Mogg describes the origin of the term and the meaning (or lack thereof) behind it:

The term 'MacGuffin' was coined by Hitchcock's Scottish friend, screenwriter Angus MacPhail, for something that sets the film's plot revolving around it. It's really just an excuse and a diversion. In a whimsical anecdote told by Hitchcock, he compared the MacGuffin to a mythical 'apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands'. In other words, it could be anything - or nothing - at all. [...] In effect, the function of a MacGuffin is like the 'meaning' of a poem - which T.S. Eliot compared to the bone

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<sup>26</sup> Ken Mogg, "the Macguffin' Web Page," [http://www.labyrinth.net.au/~muffin/faqs\\_c.html](http://www.labyrinth.net.au/~muffin/faqs_c.html).

thrown by a burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind while the poem goes about its own, deeper business.<sup>27</sup>

What is especially relevant about the story of the origin of the MacGuffin is that the meaning behind the MacGuffin is irrelevant or even non-existent. In other words, the MacGuffin stands for nothing in reality. In the story, the MacGuffin is a contraption for trapping lions (which don't exist in the Scottish Highlands). So, the MacGuffin does not exist either, in meaning anyway. This story demonstrates how Hitchcock deemphasized symbolic readings of his films, discouraging the idea that everything has to *mean* something. The MacGuffin story "exemplifies Hitchcock's impatience with literalist readings of his films. His art, like the painter's, asks the viewer not to agonize over degrees of realism but to approach it with a mixture of emotional involvement and cool detachment..."<sup>28</sup> The signifier of the MacGuffin means nothing in symbolic reality. It is a signifier without a signified.

In the film *The Lady Vanishes*, Miss Froy became the object of desire that the heroine searches for through much of the film. Not only is she barred from the screen, but once she is found, she is hidden beneath layers of bandages, like a secret waiting to be unwrapped. She is hidden from the screen, from symbolic reality and emerges as punctuating stains. But why is Miss Froy being barred from the screen? Who would want to kidnap a kindly old governess? As we later find out, Miss Froy is actually a spy who is on the train to bring vital information to the foreign office in London in the form of a coded tune. The people after her are determined that she never reach London. So this coded tune is what set the entire plot in motion, motivating the characters and even bringing the heroine and hero together. Where Miss Froy is the hidden object of desire barred from the symbolic reality of the screen, the

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<sup>27</sup> ———, *The Alfred Hitchcock Story* (London: Titan Books Ltd., 1999), 101.

<sup>28</sup> Peter William Evans, "Hitchcock, Alfred Joseph (1899–1980)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

coded message is the MacGuffin. Did it have to be a coded song? Would it have made any difference to the plot if the song had been a microfilm or secret papers? No. We don't even find out what the MacGuffin is until well near the end of the film. It doesn't matter to the plot what the MacGuffin is, just what it does.

*North by Northwest* contains perhaps the epitome of a MacGuffin in the form of microfilm containing government secrets which in the end have no relevance to the climax of the story. Moreover, every main character in the film is playing a role, no one is who they seem to be, and empty signifiers exist everywhere from the non-existent agent Kaplan, to the O in Roger O. Thornhill which stands for nothing.<sup>29</sup> It is in itself a figure of a void.

Another example of a MacGuffin is the Maltese Falcon in the film of the same name.<sup>30</sup> Characters double cross and murder one another, all in the quest for the desired object, the Maltese Falcon, a supposedly priceless antique jewel encrusted statuette. The object turns out to be worthless in the end, empty in content. Yet, the characters are motivated all the same. The story moves forward, regardless of the actual content of the object. The recently released film *Juno*<sup>31</sup> is quite literal in its reference to the plot's MacGuffin. The story revolves around sardonic teenager, Juno MacGuff, whose unplanned pregnancy changes the lives of everyone around her, re-focusing their attention onto the 'little MacGuffin' in the oven.

As stated earlier, the MacGuffin can be ambiguous in identity, therefore leaving the content up to the imagination of the viewer. The mysteriously glowing briefcase contents in *Pulp Fiction*<sup>32</sup> is an example of this desire for the unknown, ambiguous object. Four stories intertwine in this film, all of which revolve around or pass through the desire for this

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<sup>29</sup> Mogg, "the Macguffin' Web Page."

<sup>30</sup> *The Maltese Falcon*, DVD, directed by John Huston (1941; USA, CA: Warner Home Video, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> *Juno*. DVD, directed by Jason Reitman (2007; London: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> *Pulp Fiction*, DVD, directed by Quentin Tarantino (1994; London: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2002).

briefcase. It is shown only twice, once in the first scene in the film, and once in the last. The contents themselves are never shown, only a mysterious glow upon the amazed face of the person viewing the ‘contents’ (fig. IV). The viewer never knows what the contents are, but they seem to have a universal appeal, as each person who views it has a similar reaction of being in the presence of something beautiful, desirable, and hidden from everyday reality. The viewer is then left up to his own devices to conjure up what the contents might be. But for the storyline, the briefcase is, for all intents and purposes, empty.

The MacGuffin is commonly seen as an object in film, an object that is ‘empty’ in that its meaning is unimportant and often ambiguous or inexistent in terms of the film’s diegesis. It is a signifier without a signified, an empty signifier in that there is nothing in the symbolic reality of the narrative that it represents. In the case of the Third Meaning, the signifier represents that which falls outside of our symbolic understanding. In the case of *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz*, it represents that image (that representation) which has been repressed from the symbolic reality of the screen. In the case of the MacGuffin, what it represents is unimportant or meaningless to the film’s story. In all cases, the signifier is left open, representing that which cannot be represented yet which is nonetheless desired. These concepts that serve to represent the unrepresentable have been commonly used in classic films on the silver screen. However, the unrepresentable also emerges consistently in a form of media perhaps more accessible to contemporary mass culture: the situation comedy.

The situation comedy has come to develop a trope that serves to motivate the plot and the actions of characters, yet is never actually seen on screen. This has come to be called most appropriately, the Unseen Character. The Unseen Character is, in effect, a formless void, repressed from the on screen diegetic reality. We never get to see his face or hear him speak – he could in fact be non-existent. But we accept the reality of the Unseen Character the same as we accept the characters we do see. We accept him because the characters do,

and because he provides motivation for the plot and the characters in the plot, similar to how we accept the importance of the MacGuffin in film. In fact, unseen characters can seem so real to us from their references on screen, that, in many cases, we can grow to love them as much as we do the seen characters. They become the objects of our desire, the characters we desperately want to see but cannot.

A classic example of the Unseen Character is Vera Peterson, unseen wife of Norm Peterson on the long running sitcom *Cheers*.<sup>33</sup> By Norm's description, Vera is the quintessential nagging, over-demanding, and none-too-attractive 'ball and chain'. In fact, Norm's primary reason for hanging out at the eponymous bar as much as he does is to escape her. And when Norm has to leave the bar, no doubt it is because Vera supposedly nagged him to come home or run an errand. Yet, really, this is all hearsay since we, as the audience, never so much as hear her voice on the phone or from off screen. She could, in 'reality' be a lovely woman or entirely made up. But, we accept her as a real character for the way she motivates her on screen husband and the garish personal details in Norm's dry jokes made at her expense. Over the years, so many quips are made by the loveable Norm about his wife that we feel as if we know her almost the same as any other character. We even come to love her as we would an onscreen character, because we know that deep down (deep, deep down) Norm does too. And that's really all the audience needs to go on to make the character 'real'. As an Unseen Character, Vera becomes the object of the viewer's desire in that the more we hear about her, the more we want her 'reality' to be revealed on screen, to be verified. We want a payoff, an answer to our questions about what she is really like. But, as the Unseen Character, her specific attributes - how she looks, what she sounds like, who she is - are denied to us. We as the audience are left up to our own devices to conjure up in our own minds what those attributes are. In this way, any jokes made at Vera's expense of how

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<sup>33</sup> *Cheers*, (USA: Charles/Burrows/Charles Productions, 1982-1993).

unattractive or tedious she is will never go too far, because no symbolic limit has been assigned to those characteristics. They are left open, limitless, empty.

Other examples of popular Unseen Characters include Niles Crane's ostentatious wife Maris in the sitcom *Frasier*.<sup>34</sup> She is the 'picture' of the frigid, high class snob, thin as a rake and so delicate that she is said to have sprained her wrist from having too much dip on a cracker. Karen Walker's husband Stan on *Will and Grace*<sup>35</sup> characterizes the opposite extremes, comically obese with a library of sexual fetishes to rival Caligula. He has also reportedly worn the same mop of a toupee on his head since high school. But perhaps the best use of an Unseen Character comes in the form of Bob Saccamano, Kramer's friend on *Seinfeld*<sup>36</sup> who has seen and done everything from work in a condom factory to conquer electro shock therapy due to his abnormally large synapses. He is a godlike figure used as proof of any strange or questionable event that his prophet Kramer claims to have happened – Bob Saccamano did it, saw it, created it. And no one can disprove these 'truths' because Bob Saccamano is never on screen to be challenged. He is infallible, limitless, unrestrained by any symbolic characteristics that a seen character would possess.

Sitcoms will very often be reflexive with regard to the viewers' desire to see the Unseen Character. Jokes are made about the very fact that the character is never seen (is not represented by any real actor). Gimmicks are written to tease the audience with a possible unveiling of the Unseen Character. This is it, the moment we've all been waiting for when we get to see the true face of ---. But, at the last minute something happens: perhaps a fake newsreel interrupts or something masks the character's appearance. In the case of Vera Peterson, a pie is 'accidentally' thrown in her face so that the true nature of her homeliness is never revealed, perpetuating the viewer's desire for the character as well as the picture they

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<sup>34</sup> *Frasier*, (USA: Grub Street Productions, 1993-2004).

<sup>35</sup> *Will and Grace*, (USA: KoMut Entertainment, 1998-2006).

<sup>36</sup> *Seinfeld*, (USA: Castle Rock Entertainment, 1990-1998).

have painted of the ultimate ball and chain. Even though the viewer desires to uncover the Unseen Character, if he were ever to be seen on screen, it would surely spell disappointment. The character's mystical essence would dissolve into a limited human form. Ultimately, the viewer wants the Unseen Character to remain just that, unseen, so that the myth can be perpetuated and the viewer's faith, propagated. This is the one character that indeed has no earthly limitations.

If the Unseen Character is the object of desire, the character we desperately want to see but is repressed from the symbolic reality of the screen, then *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz* is the on screen signifier acting as a representative, a trace of the repressed character, the performance representative. It gives a symbolized significance to the non-symbolic. Obviously in a sitcom, these traces are going to be humorous in their absurdity; props that give reference to the limitlessness of the Unseen Character's extreme characteristics. In the case of Stan Walker, *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz* takes the form of the toupee he's had since high school, referencing what a comically unattractive man Stan is supposed to be. In the case of Maris Crane, the woman who is the epitome of a thin, fair skinned 'ghost' of a woman, an example of a signifier is her bracelet that the on screen characters mistake for her wedding ring. These signifying props are used to represent, to stand in for the empty character, the hole in the symbolic. They are signifiers without signifieds in that they represent characters that don't exist in the symbolic reality of the screen. These objects also serve another purpose: they reference characteristics that no real human could have. They represent limitless obesity, unattractiveness, frailty, or whatever characteristic will be referenced in the next quip. And these jokes maintain their humour because there is no reality behind the character. The audience is left to fill the image of Vera, Stan, or Maris with their own ideal of the ultimate in the nagging wife, the fat unattractive man, the delicate

socialite. For the situation comedy, the Unseen Character is, in many ways, the perfect character.

As we have seen thus far, film and television contain several devices and theories on reaching beyond symbolism in viewer perception. The Third Meaning, *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz*, the MacGuffin, and the Unseen Character's representative prop all serve the same function in the symbolic realm of the screen, they are empty signifiers, signifiers without signifieds. They represent nothing in symbolic reality, illuminating an empty hole in the symbolic order. That does not mean they represent absolutely nothing, for there is more than what we know in our symbolic reality. For instance, a *Cheers* fan would not likely say that Vera Peterson does not exist, even though she escapes the symbolic reality of the screen. What it does mean is that symbolism, either on screen or in culture, does not account for everything that we experience. There is the experience that falls outside of what we have coded with language and symbols. There is experience that we cannot fully grasp or understand, to which we have not or cannot assign a label. There is experience that cannot be represented in our symbolic 'understandable' world. This is the function of the concepts presented thus far, to remind us that not everything can be 'understandable', to show that human experience flows over what can be contained in symbolism's grasp, to represent the unrepresentable.

### **Beyond Symbolism in Photography and Art**

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes two components he sees in photography. The first is the *studium* which is what the photographer means to portray through the objects he photographs: the location, the characters, the action, the expressions, and so forth. It relays something about the time and place of when the photograph was taken. It is a backdrop, a background. And for our concerns, it is diegetic as is the obvious in his theory of film. "[The

studium] always refers to a classical body of information...<sup>37</sup> It is the level of information in a photograph and thus corresponds to the informational and symbolic (the *obvious*) in Barthes' theory of film perception he described in *The Third Meaning*. All photographs contain this level of meaning for they are part of the message the photographer wanted to relay. Indeed the studium, for Barthes, is the essence of a photograph as a referential medium for, it is the invention of the photograph which freed painting from the tethers of realism and allowed it to become more expressionist. "The photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents."<sup>38</sup> In other words, a photograph of a person in a particular setting proves that person existed in that setting if only for a moment. Of course advanced digital image editing software of today refutes this claim. But even at the time he was writing, around 1981, there were camera and printing effects such as double exposure and lens distortion. He even recognizes that the photographic optic is subject to Albertian perspective and depth of field variances.<sup>39</sup> Barthes doesn't allow this to sway his argument, yet gives little reason as to why. Even with camera effects, Barthes claims that a photograph ratifies an object as existing in a certain place and time, even if the object has gone through a distorting translation.<sup>40</sup> Once again, taking current image editing software, this argument holds little ground today. However, for our purposes, it makes little difference whether or not the photograph can be viewed as an essentially referential medium, one that proves a subject's existence in a particular time and place. Reality versus fiction is not what concerns us for both exist in the symbolic realm of the studium. An image represents something; whether the statement being made is truthful or not is of little concern to the studium.

All photographs contain this level of meaning. But, the memorable photographs, the images that stay with you long after your eyes have turned away contain another element

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<sup>37</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000), 25.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 88,89.

beyond the symbolic meaning of the studium which Barthes calls the *punctum*. The punctum is that detail of the photograph which pricks and punctures through the two dimensional image and leaves a lasting impression upon the beholder. Like Barthes' theory of the obtuse in film, the punctum is beyond symbolic meaning, it breaks through the symbolic; it is a cut, a "hole"<sup>41</sup> in the symbolic order, grabbing the viewer's attention from perceiving something that cannot be readily grasped through symbolic understanding. "The studium is always coded, the punctum is not."<sup>42</sup> The punctum is a surplus, beyond the symbolic dyad of meaning. It signifies nothing in symbolic reality, a signifier without a signified, as is the obtuse. It is the happy accident that catches the eye and won't let go. For Barthes, the punctum is the presence of the nuns who just happen to be there amongst the studium of the soldiers and the war torn surroundings in Wessing's photograph *Nicaragua* (fig. II). An unfamiliar and intriguing duality is present in the coexistence of the nuns who usually bring about thoughts of purity and sheltered life, within the gritty, ultra-real setting of war. Without the nuns, without the punctum, we still receive the information of the time, place, action, and story. The presence of the nuns provides this surreal juxtaposition of characters that "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces..."<sup>43</sup> Like the obtuse, the punctum's realm is outside the diegesis of the image and the intentionality of the artist. "Certain details may prick...If they do not, it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there intentionally...Hence the detail which [is of interest] is not or at least not strictly, intentional, and probably must not be so."<sup>44</sup>

The presence of the punctum makes a photograph transcend its own medium. It reaches out and touches the beholder, transcending its two dimensional quality, as well as its representative nature. It is no longer a sign of something else, a mere referent, but a thing in

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 47.

itself. Such is a work of art. It has gone beyond symbolism, beyond signs and referents and is self sufficient. It is no longer inextricably tied to its referential object as a signifier is to a signified,<sup>45</sup> but stands on its own. This provides a fullness to the photograph in the way that it is in need of nothing to refer to. “There is another...expansion of the punctum: when paradoxically, while remaining a ‘detail’, it fills the whole picture.”<sup>46</sup> As with the obtuse, this fullness can be attributed to its pre-linguistic nature. Unlike the studium or the obvious, this feeling of fullness is felt, or even divined in the punctum and the obtuse. It is outside what we know of reality and therefore cannot be expressed, or replaced by, symbols or words. Language comes from need, a need to communicate that one wants something it does not have. On the other hand, the realm of the pre-linguistic, obtuse and the punctum being part of that realm, is without need for there is total fulfilment. What we cannot fully grasp, what we cannot name and compartmentalize, what we cannot package and put away in our minds, what goes without representation is what is at once shocking and disturbing about these presences. “What [can be named] cannot really prick...The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance.”<sup>47</sup> It is this disturbance which is caused by our meeting the unrepresented, the unnamed, the unknown.

It is this ability to disturb which marks a great photograph for Barthes. Disturb does not mean something negative, a connotation the word disturb can sometimes have. Disturb here means to alert, to wake one up out of a trance of complacency; “[...] what it produces...is the very opposite of hebetude; something more like an internal agitation, an excitement, a certain labor too, the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken.”<sup>48</sup> Most important, it causes one to think. Why does this disturb me? What is it that I am so

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<sup>45</sup> A fundamental concept in Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiology is that in any sign, the signified is inseparable from, and indeed engendered by, the signifier. Cobley, *Understanding Semiotics*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 45.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

used to that this causes a change in me? The punctum, the non-symbolic causes us to look at our symbolic world and ask why it is so, how it came to be. It reminds us that there is more to experience than what we see in our symbolic understanding, both of art and of the world around us. "The punctum, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond* - as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see [...]"<sup>49</sup>

Barthes' aim in theorizing on the punctum was to find the essence of great photographs. In doing so, he wanted to find something somewhat formulaic, something that people could objectively perceive and agree upon but that would not reduce photography to mere critical analysis, betraying it as an art form. He knew he faced quite a paradox, as he mentions using opposing languages, both critical and expressive. He admits, however, that the punctum can arise in different places for different people. In many cases, the punctum can depend upon the viewers own personal experience. He uses an example in James Van der Zee's *Family Portrait*, taken in 1926 (fig. V). Here is a portrait of an American black family, dressed in their Sunday best. For Barthes, these clothes symbolize an effort of social advancement, a wanting to conform to the "White Man's" attributes. But the punctum for Barthes lay in the necklace worn by the younger woman for it was the same type of necklace worn by a woman in Barthes' own family who, to Barthes, led a dreary life. This feeling was no doubt unconsciously transposed onto the photograph and emerged as a punctum for Barthes. Yet, this is a totally personal experience, one that no other person could be expected to have. So the punctum can be objective or subjective. The subjectivity takes into account the perception of the viewer and the personal experience they bring to the viewing. Being that art does not exist in a vacuum, this is a reasonable position to take with regards to the punctum, as what we hold personal will no doubt affect us, pierce us the most. This does not in any way negate the presence of the punctum or the idea that its existence can be mutually

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 59.

agreed upon. It may simply manifest itself in different ways for different viewers depending on their personal experience and level of perception. Such is a claim Barthes did not make about the Third Meaning. However, given the vast similarities between the two concepts and the difficulty in assigning linguistic descriptions to them, it is reasonable to suggest that the Third Meaning could manifest subjectively as well.

As we have seen, the punctum in photography is very similar to the Third Meaning in film. Yet Barthes claims that film is the only place the Third Meaning can be found for, to him, it is the essence of film. The filmic is what grabs the viewer's attention for it is outside the expected and appears as "an emergence"... "a sort of gash rased of meaning."<sup>50</sup> It escapes meaning and linguistic tethers. Yet, does this not also apply to the punctum? In fact, every characteristic that Barthes designates to the Third Meaning in film he also designates to the punctum. They are what make the film or photograph transcendent of average works within each medium. They operate outside symbolism for they signify nothing in symbolic reality. They appear as details that rise from the symbolic level, illuminating a hole in the symbolic order where words fail. It is these details that make a film or photograph memorable. Yet, Barthes claims the filmic Third Meaning can only be found in film, even though, as he claims, it can only be perceived through film stills. Conversely, Barthes claims that the punctum can only be found in the photograph and not in the motion picture. Why? According to Barthes, the best way to perceive the punctum is to close one's eyes and see what detail jumps out in the mind's eye. What is it about the photograph that stays with you after you turn away? While this is easy to do with a photograph, one cannot do the same with a film, for in the moment one closes one's eyes or turns away, the image has already been replaced with another image. Because of this, Barthes claims the punctum can only be found in photography. Yet, did he not also claim that the Third Meaning could only be perceived

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<sup>50</sup> ———, "The Third Meaning," 62.

through the still of a film, a photograph? If the Third Meaning can be perceived through a photograph and it shares every primary characteristic with the punctum, then the Third Meaning can be thought of as analogous to the punctum. He simply designates the Third Meaning as pertaining to film and the punctum to photography. Both designate an empty signifier which illuminates a hole in the symbolic where words fail; a signifier without a signified.

So as we see, the unnameable presence to which Barthes gives several names: the Third Meaning, the obtuse, the filmic, and the punctum, exists in both film and photography. But if it can exist in still photography, can it not also exist in painting? Barthes would surely deny this possibility for the thing that shocks, the thing that is unrepresented in reality which we perceive in film in the obtuse and photography in the punctum, Barthes insists should be an unintentional accident. Paint is a medium too intentional and controlled to allow such an accident. But why must it be unintentional? If we have the ability to perceive and even name this unnameable thing (four times), then can we not have the ability to create it? We are not prisoners of our language in a strict sense of linguistic relativity. Language may shape our concrete thoughts, but we are not completely confined to the structure of spoken language, otherwise, a third meaning could not even be negotiated. It is therefore unrealistic and very limiting to suggest that all art is created as a mere visual representation of what could be just as easily spoken or written down. The obtuse, the punctum, the unrepresented is simply the unfamiliar or unknown, it is not the impossible. There is no reason why such non-symbolic concepts cannot exist in paint as it does in celluloid. Presenting the unfamiliar and putting the real world on trial was the direct aim of painter and philosopher René Magritte.

The obtuse and the punctum which lay outside reality reside in Magritte's surreal paintings and sculptures. However, where Barthes described two fields, the obvious and obtuse in film, and the studium and punctum in photography, Magritte's art exists solely in

the unrepresentable. For him, there is no informational level, there is no symbolic, there is no studium. Therefore, there is no concrete information or meaning to be conveyed to the viewer. That's not to say that there is no reality. But what Magritte presents to us through his unexpected juxtaposition of ordinary well known objects is the suggestion of another reality, a hidden reality. He presents not the real (the real as we know it, i.e. symbolic reality) but the surreal; the *beyond* real<sup>51</sup> or in our terms, beyond symbolic reality. He uses familiar objects and places them in unfamiliar surroundings and positions to remind us of what could be but isn't and asks us, or gets us to ask ourselves, why this is so. As the obtuse in a film could just as easily be otherwise, as the two courtiers in *Ivan the Terrible* could have been perfectly uniform, Magritte's ideas remind us that what exists within our own reality could just as easily be otherwise. "[His ideas] represent nothing else than unborn realities."<sup>52</sup>

Where the obtuse and punctum lay atop a comfortable backdrop of the understandable obvious and studium to which our minds can easily cling, there exists no such skeletal grounding in Magritte's paintings. We perceive only the unrepresentable, only the unnameable. His work defies explanation for that lies in the realm of the linguistic, the coded, the signified. "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."<sup>53</sup>

Magritte challenged the symbolic reality we take for granted as being the only possibility for reality.

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<sup>51</sup> According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the word surrealism means 'beyond realism' and was coined by Guillaume Apollinaire circa 1917 (in French as *surréalisme*). André Breton took over the term as the name of the movement he launched in 1924 with "Manifeste de Surréalisme." Surrealism. Dictionary.com. Online Etymology Dictionary. Douglas Harper, Historian. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/surrealism>.

<sup>52</sup> Suzi Gablik, *Magritte* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 9.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Where Barthes insisted that the obtuse and the punctum be unintentional, the inner disruption caused by what Magritte called the *mystery* of an image was his full intension and his primary aim. “The fear of being mystified,” according to Magritte, “applies equally to painted images which have the power to provoke such fear. Sometimes an image can place its spectator under serious accusation.”<sup>54</sup> Nothing is learned from reinforcing the known, the expected. By presenting the unexpected, Magritte wanted to bring about a true investigation of what lay beneath what we see, not only on canvas, but also in life. As the punctum and obtuse break through symbolic reality, the mystery subverts the symbolic to suggest the possibility of other hidden realities.

Magritte’s recurrent icons such as the apple, the bowler-hatted man, the lost jockey, and of course the pipe, have attracted many attempts to interpret his work through symbolism. Yet symbolism falls short within the obvious, within the linguistic, within reality. “Magritte does not concentrate on the objects or the figures, to which he lends only a ready-made appearance. What he focuses on is the search for certain strange relationships between objects or between people and objects.”<sup>55</sup> It is these relationships and juxtapositions which evoke the mystery, that which cannot be described or understood in a concrete way which would expel any notion of poetry about the image. Just as one cannot describe or name something that does not exist in reality, so one cannot symbolize it either. To ask the artist the question, “So what are you saying with this film/photograph/painting?” is to miss the essence of his artwork. 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. As Hammacher suggests, “[...] we cannot achieve very much by approaching [Magritte's] work via the traditional descriptive

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>55</sup> A.M. Hammacher, *Magritte*, trans. James Brockway (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985), 33.

method of the art historian or aesthetic analysis."<sup>56</sup> Linguistics and semiotics mark the easy way out of the conundrum in which Magritte places the viewer. Magritte has written on the meaning of his images:

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.<sup>57</sup>

Magritte refers to the mystery as a void. Such is a word used by Žižek to describe *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz*, pertaining to the void of a signifier without a signified. Magritte paints familiar objects to which many immediately want to attach a meaning, a signified. They are uncomfortable with having to deal with an empty signifier, an open sign with nothing to attach itself to, a signifier without a signified. This unresolved question lingers

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>57</sup> Gablik, *Magritte*, 11.

until the viewer can conjure up a false signified to close the sign and put the quandary out of his mind. For instance, one could suggest that the apple in *The Son of Man* (fig. VI) symbolizes knowledge, or perhaps temptation and original sin, suggesting the man is “blinded” by sin. This coupled with the bourgeois bowler-hatted man could foster a negative characterization of a capitalist middle class, perhaps particularly in Belgium, Magritte’s native country. Then the question is answered and the quandary forgotten. But is it really? Does such an interpretation really satisfy? Does it bring the viewer closer to the image? Is the viewer moved by such an interpretation?

True art creates a connection directly between the artist and the viewer, as if the message or feeling conveyed were placed directly into the consciousness of the perceiver, without the intrusion of a linguistic middle man. After all, cannot a lover’s eyes express more about love directly than any three words? Verbal and symbolic interpretation simply interfere with this direct transmission, creating a false sense of stability where one is meant to lose oneself, as when falling in love. In his essay *Reflections on Symbolism*, artist Ben-Zion writes, “In art there is something in the straight approach to a thing without any in-between agents that creates symbols. But in-between agents that impose ready made symbols destroy it as a work of art and at the same time give a false meaning to the symbol.”<sup>58</sup> The apple does not mean temptation, sin, or anything else for that matter.<sup>59</sup> So what was it that Magritte wanted to convey? What then is the answer to this quandary?

Magritte didn’t set out to answer anything, only to raise questions. His questions usually had to do with what was hidden behind reality. We come to accept symbolic reality as the one and only reality when countless other realities are possible. It is the existence of

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<sup>58</sup> Ben-Zion, *Reflections on Symbolism and the Abstract: Two Essays* (Tel-Aviv: Eked Publishing House, 1982), 27.

<sup>59</sup> Magritte was quoted as saying, “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.” Virtuo, “The Magritte Site,” Virtuo, <http://www.magritte.com/>.

these other possibilities hidden beneath the symbolic reality we see and navigate everyday which so intrigued Magritte. It is these hidden realities he wanted to evoke through his paintings, to transmit to the viewer, especially in his series of paintings which feature an image obstructed by another image. On *The Son of Man*, Magritte has said:

Well, so you have the apparent face, the apple, hiding the visible but hidden, the face of the person. It's something that happens constantly. Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see. There is an interest in that which is hidden and which the visible does not show us. This interest can take the form of a quite intense feeling, a sort of conflict, one might say, between the visible that is hidden and the visible that is present.<sup>60</sup>

It is not what the apple means or represents, it is the notion that it hides something else, another reality. Through these images, Magritte wanted the viewer to intuit something hidden which lay beneath the surface of everyday life. This is the mystery, the unknown, the unrepresented. Just as Magritte's images cannot be understood in any concrete way, neither can the mystery for it is outside symbolic reality. It is no coincidence that the film *The Lady Vanishes* is about a mystery – the mystery of the hidden Miss Froy. Just as she escapes the symbolic reality of the screen, so the mystery escapes the symbolic reality of life. Both the mystery and *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz* remind us of what is hidden from reality, what lurks below the visible. Miss Froy is eventually found, literally hidden beneath a veil of bandages. This is what Magritte wanted to do by evoking the mystery – not only to unveil what lay hidden beneath reality, but to call attention to the veil itself.

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<sup>60</sup> Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, trans. Richard Millen (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977), 172.

By rejecting the mystery out of fear of the unknown and attempting to fit the painting into an understandable construct of symbols and meaning, the poetry of the image is ignored and we are left with an unfulfilling superficial answer which serves only to rid oneself of the mystery of the image. Yet, if one beholds the mystery, the feeling that comes from encountering a reality outside of understandable symbols, the mystery is not a void but an overflow, a feeling of fullness brought from transcending the need for limiting symbols. By escaping the symbolic dyad of *this* means *that*, not only is the line between signifier and signified blurred, but the line between beholder and subject, viewer and painting dissolves as well. We break the barrier between the viewer as an individual and the artwork as exterior. This is why great paintings touch us, because they become a part of us.

This aversion to symbolic reduction is explored deliberately in Magritte's series of paintings where a word is substituted for an image or would-be symbol. For example, in *The Living Mirror* (fig. VII), objects are replaced by words: horizon and armoire. In addition to objects, actions are also replaced by words: "personage éclatant de rire" (person laughing fit to burst) and "cris d'oiseaux" (bird calls). Each word is situated in an amorphous field and all fields of words are interconnected, as the juxtaposition of painted images would form connections between them. Here we see what happens when art is reduced to (or replaced by) literary description. He explores this idea of 'interchangeability' and 'replaceability' between words and images further in a pictorial poem, *Words and Images* (fig. VIII).

None of this is to say that one is not meant to think when confronted with a Magritte painting, or any piece of art for that matter. Magritte certainly did not intend for a lackadaisical viewing of his art, nor for a purely personalized interpretation. He wanted to provoke thought; to raise questions and confront reality as it is, as we as a culture understand it. But his questions were much greater than the meaning of an apple. It's not important what the painting is, it's what it does – the process that it sets in motion. He wanted to

provoke an investigative journey and confrontation of symbolic reality as we accept it. He wanted to reveal what lay hidden beneath reality. What is there behind our understanding of reality; what other realities exist? Instead of asking what does this image mean, one might ask, “What is hidden behind this image?” Indeed, paintings like *The Living Mirror* present two images, the image painted, and the imaginary pictorial image hidden beneath. As Magritte put it, “An unknown picture of the shade is called forth the by a known picture of the light.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, by asking, “What lay beneath this image?” we are asking, “What is hidden behind reality?” The answer is unknown. It is the journey to find it that counts; that is the end in itself.

Magritte continued to investigate the inadequacy and misrepresentation in symbolism and language through his series of paintings in which he juxtaposed image and word. Some manifestations of the unrepresentable that we have discussed in film and photography have been that of a feeling or a presence divined from an opposing duality of objects and images within the frame, i.e. the two opposing courtiers in *Ivan the Terrible* or the nuns’ presence amongst the soldiers and rubble in a war torn Nicaragua. There, the obtuse and the punctum represent the indefinable, indescribable quality of an image that strikes us in the evocation of something beyond symbolism. It is a reality where language and semiotics fall short in representation. Magritte presents another opposing duality: an image and a seemingly false statement representing it. In *The Use of Words I*<sup>62</sup> (fig. IX), Magritte presents a painting of a pipe with the inscription below it “This is not a pipe.” On first encounter, this image strikes us because of the glaring untruth of the statement. But, upon further consideration, the

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<sup>61</sup> Jacques Meuris, *Magritte* (New York: Taschen, 1997), 127.

<sup>62</sup> This painting has also come to be known popularly by the title, *This is Not a Pipe (Ceci n’est pas une pipe)*. There exists another version of this painting which is almost identical which bears the title, *The Treason of Images (La trahison des images)*, painted in 1928/29. Conversely, there is at least one other painting by Magritte entitled *The Use of Words (L’Usage de las parole)* which bears no resemblance to the painting discussed here. This interchanging of images and titles is something Magritte did quite often. Indeed, it marks a good example of his call to attention of the arbitrary nature of linguistic signifiers.

statement is understood to be absolutely true. By painting an image of a pipe with the inscription “This is not a pipe”, Magritte 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. 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 landscape 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 as an 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’s philosophy toward language and symbolism was shared with notable linguistic philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although Magritte never studied the texts of Wittgenstein and Saussure,<sup>63</sup> many parallels can be drawn between their philosophies concerning the arbitrary nature of language. Wittgenstein wrote:

It can never express the common characteristic of two objects that we designate them by the same name but otherwise by two different ways of designation, for, since names are arbitrary, we might also choose different names, and where, then, would be the common element in the designations? [...] It is to be remembered that names are not things but classes: 'A' is the same letter as 'A.'<sup>64</sup>

Wittgenstein’s predecessor, Ferdinand de Saussure pioneered the structural linguistics, defining the signifier/signified dyad, the structure at the heart of Magritte’s word/image

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<sup>63</sup> Hammacher, *Magritte*, 27.

<sup>64</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961), 104. Quoted in A.M. Hammacher, *Magritte* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985), 28.

paintings as well as this entire treatise. It is difficult to not imagine Magritte's work when reading Saussure:

The link uniting that which signifies (the acoustic image) with what is signified (the concept) is arbitrary, or again, since we understand by means of a sign, that is, the total resulting from the association of a signifier with the signified, we may say more simply: the linguistic sign is arbitrary.<sup>65</sup>

Magritte's aim in his word/image paintings was the same as that in his other paintings: to disrupt the status quo and get the viewer to investigate the paradox at hand: a label that does not match the object, an inscription that counters the image, objects seemingly out of place. He did not want the viewer to conjure up a concrete meaning for his paintings but rather to behold the mystery presented; the mystery of the unknown, of reality unrealized. Magritte wished to escape the crutch of verbalized thought in order to liberate it and open the way to authentic revelation.

When considering Magritte's work, Hammacher writes of using "unthought-like thoughts," a term Nicholas Roukes uses in *Art Synectics*. These are the ideas and experiences we cannot or have no need to nail down into words. They are thoughts that escape verbal signification and reduction. It is the unthought-like thought which can behold the mystery for it has no need to be tethered with course reasoning or described with knotted tongue. The mystery reminds us of what lay outside of symbolic understanding – that grid that we lay over reality in order to compartmentalize it, to harness it, to understand it. Like sand through a sieve, there is experience which goes uncategorized with verbal language and signs. But it

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<sup>65</sup> Georges Mounin, *Saussure* (Paris: Seghers, 1968), 110-11. Quoted in A.M. Hammacher, *Magritte* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985), 29.

is easy to only pay attention to what we recognize in symbolic reality and push away the unfamiliar. “That which is the un-thought...becomes a factor in ever more urgent questions about the possibility of a life and existence no longer entirely covered by words and thoughts. The task is to lift the veil lying over the unconscious, to lose oneself in silence, or to listen to its vague whispers.”<sup>66</sup>

Magritte probably would have favoured this idea of the un-thought when pondering his paintings, as he read Foucault’s *The Order of Things* quite enthusiastically in his later years.<sup>67</sup> The title may have caught his eye as it is the same title Magritte gave to an exhibition of his work in New York City.<sup>68</sup> In it, Foucault describes one’s relation to the un-thought as the Other, as one’s twin who remains in his shadow, in the dark. Here lurks the unthought-like thoughts that cannot be put into words or be grasped in any concrete way yet still exists within us as human experience. These are the thoughts evoked from the mystery, the punctum, the obtuse; thoughts which reside more in feeling than in concrete logic, thoughts that cannot be represented with verbal signifiers and go unrepresented. These are the un-thoughts which remain hidden in the dark of man’s shadow, as the hidden painting whose presence is called forth by the seen painting. This shadow man cast as he emerged in the field of knowledge, into the symbolic realm of signifiers which cast their net over reality in order to define it yet always allowing the surplus to fall through its grasp. The un-thought is the by-product; the shadow cast as light shines upon the symbolic realm of reality. It is the mysterious Other that man keeps in the dark for fear of the unknown, yet always close at hand. To Foucault, the true undertaking of thought is to end this alienation, to bring man as close to these shadowy thoughts as possible, and thereby reconciling man with his true essence. It is not the rational symbolized thoughts that mark man’s essence for these are

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<sup>66</sup> Hammacher, *Magritte*, 32.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>68</sup> Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, ed. James Harkness, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 2.

constructed outside himself within a language that developed without him. It is the un-thought and man's ability to behold such thoughts that float above verbal constructs that marks man's essence. To bury such non-symbolic thoughts and experience is to hide one's true self lurking in the shadows. Foucault names the paradox we have been investigating appropriately the *un-thought* as he struggles to reconcile the thought which is not a thought:

How can man think what he does not think, inhabit as though by a mute occupation something that eludes him, animate with a kind of frozen movement that figure of himself that takes the form of a stubborn exteriority? [...] How can he be the subject of a language that for thousands of years has been formed without him, a language whose organization escapes him, whose meaning sleeps an almost invincible sleep in the words he momentarily activates by means of discourse, and within which he is obliged, from the very outset, to lodge his speech and thought, as though they were doing no more than animate, for a brief period, one segment of that web of innumerable possibilities? [...] [It is a question of] the resumption in a clear philosophical awareness of that whole realm of unaccounted-for experiences in which man does not recognize himself.<sup>69</sup>

Foucault became quite a fan of Magritte as Magritte did Foucault. The two men mentioned each other in their writings and even exchanged letters between them. Foucault wrote an essay entitled, *This is Not a Pipe*<sup>70</sup> which dissected this very image. It is partly due to this kinship that Hammacher so feels the un-thought is an appropriate way to perceive

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<sup>69</sup> ———, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), 323.

<sup>70</sup> Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*.

Magritte's work.<sup>71</sup> It is through the un-thought that we may come closer not only to the mystery, not only to art such as Magritte's, but also to ourselves.

To behold the mystery takes a kind of leap of faith, to look outside one's comfortable familiar surroundings and consider what is uncomfortable, the unknown. Ben-Zion has claimed that, "To the majority and average only the known counts - the tangible, the things that you can grasp and count and estimate and appropriate."<sup>72</sup> This is most likely true on a day to day basis. But it is reasonable to say that most people have had sensations which they could not explain in words, whether that moment was in beholding piece of art or simply standing still. That mystery which is not known to us, Ben-Zion calls the *great unknown*. He too professes of a hidden reality which lurks behind what we see in our symbolic reality. "The creative person sees the great unknown in everything around him and tries to penetrate it..."<sup>73</sup> The creative person (the artist, the thinker) pierces through the cobwebs of the familiar symbolic reality around him to uncover the great unknown, a kind of role reversal of the punctum which punctures through the symbolic to pierce the viewer. There is almost something mystical in this notion of the great unknown, how it is everywhere and behind all things. Indeed, many will liken an especially moving art exhibit or music concert to a 'religious experience.' Although Ben-Zion never mentions God, Adonai, or any other religious term in reference to the great unknown, it is reasonable to read a spiritual context from this concept.<sup>74</sup> He does not define the concept of the great unknown in strict terms, religious or not, but likens it more to simply a kind of reality behind all things, hidden to

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<sup>71</sup> Hammacher, *Magritte*, 37.

<sup>72</sup> Ben-Zion, *Reflections on Symbolism and the Abstract: Two Essays*, 46.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>74</sup> Ben-Zion mentions death as being part of the great unknown. As he puts it, the cowardly person faces this great unknown by suddenly becoming religious in the eleventh hour with bargaining and repentance in the hope of escaping the consequences of his mis-lived life. Although, I don't believe the Ben-Zion is simply using the great unknown as another name for God, I do believe he sees the great unknown as a unified concept that lives outside of symbolic representation of which a God-like figure or perhaps a notion of the afterlife is but a part. He is primarily speaking as an artist in terms of the great unknown which in this context refers to that which art evokes that cannot be reduced to words or symbols. For some this may translate as a spiritual or religious experience, for others, not. *Ibid.*, 46-47.

those who only see the familiar symbolic, but apparent to those who are willing to consider a reality beyond the symbolic, the mystery behind what we see, and penetrate the great unknown. "Those penetrations into the great unknown are the creations of art and human thought."<sup>75</sup> So it is through art and through our senses<sup>76</sup> with which we perceive art that we penetrate the great unknown, the mystery beyond the symbolic.

To the religious person, the great unknown may include God or some other spiritual concept as it does for Ben-Zion. For the secular person, it may manifest simply as experience that transcends the known ordinary, as unborn reality masked by manifested reality. To Magritte this probably manifested more in the realm of modern physics than any religious being. Suzi Gablik contends that Magritte's images of unborn realities reflect a shift in mentality from Newtonian mechanics which had postulated a permanent external world, fixed and independent of human beings, to formulations of relativity and quantum theory which cast doubt on the absolute value of laws.<sup>77 78</sup> Magritte's images challenged the idea of a one true reality, the reality that we see in front of us. His paintings show separate periods of time as coexisting at once, gravity suspended, spaces cut and spliced; in short, a world view that challenges any universal physical truth. Magritte's paintings showed not the impossible, but endless possibilities beyond the symbolic.

These possibilities mark a consciousness that reaches beyond the known to the fulfilment of the mystery, to (paradoxically) the 'void'. But it is a void only to those who are afraid of embracing a reality outside of secure language and symbols. To those who do embrace it, the mystery, the non-symbolic is fulfilment of a realized reality. What appears to be true because of its familiarity can be an oversimplified and limited notion of the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>76</sup> Ben-Zion writes that we use our five senses as instruments to penetrate the great unknown. Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> For example, the discovery that the atom does not abide by Newtonian mechanics as had once been thought.

<sup>78</sup> Gablik, *Magritte*.168

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 wilful disruption of the usual certainties will liberate thought and open the way to authentic revelation.”<sup>79</sup> We progress when we are shaken, when we are punctured, not when we are comfortable in the familiar. For Magritte, these encounters with the unknown, with the un-thought, are the moments of panic which count for they transcend the mediocrity of coded thought.

Magritte chose to think of himself not even as a painter, but as a thinker whose medium was paint. What motivated him in creating his images as well as viewing the images of others was the “ascendancy of poetry over painting.”<sup>80</sup> He was less concerned with the mastery of painterly techniques for mere aesthetic or representational quality and more concerned with evoking a feeling that goes beyond linguistic description. Indeed his highly representational style was a tool in presenting, through the known, the unknown. And yet, the words on these pages are a paradoxical attempt at just that. So perhaps it is possible to represent the unrepresentable with words. Magritte’s ultimate aim was to reflect a sense of “poetry” in his images. He himself was a great admirer and avid reader of many philosophers and poets including Edgar Allen Poe whose words influenced Magritte’s philosophy of the mystery greatly.<sup>81</sup> The idea of reaching beyond symbolism can traverse media from film to art to even literature itself. The following section will explore this ongoing paradox of how words may come to represent the unrepresentable.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>80</sup> Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, 2.

<sup>81</sup> Hammacher writes that Magritte was influenced by Poe in his remarks that confront the non-thought or, “everything that falls outside the confines of thought formulated in signs and words. Such is how Magritte has described the mystery. Hammacher, *Magritte*, 30.

### Beyond Symbolism in Literature

This is where the paradox of writing about the non-symbolic, what lies beyond symbolism, comes to a head. We have investigated how visual media can, through sensual visual imagery, transcend linguistic interpretation and connect us to the non-symbolic through unthought-like thoughts that defy language and codes. Barthes presented the obtuse and the punctum, Žižek wrote of *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz* in reference to the symbolic film screen, and Magritte painted to evoke the mystery, all signifiers without signifieds; in other words, signifiers that have no concrete meaning in the symbolic realm yet still represent something beyond what we know in our understandable reality. This is the function of visual art, to present what language cannot. And now it seems that we're backpedalling by investigating how the written word can indeed evoke non-symbolic experience. Perhaps it is more like coming full circle, for the same principle holds true – linguistic interpretation of such works of art, be they visual or verbal, reduces the creation and betrays what Magritte called the “poetry” of art. Now the paradox has doubled over, as if imploding in on itself as we journey through the written word, a symbolic unit of representation, and how it can present the unrepresentable. What better place to start than with poetry itself.

René Magritte made only one trip to New York City in his lifetime. In 1965, Magritte's work was exhibited at the Modern Museum of Art. Yet, he had another purpose in taking this trip: to visit the home of Edgar Allen Poe, now preserved as the Edgar Allen Poe Cottage by the Bronx Historical Society. One can find many reasons why Magritte felt such a kinship to the nineteenth century writer: his unusual fantasy landscapes, macabre tales of perversion, mystery and death. But perhaps their greatest link was a mutual affinity for the “poetic intellect; that intellect which we now feel to have been the most exalted of all; since those truths which to us were of the most enduring importance could only be reached by that analogy which speaks in proof-tones to the imagination alone, and to the unaided reason

bears no weight...”<sup>82</sup> The poetic intellect ventures into areas little explored and finds pleasure, not fear, in the unknown. It is the poetic intellect that harbours unthought-like thoughts. Though symbolic language was Poe’s medium, he expressed the transcendence of the unthought over coded intellectuality which is limited to a standardized verbal structure.

In an untitled poem dedicated to Miss Marie Louise Shew, Poe writes:

Not long ago, the writer of these lines,  
 In the mad pride of intellectuality,  
 Maintained “the power of words” – denied that ever  
 A thought arose within the human brain,  
 Beyond the utterance of the human tongue.

But that boast is made a mockery by the presence of

Unthought-like thoughts that are the souls of thought,  
 Richer, far wilder, far diviner visions  
 Than even the seraph harper, Israfel,  
 (Who has "the sweetest voice of all God's creatures,")  
 Could hope to utter. And I! my spells are broken.  
 The pen falls powerless from my shivering hand.<sup>83</sup>

Poe, a wordsmith, writes that not only can thought transcend words, but such thoughts are the souls of thought, the essence of thought, perhaps the essence of humanity itself. He

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<sup>82</sup> Edgar Allen Poe, "Edgar Allan Poe: The Colloquy of Monos and Una," Eserver Books Collection, <http://books.eserver.org/fiction/poe/colloquy.html>.

<sup>83</sup> ———, "To Marie Louise Shew," The Literature Network, <http://www.online-literature.com/poe/2141/>.

downplayed the idea of conveying a message through poetry and was more concerned with artistic qualities and techniques - art for art's sake. What Ken Mogg claimed to be the function of the MacGuffin, T.S. Elliot said of the function of meaning in a poem: to be like the bone thrown by a burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind, while the poem goes about its own, deeper business.<sup>84</sup> Poe wrote of didacticism as the worst of heresies in *The Poetic Principle*, an essay on literary criticism and theory. The 'Poetic Sentiment' should evoke more than just a relay of information, morals, or 'Truth.' This principle extends beyond literature to all media of art and is based in aesthetics, in the sensory rather than the symbolic exchange of information, alluding to

the heresy of The Didactic. It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a morals and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. [...] We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem's sake, and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true poetic dignity and force:--but the simple fact is that would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble, than this very poem, this poem per se, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Mogg, *The Alfred Hitchcock Story*, 101.

<sup>85</sup> Edgar Allen Poe, "The Poetic Principle," The Literature Network, <http://www.online-literature.com/poe/2204/>.

Any meaning conveyed in literature, according to Poe, should be an undercurrent flowing just beneath the surface of the text. Obvious meanings, he wrote, cease to be art.<sup>86</sup> So, to unduly impose symbolic meaning into art or thought is to rob them of their essence. Art for art's sake; or as Magritte might have said, "art for poetry's sake." Magritte painted for poetry the same way Poe wrote for it. It is perhaps this 'poetic sentiment,' which breaks through symbolic tethers, that brought Magritte to Poe, across continents and centuries.

Although Poe wrote about unthought-like thoughts and ideas that have no concrete literary meaning, he did so using understandable linguistic verse. He presented tales of mystery using familiar words much like Magritte did by painting familiar objects. However, poetry can be used to evoke mystery and unthought-like thoughts by making the language itself more subjective and less understandable. This leaves the overall meaning or impression more intuited by the reader and the experience a sensory one rather than purely rational. Such is the case with Lewis Carroll's nonsensical poem *Jabberwocky*. In it, Carroll fuses understandable words with portmanteau and esoteric words that Carroll made up himself:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
 Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
 All mimsy were the borogoves,  
 And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
 The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
 Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun

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<sup>86</sup> Richard Wilbur, "The House of Poe," in *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Regan (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967), 99.

The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:

Long time the manxome foe he sought --

So rested he by the Tumtum tree,

And stood awhile in thought

And as in uffish thought he stood,

The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,

Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,

And burred as it came!

One, two! One, two! and through and through

The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!

He left it dead, and with its head

He went galumphing back.

"And has thou slain the Jabberwock?

Come to my arms, my beamish boy!

O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"

He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

All mimsy were the borogoves,

And the mome raths outgrabe.<sup>87</sup>

The verse that begins and ends the poem contains nouns, verbs and adjectives that are all of Lewis' creation. The words are less understandable simply because they do not exist in the English language. However, they evoke ideas through their sensory characteristics, making them less arbitrary than so called sense words. Carroll had definitions for some words such as *slithy* which is a portmanteau made up of slimy and lithe. Other words Carroll invented like *galumphing* had no definitive meaning<sup>88</sup> yet one can sense a connotation of a victorious kind of gallop from the context and the onomatopoeic quality of the word. Indeed it is the sensory nature of the poem that allows the reader to divine ideas and unthought-like thoughts pertaining to the poem rather than the author imposing a rigid meaning. Such a poem allows ideas to fly in the mind untethered by stagnant definition. Alice says as much upon reciting the poem in Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*: "It seems very pretty, but it's *rather* hard to understand! Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas only I don't exactly know what they are!"<sup>89</sup> These ideas are the unrepresentable unthought-like thoughts represented by 'unword-like words.' As Jean Mitry puts it, "The nonsensical vocabulary [of *Jabberwocky*] opens onto intuitive connotations, onto 'the expressed of the inexpressible'."<sup>90</sup>

Such is not only the case with poetry but can exist within the novel as well. James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is an example of a sensory novel made up of unword-like words or nonce words. *Wake* was Joyce's final novel and took him seventeen years to write. It's taken some even longer to read due to the fact that it is written in an un-understandable polyglot

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<sup>87</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1992), 168-69.

<sup>88</sup> The word has since entered the English language, probably due to the popularity of *Jabberwocky*. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, its meaning is to march on exultingly with irregular bounding movements. Oxford English Dictionary, "Galumph," Oxford English Dictionary, <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50092068?>

<sup>89</sup> Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, 169.

<sup>90</sup> Jean Mitry, *Semiotics and the Analysis of Film*, trans. Christopher King (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 228.

idiom of disfigured words, anagrams, portmanteau and puns against an armature of straightforward structured prose. The book's poetic, almost musical language allows for a more sensory perception of the words, rather than a usual literal reading, as if they were written to be read aloud:

riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of the shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.

Sir Tristram, violer d'amores, fr'over the short sea, had passencore rearrived from North Amorica on this side the scraggy isthmus of Europe Minor to wielderfight his penisolate war: nor had topsawyer's rocks by the stream Oconee exaggerated themselfe to Laurens County's gorgios while they went doublin their mumper all the time: nor avoice from afire bellowsed mishe mishe to tauftauf thuartpeatrick...<sup>91</sup>

*Finnegans Wake* was written in this way as to not impose a fixed meaning, but allow for a flexible poetic reading with some referential autonomy. The relationship between signifier and what is signified is once again blurred and becomes ambiguous, mysterious as if the words themselves hang within a dream. Indeed, Joyce could not even signify the book until it was almost finished, leaving it (un)labelled as *A New Unnamed Work* when it first appeared in serialized form in 1924. It was subsequently titled simply *A Work in Progress* from 1928 to 1937 until it was published as *Finnegans Wake* in 1939. Even now, the chapters remain unnumbered and unnamed. The interpretation of the book will vary depending not only on one's prior exposure to Joyce's obscure references, but also to one's ability to let go of a conscious rigid meaning and fall into a more fluid meta-reading<sup>92</sup> intuited

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<sup>91</sup> James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (Whitstable: Riverside Press, 1975), 3.

<sup>92</sup> Meta here means beyond, so a meta-reading would be a reading beyond a solid symbolic reading where each word or phrase has a definite meaning.

through a kind of stream of consciousness. As with visual art or poetry, if *Finnegans Wake* were meant for nothing more than to be translated into sensible English prose, than the poetry of Joyce's seventeen year labour is lost. Many *Wake* scholars including Clive Hart express a similar concern:

My principal objection to the logical and rational method of reading *FW* is that it may lead to the expulsion of poetry. I do not wish to equate poetry with disorder, but as soon as we start saying to ourselves that certain readings will not allow sentences to parse properly, we should ask whether we are not trying to turn *FW* into a prose palimpsest, each level of which can be stated in normal grammatical English. This is a grave literary sin. It seems evident that many readings of *FW* which are wholly acceptable will not 'make sense' in any ordinary way. [...] It is certainly possible, by means of a reversal of Joyce's process of composition, rationally to extract and isolate the deposits of discrete pieces of denotation from which the book was originally compounded. I am not suggesting that this pursuit will lead to a denial of the interrelationships of constituent parts, not that its exponents claim the whole to be no more than the sum of the parts. What I am suggesting, however, is that it constitutes a most restrictive form of fallacious intentionalism.<sup>93</sup>

This is by no means an argument for a purely personalized reading of *Finnegans Wake* drawing upon the Intentional Fallacy. Indeed, Joyce's intent should be taken very seriously. Hidden within his elusive language are numerous yet fleeting allusions to various cultural mythologies, literature, and scientific theories that Joyce surely wanted to be

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<sup>93</sup> Clive Hart, "The Elephant in the Belly: Exegesis of *Finnegans Wake*," in *A Wake Digest*, ed. Clive Hart and Fritz Senn (London: Methuen and Company Limited, 1968), 7.

investigated. For example, in the opening line of the book, “commodius vicus” refers to Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico who believed in a theory of cyclical history which he elucidated in his work *La Scienza Nuova*.<sup>94</sup> Joyce refers to him again several times alluding to a cyclical view of history and confirming his debt to Vico’s theories: “The Vico road goes round and round to meet where terms begin.”<sup>95</sup> The first line of the book is indeed and continuation of the last line, making the book cyclical in itself.<sup>96</sup>

Many *Wake* scholars have written their own translations, attempting to decode Joyce’s cryptic text. And yet, the complexity of Joyce’s writing can never be translated as one might translate another arbitrary language, horizontally phrase for phrase. The layers are so complex and vast that each phrase is like a porthole to another dimension, calling for a more three dimensional vertical reading. But many readings will have different dimensions and they won’t all lead to the same places. That was also Joyce’s intent: to expand meaning as well as to obscure it, using a language that is “devious, which conceals and reveals secrets.”<sup>97</sup>

*Finnegans Wake* can be viewed as a surrealistic piece of literature since its prose reflects a dream itself, living somewhere between the conscious and unconscious. Actions that take place are quickly abandoned and locations suddenly switch, as if in a Buñuel film. Even the character names change as characters in a dream might shift without warning or concern, as is totally natural and accepted within a dream. Wake scholars have even debated over who is indeed doing the dreaming – one of the characters, Joyce himself, or the collective universe of people. The point is that *Finnegans Wake* is not meant to be understandable in a typical literary way. This may be upsetting to those who cannot see a

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<sup>94</sup> Donald Phillip Verene, "Vico's Scienza Nuova and Joyce's Finnegans Wake," *Philosophy and Literature* 21.2 (1997): 397.

<sup>95</sup> Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 452.

<sup>96</sup> The spliced sentence would therefore read: “A way a lone a last a loved a long the riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of the shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.” *Ibid.*, 628-3.

<sup>97</sup> Margot Norris, *The Decentered Universe of Finnegans Wake* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 120.

reality beyond their familiar symbolic reality, for whom everything must be nailed down into ideas which have already been filed and organized. Joyce has commented on such detractors: "I can't understand some of my critics... They say [*Finnegans Wake* is] obscure. They compare it, of course, with *Ulysses*. But the action of *Ulysses* was chiefly during the daytime, and the action of my new work takes place chiefly at night. It's natural things should not be so clear at night, isn't it now?"<sup>98</sup> In this reality, words do not represent solitary concrete ideas; and the musical vocabulary should be appreciated for its sensual quality, devaluing any single meaning, as the road of the journey arrives at no single destination but diverges off into countless other journeys.

There have been and will be scholars who will argue for their definitive reading of *Finnegans Wake* as though it is a tangible treasure that has finally been unearthed. Others will insist on a purely personal reading which will hinge on one's own mind and experiences. *Finnegans Wake* can allow for a spectrum of readings. What is important is what the poetic unword-like words tap into: a level of the mind that is unrestrained by understandable verbal constructs; that has not compartmentalized all thought into rigid structures and has no need to do so. It is not disorder; it is simply a consciousness that has no need to distinguish between order and disorder, where experience exists un-translated and un-separated, full and complete without the need to explain itself. As Joyce himself decreed, "One great part of every human existence is passed in a state which cannot be rendered sensible by the use of wideawake language, cutanddry grammar and goahead plot."<sup>99</sup> Such experience dwells in a part of every human mind, whether it is acknowledged or not. This is the place of unthought-like thoughts that the mystery of art taps into, where the punctum pierces and the lyrics of *Finnegans Wake* flow undammed along the riverrun.

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<sup>98</sup> Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 590.

<sup>99</sup> Joyce wrote this in reference to what would become *Finnegans Wake* in a letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, 24 November 1926. Allen B. Ruch, "James Joyce Quotes," *The Modern Word*, [http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/joyce\\_quotes.html](http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/joyce_quotes.html)

*Finnegans Wake* has provided the source for a number of musical adaptations, its sing-song lyrics and lack of fixed meaning perhaps more suited to music than other print or film media. After all, people are quite willing to listen to music, an abstract form, but show them an abstract film or a poetic text and they immediately start asking what it means.<sup>100</sup> For example, John Cage's *Roaratorio: an Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake* takes words from the text and rearranges them in mesostic form, a type of poem he invented in which he wrote 'through' texts using his own predetermined formula. The text is Cage's *Writing for the Second Time through Finnegans Wake*, one of a series of writings that he did based on Joyce's novel. Cage referred to *Finnegans Wake* as one of the books he's always loved and never read.<sup>101</sup> He read from this text as part of a performance called *Empty Words*<sup>102</sup> in 1974. In conceiving of *Empty Words*, Cage wanted to deconstruct language in order to liberate it and thereby liberate thought from such constructs, preserving the poetry of words. Language is a structure made and developed outside oneself. Therefore, by translating thought into this foreign structure, we are robbing our thoughts of their essence, turning one's own creation into a foreign expression. Cage went as far as to say that this has been used as a means of controlling people, as can happen when you 'put words into someone's mouth.' In an interview he gave just before his *Empty Words* performance, Cage said:

The *Empty Words* begins, because I - the way I thought of the title is that I let it be known to my friends and even strangers as I wandered around the country that what was interesting me was making English less understandable. Because when it's understandable, people control one another and poetry disappears, and as I was

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<sup>100</sup> Paraphrased in part from an interview with film historian William Moritz. *Abstract Cinema*, directed by Keith Griffiths (UK: Channel Four, 1993) in at 6:30.

<sup>101</sup> John Cage, "Writing for the Second Time through Finnegans Wake, (1978)," (UbuWeb, 2008).in at :20.

<sup>102</sup> This is also the name of a collection of writings by Cage which includes *Writing for the Second Time through Finnegans Wake*. ———, *Empty Words: Writings '73-'78* (London: Boyars, 1980).

talking to my friend Norman O. Brown, he said syntax, which is what makes things understandable, is the army - is the arrangement of the army. So what we're doing when we're making language un-understandable, is actually we're demilitarizing it so that we can do our living. It's a transition from language to music, certainly.<sup>103</sup>

When there is such a narrow understanding of meaning between signifier and signified, poetry and art disappear. Language becomes a confining construct rather than a freeing form of expression. Cage's writings were a way for him to free our most common form of communication and to challenge the signifier/signified relationship that we take for granted. As with *Finnegans Wake*, Cage's poems have no fixed meaning. The verbal signifiers have no signified; they are words left open, empty – empty words. As a consequence, many people could be seen leaving Cage's performances before they ended, because they were bothered by the fact that they didn't understand them. Through *Empty Words*, Cage set out to represent the un-understandable, the unrepresentable. The fact that people would walk out or talk or even sing recognizable melodies during his performances shows that he succeeded. It also shows a common reaction people have when confronted with the unfamiliar, something that cannot be represented through familiar words and symbols. As Magritte would say, they are afraid because they don't understand what they are supposed to think. By rejecting the mystery, in this case the mystery of the sound rather than the mystery of the image, they express a wish that everything be understandable. But those who do not reject the mystery, behold the un-thought, the essence of thought.

It is not only unword-like words which can represent the unrepresentable in literature. As we have seen, the surrealist movement was particularly prolific in presenting art that

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<sup>103</sup> Internet\_Archive, "Cage Interview and Performance Empty Words August 1974," [http://ia310124.us.archive.org/2/items/Cage\\_interview\\_and\\_performance\\_Empty\\_words\\_August\\_1974\\_A002A/Cage\\_interview\\_and\\_performance\\_Empty\\_words\\_August\\_1974\\_A002A.wav](http://ia310124.us.archive.org/2/items/Cage_interview_and_performance_Empty_words_August_1974_A002A/Cage_interview_and_performance_Empty_words_August_1974_A002A.wav).

escaped rational symbolic meaning. But the surrealist movement began with literature, with poems, prose and plays by writers such as Apollinaire, Lautréamont, and the movement's leader André Breton. Surrealist writers like Louis Aragon and Philippe Soupault experimented with 'automatic' writing, poems and even novels<sup>104</sup> written in a state of deliberate suspension of conscious control, a kind of stream of consciousness, bypassing conforming their thoughts into 'understandable' prose.

Apart from experimental writing, the surrealists were also heavily influenced by mainstream detective novels and mysteries. Perhaps the most popular of these was *Fantômas*, a narrative thriller which first appeared in serial form and then as a series of novels beginning in 1913. The character of Fantômas, like Lautréamont's Maldoror, was a genius of crime and hero to Magritte and the Surrealist movement. The significance of *Fantômas* lay not in the style of the literary medium for it was written in straightforward prose meant to appeal to the masses, but rather in the content of the eponymous character. The idea of operating outside tangible reality and a signifier without a signified is evident in the phantasmal criminal, for he seems to operate outside reality with no concrete form, no substantial reality, almost as a phantom (hence the name Fantômas). He navigates outside of the normal contingencies of time and space and yet his presence is always felt, or rather, divined.

Even in a series of novels, Fantômas was above literary description. As the character President Bonnet proclaims in the first book, "It is impossible to say exactly what or to know who Fantômas is. He often assumes the form and personality of some particular and even well-known individual; sometimes he assumes the forms of two human beings at the same time...he is impossible to catch or identify. He is nowhere and everywhere at once, his

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<sup>104</sup> *Les Champs Magnétiques (The Magnetic Fields)* by André Breton and Philippe Soupault, famed as the first work of literary Surrealism, is written using this automatic writing technique.

shadow hovers above the strangest mysteries...’’<sup>105</sup> Fantômas manoeuvres and even seems to exist outside of reality. He is intangible, a mystery. Through disguises and subterfuge, he cannot be represented through any graspable form. His effect is real yet he escapes symbolic reality, entering it when propelled, as a phantom might cross through a wall from the unreal to the real and back again, his presence fleeting. He takes action seemingly without substantial body, like a ghost. Yet he is known to exist. He is not on the city streets, but he lurks below, hovers above, punctures through our symbolic reality. He is not seen, his presence is divined. He is a signifier without a signified.

It is no mystery as to why Fantômas was a hero to the surrealists, for he was beyond symbolic tangible reality, beyond real. Perhaps even more than that, Fantômas stirred up trouble, disturbing the peace and quiet of everyday life. The usual hero captures the bad guy and restores law and order – the status quo. But Magritte and the surrealists wanted to challenge the status quo and question fundamental beliefs. They were interested not in the expected but the unfamiliar, the mystery. This is what Fantômas signified. Magritte even based several paintings on the character, *The Backfire* (fig. X) based on the cover of the first book (fig. XI). Like a hidden secret, Fantômas lurks in the shadows appearing and disappearing like the obtuse, piercing through reality like the punctum. It is this quality Magritte captured so well in his portrait of the criminal genius, *The Savage* (fig. XII). The portrait would take on the fleeting quality of its subject, as it would disappear during the Second World War. Fantômas also embodied the perverse instinctual forces repressed and hidden from society. And yet, what is repressed will finally break through reality, like a hidden memory in the shadows of the mind. This is Fantômas, a remnant of another reality, outside the familiar symbolism of the world we see, the unrepresentable. Yet, we root for

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<sup>105</sup> Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre, *Fantômas* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1986), 14.

him; we want to see him escape his would be captor, so that this bit of the non-symbolic will live on and continue to disturb the status quo. Such is the state of the mind, functioning through the symbolic yet desiring to come closer to the unknown that escapes it. That is why people loved Fantômas, because the mind loves the unknown.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter concludes with the introduction of yet another paradox: How can the mind love the unknown and yet repress it as well? We live in a symbolic reality, one that is understood through language and symbols used to communicate one's needs in order that they may be fulfilled. So when drawn to the unknown, the non-symbolic, it is common to immediately start looking for ways to incorporate it into the symbolic, into something understandable. If we cannot, it can go repressed. But it still exists as the unrepresented, that which symbolism cannot reduce to a closed dyadic sign of a signifier representing a signified. This is the human experience that goes uncoded and even unacknowledged. The function of art is to evoke the unknown, to present what symbolic reality represses, what is beyond symbolism.

That is what ties the theories presented in this chapter together, the idea that art can signify what is beyond signification. Indeed, that is the essence of great art. To reduce it down to linguistic descriptors is to betray that essence. The Third Meaning, *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz*, the punctum, the unword: they are all empty signifiers, signifiers that do not signify anything in our understandable symbolic reality - signifiers without signifieds. What they do is illuminate a hole in the symbolic order, a void, the shadow cast by the sun's light upon the symbolic. They call attention to the mystery, a void only to those who are fearful of the unknown. But to those who embrace the unfamiliar, it is a surplus, an overflow, a fulfilment of experience that has no need to be broken down into a signifier/signified

structure. It is not feared but desired, as is the MacGuffin or the Unseen Character. By beholding what is unknown and un-understandable, by lifting the veil over hidden realities, we open the door to true revelation, rather than standing still within in a fixed structure. It is the poetic intellect that revels in the unthought-like thoughts where the mystery lingers.

Paradoxically, it is not only sensual media such as film, painting or music that can evoke experience that cannot be tethered by language, but also the written word itself. Both through straightforward prose as well as nonsensical writing, literature can express the inexpressible by filling our heads with ideas even if, like Alice in Wonderland, we don't know what they mean. Even verbal language, our most common and structured mode of communication can present the non-linguistic. Words can indeed evoke the unknown, as Fantômas is mystery personified. Unlike Barthes' claims, this presence of the mysterious unknown does not exist only in film, or photography, or even any formal art. It can happen at any moment in life, if we are aware enough to see it, confident enough to behold it, and open enough to be moved by it.

But a glaring question remains. How do we account for this level of the mind that revels in the mysteries of the unknown? If we are so reliant on symbolic structures to communicate needs, express desires, and navigate the world we live in, then how is it that our minds can even negotiate the idea of anything falling outside of that reality? What is the source of our un-thoughts? Art may evoke them but where do they hide? And what accounts for anything existing outside of a tangible symbolic structure? The answer can be found within the psychological structure of the mind as determined by Freud and later adapted by Lacan. As soon as man enters the symbolic realm, into the field of knowledge, he casts the shadow of the mystery where unthought-like thoughts dwell. It is indeed the process of symbolisation itself which creates this remnant of the unknown, what is beyond symbolism.

Art represents the unrepresentable. But where it hides and how it came to exist will be the focus of the following chapter.

## Figures

- (fig. I) Still from *Ivan the Terrible Pt. I* by Sergei Eisenstein (1944)  
Source: Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, p. 97).
- (fig. II) Koen Wessing, *Nicaragua*, 1979. Gelatin silver print, 10.8 x 15.9 in. / 27.5 x 40.3 cm. Reproduced from Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000), 22.
- (fig. III) Still from *The Lady Vanishes* by Alfred Hitchcock. The name Froy is marked on the glass window.  
Source: *The Lady Vanishes*, DVD, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1939; Los Angeles, CA: Delta Entertainment, 1999).
- (fig. IV) Still from *Pulp Fiction* by Quentin Tarantino. Vincent Vega played by John Travolta looks in amazement at the unidentifiable briefcase contents.  
Source: *Pulp Fiction*, DVD, directed by Quentin Tarantino (1994; London: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2002).
- (fig. V) James Van der Zee, *Family Portrait*, 1926.  
Reproduced from Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000), 44.
- (fig. VI) René Magritte, *The Son of Man*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 45.5 x 35". Collection Harry Torczyner, New York City. Reproduced from *The Art Exchange*, <http://theartexchange.blogspot.com>.
- (fig. VII) René Magritte, *The Living Mirror*, 1928/29. Oil on canvas, 54.2 x 73.5 cm. Private Collection. Reproduced from Jacques Meuris, *Magritte* (London: Taschen, 1997), 131.
- (fig. VIII) René Magritte, *Words and Images*, 1929. Ink on paper, *La Révolution surréaliste*, vol. 5, no. 12 (15 December 1929). English translation in the exhibition catalogue 'Words vs. Images', Sidney Janis Gallery, New York 1954. Reproduced from *Interchangeable Landscapes*, <http://atemporaryliquidsolution.blogspot.com/2007/05/rene-magritte-words-and-images.html>.
- (fig. IX) René Magritte, *The Use of Words I*, 1928/29. Oil on canvas, 21.5 x 28.5". Collection William N. Copley, New York City. Reproduced from *Not Reality*, <http://www.notreality.org/info.php>.
- (fig. X) René Magritte, *The Backfire*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 65 x 50 cm. Private Collection. Reproduced from Jacques Meuris, *Magritte* (London: Taschen, 1997), 44.
- (fig. XI) *Fantômas* book cover design by Jaye Zimet. See bibliography.
- (fig. XII) René Magritte, *The Savage*, c. 1928. Oil on canvas, Painting destroyed during the London blitz (photograph shows the artist, 1938). Reproduced from Jacques Meuris, *Magritte* (London: Taschen, 1997), 45.

I



II



III



IV



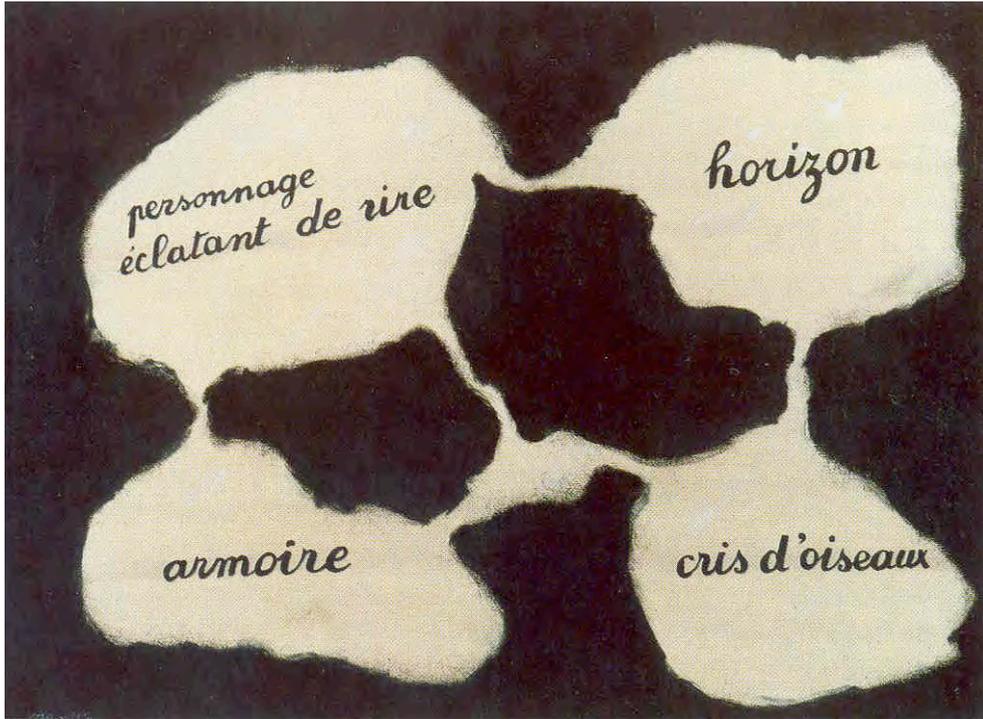
V



VI

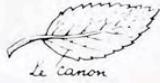


VII



VIII

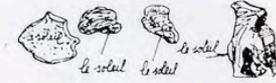
An object is not so attached to its name that one cannot find another for it which suits it better:



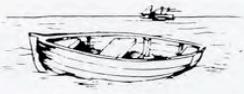
An image can take the place of a word in a statement:



Any shape whatsoever may replace the image of an object:



There are objects which do without a name:



An object can make one think that there are other objects behind it:



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



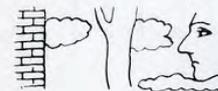
A word sometimes only serves to designate itself:



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



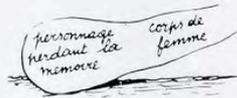
The visible contours of objects in reality touch each other as if forming a mosaic:



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



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



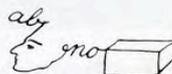
Vague figures have a meaning as necessary and as perfect as precise ones:



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



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



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



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



One sees images and words differently in a painting:



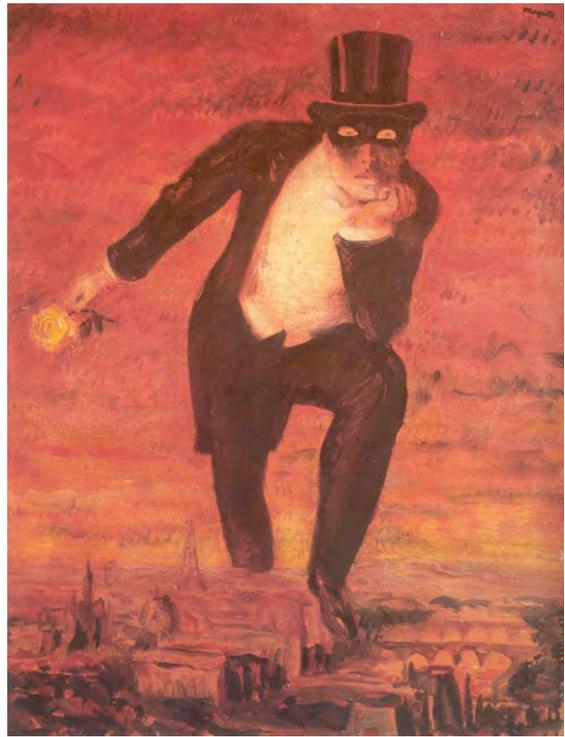
Or, indeed, the contrary:



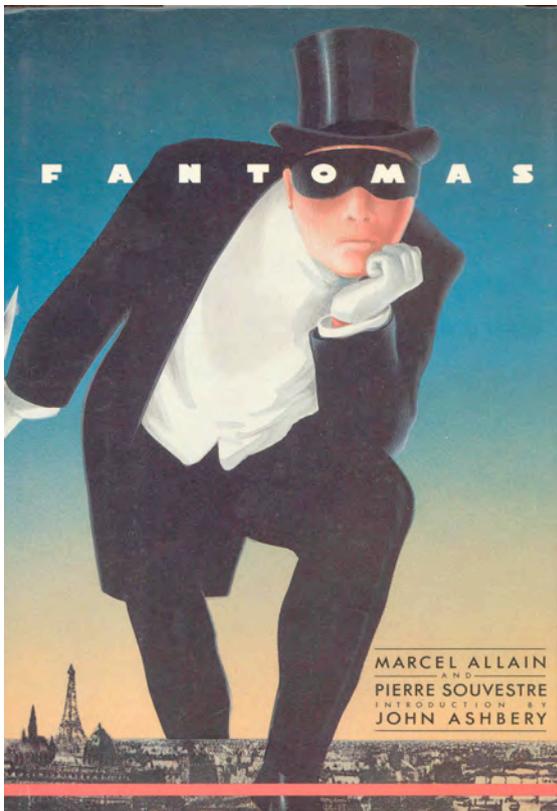
IX



X



XI



XII



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