



MAXIME THIRY

# “THE LAND OF MAGRITTE”: THE SURREALIST EVENT IN FRANCOPHONE BELGIUM

**ABSTRACT:** The main goal of this paper is to delve into Belgium's imaginary from a historical perspective to better understand how Belgium's pictorial heritage nurtured a cultural imagotype on the one hand and consequently laid ground for surrealism to happen on the other. By focusing on imagotypes the research will tackle both sociological and aesthetical issues, showing how they participate to the collective adhesion of an imaginary often confounded with a cultural identity.

**KEYWORDS:** Imagotype; Regimes of value; Belgium; Paul Nougé; René Magritte; Artistic Capitalism.

Should there be an adjective that naturally comes to one's mind when referring to Belgium (either to its daily news or to something relating to the country), it would most likely be “surreal.” The numerous governmental crises that punctuated the country's life for the last thirty years stand of course among the most famous examples. Back in 2007, after only half a year of parliamentary negotiations, the country managed to form an acting temporary government. That was enough for *The New York Times* to make fun of the federal complexity of what they referred to as a “surreal state.” Such commonplace has since taken roots and comes out of hibernation on each new political crisis, more vigorous on every occasion and more verbose as periods without government follow one another, every time beating new records of longevity. It has becomeso apparent that journalists now point it out: “Le mot ‘surréaliste’ apparaît souvent dans les articles des observateurs qui s’interrogent sur la capacité de la Belgique d’assumer pleinement [...] la présidence tournante de l’Union européenne” reports the RTBF (Belgian’s public radio network)’s web site on April 27<sup>th</sup> 2010. Further, the same article quotes Gent University professor Marc de Vos: “Le pays qui a offert au monde le surréalisme, transforme le surréalisme politique en une forme d’art”. De Vos’ argument relies on René Magritte’s (1898-1967) international fame and on the way his paintings, among others,

helped popularize the surrealist movement, especially its Belgian faction, on a global scale. On a more dramatic note, another article tackles the infamous terrorist attacks that occurred in Brussels in March 2016 and captions its analysis as follows: "Ceci n'est pas une crise politique (malheureusement, si...)" . The Magrittian reference appears clearer, as the journalist revisits the iconic phrase that appears at the bottom of the equally iconic painting *La Trahison des images* (1929).

Is that enough though to conclude that when newspapers associate Belgium (and thus its politics, its people, local events or even its way of life) to surrealism they do it knowingly by referring to the artistic movement founded in Paris by André Breton in 1924? Or even, let's say, to the one born in Brussels the same year, which resonates with Breton's movement while deferring with it on crucial issues such as the relevance of the unconscious and the practical subversion of everydayness? Or do they simply follow a tendency to hide behind a cliché so easy and overused through time that it has taken the shape of a grounded blatancy? The answer probably lies between both statements, as it would be incorrect to assume that any reference to surrealism cannot be anything but uninformed. On the one hand, surrealism is, like all cultural phenomenon, the object of many types of receptions, often depending on the appropriating audiences. On the other hand, it is important to remember how doxas usually reshape discourses and realities: the collective appropriation of an idea surely leads to its larger outreach, but at the cost of its complexity which often gets oversimplified.

### Updating an imagotype

"[S]'il est vrai qu'une tradition purement littéraire nous manque, une tradition d'art nous appartient depuis des siècles" (Verhaeren 1905). Not only an observation, these words pronounced by Émile Verhaeren during the Universal Exhibition that took place in Liège at Belgium 75<sup>th</sup> jubilee fall within a commonplace so wide that it inspired advocates of an emerging Belgian literature insecure about its lack of national identity as well as those who defend a literature nurtured by a strong and original pictorial heritage.

During the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, critics and writers were working together on establishing a founding myth for the young kingdom. Agreeing with the idea that literature plays an important part in the promotion of a national spirit, their task proved to be tedious, due to Belgium's double cultural and linguistic heritage, borrowing its models from both the Latin world (i.e. France) and the German world (i.e. the Netherlands and Germany). For instance, Edmond Picard remains one of the principal advocates of the "âme belge" (Picard 1897) – or "Belgian core" – where both Walloon and Flemish identities converge and whose origins reside in part in the pictorial legacy of great Flemish painters from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, such as Bosch, Breughel and Vermeer. This appealing conception is quickly discussed in France, where writers like to apprehend

French Belgian literature as a sort of outlandish variant of their own. In 1892, the journal *La Jeune Belgique* republishes an article from *Le Figaro* in which the idea of a pictorial literature turned into a stereotype. Indeed, what was first conceived as a patronage evolved into a cliché because of oversimplifying and generalizing outputs: “[Les Belges] sont des coloristes ardents, ils subissent la prédestination d'être surtout des peintres. Leurs écoles littéraires se rattachent aux préoccupations de leurs antérieures écoles d'art.”

During the following decades, in Belgium as well as in France, critics tend to validate such an idea. For instance, in a 1906 essay, Joseph Boubé describes what he calls the *couleur locale* of Belgian writings in words that never really depart from the realm of painting. In this regard, imagology states that “[f]rom early on in history, the encounter with other cultures [...] has been governed by selective perception, which inspires curiosity, stimulates the imagination and evokes fascinating images in people's mind” (Beller & Leerssen 2007, 6). As the stereotype gets embedded in collective consciousness it becomes a distinctive trait of Belgian French literature, a token of its originality in relation to French literature. Whereas some critics carefully present such discourses as part of a commonplace, of an immemorial doxa (“On a dit que tout artiste belge était peintre” [Boubé 1906, 34]), others tend to oversimplify them (“C'est un musée de tableaux” [Boubé 1906, 35]) or simply to argue that they all stem from the same sources: be it the inclination to descriptions, the peculiar use of light, the display of tableaux full of colorful and picturesque details (in particular, tables of feast such as the ones painted by Breughel). In short, everything is said to derive from the “souvenir et [...] l'amour des ancêtres” (Boubé 1906, 7). That is to say that if there is a cliché, it does not only derive from actual literary practices but also certainly from what critics established since their first attempts to define (and thus defend) the characteristics of Belgian literature from the very first steps of its institutionalization. By doing so, they helped this cliché become relevant in collective consciousness and memory, giving birth to an imagotype, a foreign representation of traits relating to a community that progressively modify said community's own perception, due to the symptomatic nature of those traits which are part of a larger shared and cohesive imaginary.

Belgium is thus considered as a country where literature often appears as pictorial if not picturesque. To quote Tom Verschaffel's contribution to Beller & Leerssen's inventory of imagotypes per nation: “Belgians are considered to be more of a visual and practical nature” (Beller & Leerssen 2007, 109). Consistent with the concept of “imagined community” theorized by Benedict Anderson, cultural or literary specificities do not appear from nowhere to subsequently determine what constitutes the identity cohesion of a nation. On the contrary, it is precisely because of how a given community consistently exploits and revisits a commonplace that it then becomes grounded. Imagotypes are to be understood as sociocultural facts producing observable effects on

communities and their representation, either their own or others'. What matters here is to better understand why this specific imagotype of a pictorial literature remains relevant and how it keeps developing, evolving, notably through surrealist practices.

Thus, in 1949 Franz Hellens, who actively and famously works on defending the French affiliation of Belgian literature during the interwar period, briefly clarifies what could pass for a Belgian specificity: "L'écrivain belge, le Flamand surtout, apporte dans sa façon de voir, de sentir et de s'exprimer, un reflet indéniable des tableaux des grands maîtres de la peinture flamande et wallonne : Roger de la Pasture, Gérôme Bosch, Brueghel... Réaliste et mystique à la fois, il a un goût prononcé pour les couleurs vives et les formes corsées" (Hellens 1949). From simply pictorial, such a description also raises the question of a mystical dimension nurturing the imaginary from which Belgian writers draw their inspiration. This dimension also explains the tendency of Belgian literature to often highlight the exploration of aspects and territories that deviate from the norms and standards of reality (i.e. through symbolism, fantastic and magical realism). It is that very tendency that Verschaffel presents as part of the "slightly surreal aspect" (Beller & Leerssen 2007, 112) observable in Belgian culture.

Sure, Breughel remains a steady reference. To the point that a reader of *L'Expérience continue*, in which the poetic texts of surrealist poet and theoretician Paul Nougé (1895-1967) are reunited, pretends to grasp in it some of the Flemish painter's spirit. Such an easy and unfounded interpretation obviously triggers Marcel Mariën (1920-1993), who was a member of Brussels surrealist group and who is responsible for the compilation of Nougé's texts. In response, he shells out a sarcastic remark, underlining the reader's imagotypical bias: "Expédiés d'Angleterre, sans doute [les textes] auraient-ils distillé les brumes de la Tamise !" (Mariën 1979). Beside Breughel, other painters serve as bearing to grasp different moments of a Belgian imaginary; discretely during the symbolist period with the inspiration of mystical Flemish painters Jan Van Eyck and Hans Memling, and way more blaring through Magritte's work during the surrealist years, to the point that he has now replaced Breughel in the role of national herald. Once the "land of Breughel", Belgium is increasingly called "land of Magritte", as a French article from 1979 writes in *Le Monde*. Such a modification of the imagotype's coordinates shows the important role that surrealism played in the sustainability of Belgium's pictorial imaginary. On the one hand, it made it more in tune with the representation crisis observed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which Magritte notably illustrated. On the other hand, surrealism acted as a way to expand this imaginary beyond the sphere of images, as it still stands as an ethical enterprise that overpassed national borders.

## A cornerstone

Born on November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1924, the journal *Correspondance* is immediately compared to the surrealist movement founded in Paris by André Breton few weeks before. Published once a month, these documents take the form of tracts printed on colored pieces of paper sent to a select few. At the head of the enterprise, Paul Nougé writes in a fashion that always favors what he calls an "oblique pensée," meaning that instead of explicitly confronting ideas, positions and realities he prefers to remain evasive to better bypass and short-circuit those in positions of institutional or symbolic power. The nougarian stance revolves around its offbeatness [Thiry 2023]: firstly, Nougé obstinately cultivates his own discretion by staying in the margins of literary and artistic institutions hoping to better challenge them, bound them and then to determine the means of his own action. Secondly, he conceptualizes the idea of "objets bouleversants" and takes Magritte's paintings as the best examples of objects capable to disorient (*dépayser*) one's usual view on reality. Finally, while acknowledging the proximity between his movement and Breton's, Nougé refuses to give credit to the disputable yet emblematic practice of automatic writing. He also refuses to put faith in the unconscious, to embrace the powers of dreams and to promote socially nor ideologically committed art. As Bartleby, Nougé "would prefer not to" and always finds a way to alleviate his own participation in a movement that he only accepts to call surrealism "pour la commodité de la conversation" (to use a cherished expression of his, meaning how politely reluctant he is to qualify his action as "surrealist"). In 1945, in an issue of the journal *Surréalisme*, he even cautions people to refrain from committing to any swift and inevitably incorrect interpretation: "Exégète, si vous voulez y voir clair, rayez le mot *surréalisme*" (Nougé 2017 [1945], 212). Similarly, Mariën further argues that "[l]e *surréalisme belge* n'existe pas," meaning that such designation mainly had a retroactive function in guaranteeing the visibility of the surrealists' actions. He carries on by saying: "C'est après coup qu'on a fait du *surréalisme* un courant de la littérature belge alors que ça n'a rien de commun [...] En réalité, c'était un groupe de gens désespérés, ne sachant que faire, n'ayant aucun plan, aucun. Tout était improvisé" (Berréby&Vaneigem 2014). Of course, such statements are nothing but very typical examples of how surrealists enjoy removing the chair on which they nonetheless sit. In other words, Nougé's position in the literary field depends on its own disqualification.

Magritte joins the *Groupe de Bruxelles* in 1926. Immediately, Nougé sees in his painting a perfect way to carry his own poetic, aesthetic and ethical project, thanks to the efficiency of visual advertisement. This is a well-known observation for anybody engaging in modernist art, from cubism to futurism and surrealism: visual arts are more able than literature to make the complexity of artistic experimentations tangible and comprehensible to a larger audience. They act therefore as efficient mediaries, which

Nougé realizes quickly, as he takes over the promotion of his friend's work through written introductions to exhibitions catalogues, public conferences and other brief liminary writings.

The most famous of these texts is actually one of the rare long pieces of writing signed by Nougé: *Les Images défendues*, first published in 1933. In it, Nougé renews his group's commitment to transform the world and to free it from any established order. He presents Magritte's paintings as ideal prompts of the "disponibilité d'esprit" (some kind of open mindedness, an availability of the mind) that he considers essential to the creation of "objets bouleversants." The idea is to bring human kind "où il n'a jamais été," to insure that it "éprouve ce qu'il n'a jamais éprouvé, pense ce qu'il n'a jamais pensé, soit ce qu'il n'a jamais été. Il faut l'y aider, il nous faut provoquer ce transport et cette crise, créons des objets bouleversants" (Nougé 2017 [1933], 122). With Nougé's help, Magritte's painting made Belgian surrealism relevant, both nationally and internationally. Of course, others such as Marcel Mariën and Xavier Cannone have since played an important, though long overdue, role in said promotion. What interests me though, is to question the paradox in which an artistic movement obstinate if not stubborn to remain anonymous now appears as a stellar and undisputed national trademark. Even if I would not be as assertive as Olivier Smolders when he states that "le seul Magritte susceptible de nous intéresser encore aujourd'hui a été inventé par Paul Nougé" (Smolders 1997), there is no doubt that Nougé not only groomed Magritte into becoming the pictorial poet he turned out to be, he also orchestrated his reception through time. In return, Nougé's surrealist heritage, originally designed to be and to remain discreet if not anonymous, now exists thanks to what Magritte's work brought to light, making it an emblem of not only Belgian but surely also international surrealism (which is not to say that there is something inherently Belgian in their surrealism; Nougé and his accomplices would not have agreed with such an idea).

That is not to say that the complex philosophy behind Nougé and Magritte's surrealist project directly impregnated the imaginary of Belgium as such. It would be more correct to speak of a slow and long filtering process, only retaining a refined version of Nougé's theory, simplified and mainstreamed through the popular reception of Magritte's painting. Also, it is important to keep in mind that not everybody sees and understands a painting from Magritte the same way. To know or to recognize a painting is less a sign of its fame than of its institutionalization within a specific cultural field in which different audiences and different types of reception coexist. This means that it is always essential to not consider the academic understanding of a work of art as the only legitimate one. Sure, a scholar versed in art and literature has more chances than the average person to understand better the poetic intention at the foundation of a surrealist painting. Said average person is nonetheless totally able to grasp the strangeness emanating from said painting, to put his finger on why something transpires as absurd or

actually surreal, even if the use of that term does not necessarily nor precisely refer to the exact acceptation of Nougé or Magritte's philosophy. Indeed, to randomly use the word "surreal" in a normal conversation today says something about how mainstream surrealism came into being, even if its understanding is more about a sense of its disruptive aesthetics than about an overall comprehension of the movement and its objectives.

Following both Antonio Gramsci's theories on hegemony and legitimizing agencies and Arjun Appadurai's work on "regimes of values" (regimes from where specific types of judgement and reception emerge), John Frow encourages to study literature from the angle of how certain institutional mechanisms and variables promote a product, acknowledge its value in a certain cultural or even sociological field. Meaning, how a product, *i.e.* a work of art, receives symbolic, economic, cultural, academic and public recognition; how it is institutionalized. In Frow's words:

it seems to me more useful (and more economical) to posit a mediating institutional mechanism to account both for the diversity of value and for the absence of any simple or necessary coincidence between social groups and the structure of valuation. The concept I want to propose is that of the regime of value, a semiotic institution generating evaluative regularities under certain conditions of use, and in which particular empirical audiences or communities may be more or less fully imbricated. [...] Regimes of value are mechanisms that permit the construction and regulation of value-equivalence, and indeed permit cross-cultural mediation. (Frow 2001: 300)

The process of institutionalization has a concrete effect on collective imaginaries. When a series of legitimizing agencies showcase an artist and his work or a movement or phenomenon, they turn it into a cultural event, a cornerstone around which value is shaped and history reassessed to better understand what led to this event (seen as a pinnacle) and how it influenced what followed. For example, literature historian Marc Quaghebeur chooses to illustrate the second volume of his great historiographic compilation with a reproduction of Magritte's *La Clef des champs* (1936): to illustrate the subtitle Quaghebeur gave to his 2017 book to describe the moment of Belgian literature he is writing about called "L'Ébranlement", he chooses the image of a clear view unaltered by the broken window opening to the landscape behind it. For instance, said "undermining" (or "ébranlement") affects both the foundation of the literary institution in Belgium (which was, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, looking to draw nearer to the French model) and the traditional framework of reality: Magritte becoming an emblem of Belgium's offbeat posture.

Universities, academies, awards and prizes, museums and schools count among the institutional structures identified by Frow. Academic research ideally feed university courses, which on the one hand give credit to the matters that are studied and on the other hand contribute to their generational and international outreach, through teaching and publishing. That is particularly true with surrealism, since it still stands as very actual

topic in academic research, more so on the occasion of its centenary. In Belgium, it also appears as one of the very few occasions school students have to get in touch with their own national culture. For that reason, its teaching is often recommended in school programs.

Academies and awards also fulfil a heritage function, either when they honour a particular *œuvre* or when they associate an artist's name with a field, thereby making them an emblem of national excellence in the discipline acknowledged by the award. It is especially the case of the Cérémonie des Magritte, a Belgian equivalent of the Césars or of the Oscars which has been rewarding excellence in Belgian cinema since 2011. The winners receive trophies in which recognizable motifs from Magritte's iconography are sculpted.

As for museums, they play a two-fold role in the institutionalizing process. Their patrimonial function responds to democratic ambitions which also have economic agendas, as the main goal is to provide culture to an always larger audience of consumers. Throughout time, the numerous exhibitions dedicated to Magritte have contributed to the painter's consecration on an international scale as well as in Belgium, especially in Brussels, where the Musée Magritte stands as a separately dedicated part of the prestigious Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts. His mainstream reception is also measurable by the number of more didactic and contemporary takes on his work, mixing museography with virtual installations. For instance, the so-called "experience" *Inside Magritte* organized between 2021 and 2022 at the Musée de la Bovery in Liège, invites its visitors to "enter into surrealism's spirit."

When evaluating the impact of "regimes of value," one must also consider how legitimizing mechanisms influence both reception and consumption of cultural goods. That said, commercial strategies deployed by museums can be comprehend through the lens of what Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy call "artistic capitalism," understood as a "système économique qui travaille à esthétiser tous les éléments composant et organisant la vie quotidienne" (Lipovetsky & Serroy 2013, 367). Giftshops installed at the exit of exhibitions commercialize copies, reproductions or derived products from the pieces on display in the museum. By doing so, they contribute to the spreading of said images in everyday objects and therefore to their commodification, which in turn makes them very recognizable, to the point that people don't really look at them anymore since they see them every day. In the case of Magritte, his paintings and especially the iconic motifs that appear in them (apples, bowler hats, chess pieces, clouds, etc.) almost seem configured to their own reproducibility, to their subversion, to their "*dépaysement*." These motifs as well as the iconic sentence "*ceci n'est pas*" now work as "logotypes, des symbols graphiques[...] familiers de tous, des images de marque stylisées et massivement mémorisées" (Lipovetsky & Serroy 2013, 251). Their commercialization sums up their

marketing, symbolic and spectacular values, making Magritte an undeniable emblem of Belgium.

Imaginary, in this case under the form of imagotypes, not only nurture creation but also collective consciousness. The following examples shows how it serves storytelling and marketing campaigns. For instance, two "Magritte Shop" opened in Brussels, both in highly touristic locations: the first in Zaventem national airport, the second near the famous Grand-Place. The shop's logo mimics the 1964 painting *Le Fils de l'homme*. As previously mentioned, in 1979, French newspaper *Le Monde* talks about Belgium as "Le pays de Magritte," and again in 2007, stating that "au pays de Magritte, le surréalisme n'est pas mort". Finally, in 2016 Brussels Airlines adds an 320 Airbus named *Magritte* to its fleet. On its fuselage are depicted well-known pictures borrowed to the painter's iconography, along with the following promotional advertisement: "We fly you to the home of Magritte".

### Reshaping a field

Those mechanisms "through which value is formed, transmitted, and regulated" (Frow 2001, 296) transformed Magritte into a trademark of Belgium. His most famous paintings are now part of common knowledge, and most people are able to grasp some aspects of his aesthetic project even if they are simplified and stereotyped. It is, after all, through refined versions of themselves that artistic and aesthetic movements widen their outreach and, by doing so, modify an imagotype.

My goal here is not claim that Belgian writers were thoroughly influenced by Magritte, even though it is possible to find some examples here and there. One can think of the strongly heritage-oriented if not chauvinistic series of novels *Les Folles aventures de René et Georgette*, from Brussels writer Nadine Monfils, or of *Izo*, the novel by Pascal de Duve. On another level, a Belgian TV show coming out in 2025 will depict Magritte as an unusual investigator, helping Scotland Yard to solve a case. The show will be named: *This is not a murder mystery...* There are also examples of less straightforward references, such as this passage of 1942 novel by Paul Willems, *L'Herbe qui tremble*, in which he questions the duplicity of reality by means of a very familiar image:

Dites-moi maintenant, que fait cette pipe sur la table, si ronde et si luisante ? Est-ce bien une pipe ? Quel est le savant assez fou pour prétendre que la matière est formée d'atomes, et que ceux-ci sont eux-mêmes des systèmes complexes... Voilà des choses à refuser en bloc... À nier. Il faut pouvoir nier avec force. Surtout quand on vient vous prouver que les choses ont une autre nature que celle que nous lui reconnaissions. (Willems 2021 [1942])

My goal is actually to demonstrate that the imaginary in Belgium, apparent both in artistic productions such as literature and in daily news commentary, as well as in

academic discourses published by critics, has been reshaped by surrealism to the point that it now influences the way art is produced and interpreted, leading to a rethinking of Belgium's historiography. Even if picturality remains a clear landmark, it now gives way to the idea that Belgians cultivate their own offbeatness, which sheds light both on the "surreal aspect" of their culture and on their stance toward France. It has now become another commonplace to say that Belgian literature explores some "terres de l'étrange," be it the ones of symbolism, fantastic, surrealism or magical realism. It is also well known that Belgian literature has a proclivity to favour genres usually considered as minor, such as detective novels and comic books. Also, Belgian writers often give themselves more leeway to play with grammatical rules, thus showing defiance toward French language.

Moreover, such characterisations go beyond cultural products. Paul Willems says that Belgium is a "*non-État*" (Willems 1980), Patrick Corillon that it is "*un pays où l'on n'arrive jamais*" (Corillon 2019), a scientific journal that it lies "*au-delà du réel*" and that its literature is nurtured by some "*écritures du surnaturel*" (Bizek-Tatara 2017). Given the opportunity to explain his vision of what constitutes Belgium's identity, writer Xavier Hannote explains that:

Je crois qu'on retrouve chez les auteurs belges une fascination pour le clair-obscur, pour ce qui n'est pas net, pour le gros [...]. On essaie de voir les deux côtés de la réalité, ce qui n'est pas nécessairement le cas des gens qui sont plus latins, ou qui sont plus raisonneurs, comme les Allemands. (Janne d'Othée 2024)

The pictorial terminology remains, as Hannote still refers to the technique of clair-obscur to illustrate the specificity of Belgian writers. Though, the reference serves less as a way to convey any baroque-related strangeness as it serves to qualify Belgians' ability to see both sides of reality, to consider its materiality and its underside, to enjoy the mystery that inhabits everyday life and to laugh in the face of what passes as too serious. All those traits depict the portrait of the land of surrealism, which is often mistaken for a surreal land.

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