

Visual Subversion and Ontological Self-Legislation: Artistic Autonomy in the Paintings of René Magritte

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Abstract: René Magritte's paintings are frequently interpreted as philosophical puzzles or psychoanalytic symbols. Such interpretive frameworks, however, subsume his practice under a heteronomous discursive model that prioritizes external translation of meaning, obscuring the internal mechanisms underpinning his pursuit of artistic autonomy. Drawing on the autonomy-heteronomy binary from theories of aesthetic modernity, this article analyses Magritte's work across three dimensions: formal construction, aesthetic judgment, and social-institutional function. It argues that Magritte's artistic autonomy rejects the path of abstract formalism. Instead, he achieves self-legislation by dismantling the internal logic of figural representation. His creative strategy dissolves painting's traditional narrative efficacy at the formal level; suspends viewers' ingrained habits of conceptual interpretation on the perceptual plane; and opens a space for non-instrumental cognitive critique as art's social mode of engagement. Magritte thereby unsettles Clement Greenberg's canonical equation between artistic autonomy and abstract medium-specific purity, demonstrating that figurative painting can equally attain ontological self-legislation for art. His body of work further offers a substantive response to Peter Bürger's well-known paradox of institutional autonomy within the historical avant-garde.

Keywords: Artistic Autonomy; René Magritte; Surrealism; Figurative Painting; Aesthetic Modernity.

1. Introduction

René Magritte is one of the core representative painters of Surrealism, and he has always been a key research object in the field of modern art; this popularity mainly comes from his unique painting style, which breaks rational thinking and contains many contradictory visual features. Most of the current academic studies focus on the implied metaphorical meaning of his paintings and his unique surrealist painting characteristics; only a small number of studies have systematically linked his painting creation to the research on artistic autonomy. This insufficient research status stems from the fixed interpretation habit in academic circles; most art critics regard Magritte's visual works as a series of symbolic puzzles that need further analysis and explanation. This common research method makes the essential attributes of his paintings subject to external interpretation rules, and this analysis mode believes that the core meaning of paintings is derived from external philosophical ideas and psychoanalytic theories. These one-sided research perspectives ignore the independent visual logic of Magritte's works, and this unique visual logic is the key to shaping the essential value of his paintings.

Anglophone Magritte scholarship has long emphasized psychoanalytic and philosophical exegesis of his dream-like scenes. Artistic autonomy, meanwhile, is most often discussed in relation to abstract modernism in the wake of Clement Greenberg. Figurative surrealist painting has rarely been examined within autonomy-heteronomy debates. Against this background, the present article situates Magritte's practice within the theoretical tension between autonomy and heteronomy central to aesthetic-modernity discourse.

While the Surrealist movement set out to subvert established artistic conventions, Magritte diverges sharply from his surrealist peers. Rather than relying on automatic

writing or oneiric narratives to undermine rational order, he conducts precise deconstruction of figural representation's inner logic. Through formal, perceptual and social-institutional registers, his paintings construct art's immanent law-governed character. This article unfolds along three axes: formal autonomy, autonomy of aesthetic judgment, and social-functional autonomy. It elucidates Magritte's alternative route to artistic autonomy outside abstract formalism, maps the configuration of autonomy within his figurative system, and expands interpretive horizons for both theories of modern artistic autonomy and Surrealist studies.

2. The Discursive Boundaries between Autonomy and Heteronomy in Modern Art

Artistic autonomy and artistic heteronomy are two basic opposite concepts, and people often use them to judge the essential value of art in the research of modern aesthetic theories. Zhou Xian puts forward relevant explanations in his book *Critique of Aesthetic Modernity*. He points out that artistic autonomy refers to the self-rule and self-regulation of art itself; art can form its own unique value based on its internal creation rules and aesthetic logic. On the contrary, artistic heteronomy is controlled by external rules and external influencing factors; art gains its rationality and recognition from various non-artistic factors, and these factors mainly contain religion, politics, moral norms and market environment. [1]

Western paintings were mostly restricted by external artistic rules from the Renaissance period to the 19th century; religious institutions ordered artworks to spread religious teachings, royal portrait works were used to show the power of political rulers, and genre paintings as well as historical paintings undertook the task of telling moral stories and guiding public ethics. In this period, the formal features,

aesthetic expressions and social functions of paintings all had to cater to external requirements; lines, colors and picture layouts served as basic tools to present preset thematic content, and people judged the quality of artworks mainly by whether the story was clearly conveyed and whether the moral meaning was convincing, rather than focusing on the inherent formal structure of the paintings themselves. The defining transformation of modern art consists in breaking these external constraints so art can achieve ontological self-legislation.

Nevertheless, critical accounts of modern artistic autonomy have largely been folded into narratives of abstract art. Clement Greenberg influentially equated artistic autonomy with the medium-specific purity of abstraction. While enormously generative for modernist art history, this framework a priori excludes figurative painting from the sphere of autonomy. Magritte occupies this overlooked space. He rejects external disciplinary pressures from religion, politics, morality and market forces, yet never abandons figurative representational language. If autonomy is reduced to abstract production, Magritte's practice becomes difficult to categorize: he is neither a formalist in Greenberg's sense nor a conventional narrative realist. Instead, working within figurative conventions, he dismantles representational logic from inside, redirecting painting away from "representing the world" toward critical reflection on art itself.

Drawing the discursive boundary between autonomy and heteronomy is therefore more than labelling Magritte an autonomous artist. It addresses a deeper question: once a painter severs painting's dependence on religious, political and moral narratives, what immanent mechanisms grant painting its independent ontological standing?

3. The Threefold Construction of Artistic Autonomy in Magritte's Painting

(1) Formal Autonomy: From "Instrument of Representation" to "Visual Ontology"

Formal autonomy forms the foundation of artistic autonomy, and the core question it asks is whether the meaning of a painting comes from the stories that are told, or from the internal relations among line, colour, and shape.

German art theorist Konrad Fiedler was one of the first to analyse this question from a philosophical angle; he did not agree with Hegelian aesthetics, which centres on content, and he held that the essence of art lies not in mimetic or narrative subject-matter, but in "the autonomous constitution of visible form". Visual art has its own way of knowing, which is different from conceptual thought and also from moral judgement; it builds its own world of meaning purely through the relations between form and colour. [2] Clive Bell put forward the idea of "significant form" and pushed this argument one step further; certain combinations of lines and colours arouse an aesthetic emotion, and this emotion is separate from everyday experience, and it is not tied to external knowledge, utility, or moral presuppositions. [3] Bell's insight is that form is not secondary to content; form itself carries aesthetic value, and immanent formal order can constitute art's final purpose.

Magritte's formal innovation retains figuration yet restructures object relations and spatial order so that the representational act ceases to function transparently. Painting stops acting as a "window onto the world" and becomes a

self-referential, self-legislating visual entity. Take *The Empire of Light, II* (Figure 1). It uses traditional realist techniques to depict familiar landscape elements: streets, trees, lampposts, and houses; Magritte places a fundamental formal contradiction here, as the upper part of the canvas shows a bright blue sky with white clouds, while the lower part sinks into the darkness of night, and these two parts are forced into the same perspectival space; the direction of light, the warmth and coolness of colour, and the depth of space contradict one another. This approach does not cancel representation through abstraction or distortion. Magritte breaks the inner logic of formal elements, so that viewers cannot read the scene as a coherent realistic statement. The daytime sky cannot light up the nocturnal street below; under the bright daylight, the warm glow of the street lamp becomes functionally redundant, and form no longer serves to depict a believable world; instead, form reveals itself as an autonomously constructed entity; Bell's "significant form" takes on a new meaning here, as the significance of form no longer comes from the narrative content it carries, but from the visual tension produced when form undermines its own representational function.



Figure 1. René Magritte, *L'Empire des lumières (The Empire of Light, II)*, 1950, oil on canvas, 78.8 × 99.1 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

(2) Autonomy of Aesthetic Judgment: Disinterested Perception and Autonomous Appraisal

If formal autonomy answers how art exists, autonomy of aesthetic judgement poses the subsequent question: by what criteria should art be evaluated?

At its core, autonomous aesthetic judgement establishes the independence and irreplaceability of aesthetic perception. Immanuel Kant distinguished aesthetic judgement from cognitive judgement and moral judgement, and he held that aesthetic pleasure comes neither from sensory satisfaction (the "agreeable") nor from moral fulfilment (the "good"), but from the disinterested, purposeless pleasure produced by the free play of the cognitive faculties when they respond to an object's form. [4] Han Qingyu argues that aesthetic pleasure forms a kind of spiritual value that is specific to the ontology of art; it stays independent of moral evaluation, social consensus, and utility, and aesthetic experience is an end in itself. [5] This sets up the key contrast between autonomous art and heteronomous art; autonomous aesthetic judgement puts the purity of aesthetic feeling first, while heteronomous judgement places artistic value under external social norms, for example, a history painting is seen as successful if it stirs patriotic feeling, and a religious painting is seen as successful

if it inspires piety; these standards are borrowed from ethics or theology, rather than from aesthetics.

Most people view Magritte's paintings as mysterious, illogical and thought-provoking; such public viewing attitudes will shift people's aesthetic evaluation to conceptual and philosophical analysis, and this situation forms a new kind of external restriction, which is covered by in-depth content interpretation. Magritte does not create confusing painting scenes that can be explained by philosophical theories, and this is not the true value of his works. He breaks people's long-formed fixed viewing modes in a powerful way, so that at moments of cognitive blockage, viewers are pushed back to sheer visual perception itself. *The Treachery of Images* (Figure 2) exemplifies this mechanism. Realist technique renders a pipe, underneath which reads the inscription: *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* ("This is not a pipe"). Ordinary cognitive habit equates the painted figure with the object-concept "pipe"; aesthetic reception becomes hostage to linguistic naming and social convention. Magritte interrupts this automatic process through text-image contradiction. When the visual impression "this is a pipe" is verbally negated, viewers cannot remain absorbed in conceptual questioning "what is this?". Instead they confront patches of colour, outlines and shapes on canvas. Michel Foucault similarly observed that by severing referential links between image and language, Magritte renders the painting a self-sufficient visual entity. [6]



Figure 2. René Magritte, *La trahison des images* (*The Treachery of Images* [*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*]), 1929, oil on canvas, 60 × 80 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

In *The Treachery of Images*, Magritte invokes language — a non-pictorial medium — to destabilize visual judgement. *Dangerous Liaisons* achieves comparable effects using purely pictorial means. A framed mirror is held before a nude female figure. Though positioned toward the viewer, the mirror reflects only her back. This counter-intuitive arrangement refuses to be read as realistic representation or as a determinate narrative; it undermines a basic assumption of representation, namely that no depiction can fully capture the thing itself. Viewers are suspended in the fissure between "reality" and "representation". Aesthetic judgement loses external benchmarks — verisimilitude, rational coherence, moral allegory. What remains is pure visual experience and cognitive tension produced by the painting's formal arrangement.

Resistance to conceptual decoding and the enforced return to unmediated visual perception defines Magritte's contribution at the level of aesthetic-judgement autonomy.

His paintings do not primarily await interpretation; they demand to be looked at. This disinterested act of looking supplies the starting-point for autonomous aesthetic judgement.

(3) Autonomy of Social Function: Art-Institutional Independence and Critical Intervention

Formal autonomy and autonomous aesthetic judgement address art's internal formal order and evaluative norms. Social-functional autonomy turns toward art's external relations with society and its embedded cultural institutions, striving for the self-governance of the artistic field.

Writing within modernist cultural contexts, Clement Greenberg argued that modern art's autonomy consists in extricating itself from secular mass culture and kitsch. Art carries out social-cultural critique and renewal through its ontological purity. Its social function is not to serve or entertain the public, but to nourish society from an independent cultural vantage point and dismantle defects of established culture. [7] Peter Bürger further argues that full artistic autonomy is not confined to individual artworks, but inheres in the art institution as a whole. Art must free itself from external control by religion, politics and market; it needs independent systems for production, circulation and evaluation, bringing forth a self-constituted form of artistic sociality. [8]

Magritte's singular achievement on this register is that he does not retreat from society into pure abstract form. By rendering reality itself strangely, he compels audiences to question the foundational cognitive premise: what counts as real? *Personal Values* (Figure 3) illustrates this strategy. The interior scene assembles familiar domestic objects: a comb, a brush, soap and drinking glass. Everyday items are drastically magnified, while standard household furniture — bed, wardrobe — shrinks to miniature scale. Even the interior wall of the room dissolves into an open sky full of clouds; this space is both indoors and outdoors, and it feels familiar, yet it does not match ordinary lived experience.



Figure 3. René Magritte, *Les valeurs personnelles* (*Personal Values*), 1952, oil on canvas, 80.0 × 100.1 cm. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

This kind of formal arrangement brings more than just visual spectacle; it also systematically breaks down the "order of things" that people have grown used to. In ordinary social cognition, the meaning of objects comes from their practical function and their use in specific contexts, for example, combs are used to comb hair, glasses are used to hold liquid,

and beds are used for rest; the size and placement of these objects maintain a stable object system, and this system in turn supports various cognitive assumptions in consumer society. By wrenching everyday things from expected functional scale, Magritte strips them of instrumental usability. They become hard to classify and turn into strange presences, which people can mainly reach through vision; when viewers face these uncanny objects that are both familiar and unfamiliar, they can no longer rely on their existing social-cognitive frameworks to explain them, and they can only engage these objects through vision.

This compositional logic carries social-critical weight, forming the heart of art's social-functional autonomy. Magritte does not propose new social ideals or political programmes. By suspending habitual scales of perception, he exposes the "self-evident" everyday world as culturally constructed contingency open to deconstruction. Once a comb is no longer used for combing hair, and a glass is no longer used for holding liquid, their practical value fades away, and viewers then enter a visual space, which is hard to measure by practical or instrumental standards.

Therefore, art with social autonomy is not an aesthetic pastime that is disconnected from real-world concerns; it refuses to intervene in society through obedience, accommodation, or service. It relies on the independent art institution and its unusual visual logic, and it produces a cognitive rupture; when society encounters this rupture, it is forced to reflect on its own basic assumptions, and this makes critical intervention possible. In *Personal Values*, the blue sky breaking through interior walls is not just a natural motif; it works as a visual metaphor for artistic autonomy at the institutional level. Autonomous art does not belong to any external authority, and it is not bound by utility, politics, or market demand. It simply exists, to be seen.

4. Conclusion

In his painting practice, René Magritte forged a distinct mode of artistic autonomy. Through idiosyncratic image construction, he freed painting from inherited religious, moral and political narratives and achieved ontological

self-legislation across formal, aesthetic-judgement and social-institutional dimensions. Formally, illogical spatial juxtaposition and suspended physical law transform painting from "representation of the world" into self-legislating visual construction. On aesthetic-judgement grounds, rupturing automatic cognitive habits pushes viewers back toward pure visual perception, restoring the autonomous starting-point for aesthetic experience. Socially, persistently interrogating commonsense reality through paradoxical imagery grants figurative painting non-instrumental critical force directed at social cognition.

These three layers of autonomy are not discrete within Magritte's oeuvre. They converge into a speculative visual language that delivers a thoroughgoing critique of traditional art institutions and constitutes a major practice of aesthetic independence within modern art. Magritte's figurative path challenges Greenberg's identification of autonomy with abstract purity and supplies a concrete artistic response to Bürger's paradox of avant-garde institutional autonomy. His work expands our understanding of how artistic autonomy can be realized without abandoning figuration.

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