

## [BRIDGING REALITY AND FANTASY: MIMESIS IN SURREALISM]

### MENGHUBUNGKAN REALITI DAN FANTASI: MIMESIS DALAM SUREALISME

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#### **Abstract**

*This article re-examines the concept of mimesis within surrealism through a comparative Western–Malay perspective, responding to contemporary scholarly interests in intercultural aesthetics and the decolonization of art history. Western surrealism exemplified by Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, and Max Ernst has long been grounded in psychoanalytic explorations of dreams, desire, and the unconscious. In contrast, Malay artistic engagements with mimesis are shaped by cosmology, nature, and indigenous symbolic systems that emphasize harmony with the environment and metaphysical balance. By placing these visual traditions in dialogue, the article expands surrealism’s reinterpretation of mimesis beyond its Euro-American canon to include Southeast Asian visual philosophies. Through comparative analyses of Dalí’s *The Persistence of Memory* and Ernst’s *The Robing of the Bride* alongside Abdullah Ariff’s *Tepi Sungai* and Latiff Mohidin’s *Mindscape* series, the study demonstrates that the negotiation between reality, symbolism, and imaginative transformation operates differently across cultures. Whereas Western surrealists draw from Freudian and Jungian psychological models, Malay artists engage nature-based metaphysics, cultural memory, and local cosmologies. The findings show that Malay visual traditions offer alternative configurations of the unconscious and imaginative experience, thereby widening the global discourse on mimesis, surrealism, and cross-cultural approaches to artistic representation.*

**Keywords:** *mimesis, surrealism, Malay art, intercultural aesthetics, unconscious mind, West–Malay comparison.*

#### **Abstrak**

Artikel ini meneliti semula konsep mimesis dalam aliran surealisme melalui perspektif perbandingan antara Barat dan Melayu sebagai respons terhadap minat ilmiah kontemporari dalam estetika antara budaya dan usaha mendekolonisasi sejarah seni. Surealisme Barat seperti yang ditonjolkan oleh Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, dan Max Ernst berakar pada penerokaan psikoanalitik tentang mimpi, keinginan, dan alam bawah sedar. Sebaliknya, keterlibatan seni Melayu dengan mimesis dipengaruhi oleh kosmologi, alam semula jadi, dan sistem simbolik pribumi yang menekankan keharmonian dengan persekitaran serta keseimbangan metafizik. Dengan mempertemukan kedua-dua tradisi visual ini dalam satu dialog, artikel ini memperluas penafsiran semula mimesis dalam surealisme melampaui kanun Euro-Amerika untuk merangkumi falsafah visual Asia Tenggara. Melalui analisis perbandingan karya Dalí *The Persistence of Memory* dan karya Ernst *The Robing of the Bride* dengan *Tepi Sungai* oleh Abdullah Ariff serta siri *Mindscape* oleh Latiff Mohidin, kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa rundingan antara realiti, simbolisme, dan transformasi imaginatif beroperasi secara berbeza merentasi budaya. Jika surrealism Barat bergantung pada model psikologi Freud dan Jung, seniman Melayu pula berakar pada metafizik berasaskan alam, memori budaya, dan kosmologi tempatan. Dapatan kajian membuktikan bahawa tradisi visual Melayu menawarkan konfigurasi alternatif terhadap pemahaman alam bawah sedar dan pengalaman imaginatif, sekali gus memperluas wacana global mengenai mimesis, surealisme, dan pendekatan silang budaya dalam representasi seni.

**Kata kunci:** *mimesis, surealisme, seni Melayu, estetika antara budaya, alam bawah sadar, perbandingan Barat–Melayu.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Art history has long relied on the concept of mimesis to explain how artists across cultures respond to, imitate, and transform the world around them. Rooted in the classical philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, mimesis traditionally emphasizes representation, realism, and the faithful imitation of nature (Plato, 2008; Aristotle, 2013). When surrealism emerged in early twentieth-century Europe, however, it disrupted this classical framework by turning artistic attention inward, away from the external world and toward the dream space of the unconscious (Hopkins, 1998). Surrealist painters such as Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, and Max Ernst challenged conventional representational norms by using mimetic techniques to construct images that were recognizable yet psychologically disorienting (Sontag, 1969; Ades, 1976). Their works relied not on naturalism but on distortion, symbolic projection, and psychoanalytic interpretations of desire, repression, and memory (Freud, 1910; Jung, 1968).

Yet this dominant narrative remains Eurocentric, often isolating surrealism within Western art history and presenting mimesis as a universal artistic impulse interpreted through Western philosophical and psychological models. This article responds to ongoing scholarly efforts particularly within West Asian and Southeast Asian studies—to decolonize aesthetic frameworks and to acknowledge alternative cultural epistemologies in the study of representation (Green, 2007; Farahmandian, 2015). By introducing comparative Malay examples into the discussion, this study aims to broaden the discourse of mimesis and surrealism beyond its Western genealogies.

In the Malay world, mimesis manifests differently. Malay artistic traditions emphasise observation of nature (*alam*), cosmological order, symbolic motifs, and the metaphysical relationship between humans, environment, and the divine (Aziz, 2021). Artists such as Abdullah Ariff and Latiff Mohidin demonstrate how imitation in Malay art is not limited to naturalistic depiction but includes the translation of cultural memory, spirituality, and collective experience into visual form (Tobin, 2015). Unlike the Freudian and Jungian underpinnings of Western surrealism, Malay engagements with symbolism often emerge from indigenous cosmology, Islamic metaphysics, and regional mythopoetic imagination.

By analysing how Western surrealists reinterpret mimesis through psychological fragmentation, and how Malay artists reinterpret mimesis through cultural, ecological, and metaphysical frameworks, this article highlights the potential of a West–Malay comparative approach. Such an approach not only expands the theoretical scope of surrealism but also aligns with the broader goals of comparative art history, transnational aesthetics, and intercultural methodology areas central to the mission of the *International Journal of West Asian Studies* (IJWAS).

This article therefore argues that the intersections between mimesis and surrealism can only be fully understood when considered across cultural contexts. Through the pairing of Dalí, Magritte, and Ernst with Malay exemplars such as Abdullah Ariff and Latiff Mohidin, the study demonstrates how the imitation of reality whether natural, psychological, or symbolic operates within culturally specific frameworks that yield different aesthetic outcomes. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing conversations on the decentralisation of art history and the integration of Southeast Asian perspectives into global modernism (Varnedoe, 2003).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Surrealism, which arose in the early 20th century, marked a radical shift in the way artists approached the representation of reality. Inspired by the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, surrealists sought to bypass the conscious mind and explore the unconscious, dreams, and the irrational. As Green (2007) explains, surrealism was a response to the limitations of traditional mimesis, aiming to capture the hidden, unconscious aspects of human experience rather than merely reflecting the external world. Surrealist artists such as Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, and Max Ernst employed distorted, dreamlike imagery to depict psychological truths, often using everyday objects in strange and unsettling contexts. These artistic disruptions of reality were designed to provoke deep psychological responses in viewers.

Sontag (1969) argues that surrealism fundamentally challenges traditional artistic representations of reality, expanding the scope of mimesis to include not only the observable world but also the hidden, often chaotic mental landscapes. For surrealists, the imitation of reality was no longer bound by the conventions of visual representation. Instead, surrealism sought to capture the fluid, fragmented, and often contradictory nature of the human psyche. This idea is particularly evident in Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), where the melting clocks symbolize the distortion of time and the fluidity of perception in the unconscious mind, rather than representing time as a fixed, objective reality (Sontag, 1969).

Sigmund Freud's theories of the unconscious, repression, and dreams have been pivotal to surrealism's development. Freud's assertion that unconscious desires, repressed memories, and hidden fears influence behavior and perception is central to the surrealists' exploration of the mind. According to Berenbaum (2015), surrealist artists adopted Freud's methods of free association and dream analysis as tools for tapping into the unconscious. This psychological framework allowed artists to represent not only external reality but also internal mental states, emotions, and fantasies.

Carl Jung's ideas on the collective unconscious and archetypes provided another layer of psychological depth to surrealism. Jung's theory posits that certain universal symbols, such as the shadow, anima, and animus, are embedded in the unconscious of all humans. These archetypes, as discussed by Micale (1996), often manifest in surrealist works, where symbolic images reflect universal human experiences and psychological processes. Max Ernst's work, such as *The Robing of the Bride* (1940), is a prime example of this, where the birdlike figures and dreamlike transformations symbolize both personal and collective unconscious material, drawing on Jungian themes of metamorphosis and the tension between the conscious and unconscious selves.

In this context, surrealism is seen not just as a stylistic shift in art but as a psychological exploration of the unconscious mind. Artists such as René Magritte and Max Ernst utilized surrealist imagery to reveal repressed desires and psychological conflicts. For instance, Magritte's *The Lovers* (1928), with its veiled figures, embodies the surrealist concern with the hidden, repressed aspects of human relationships and identity (Cohen, 2014). This theme of repression, deeply rooted in Freudian theory, is common throughout surrealist works, which often feature images of constraint, distortion, and concealment.

## METHODOLOGY

This study explores the complex relationship between mimesis, surrealism, and psychological theory in art. The research employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, combining methods from art history, psychological analysis, and philosophy to analyse the evolution of artistic representation. The methodology incorporates a detailed examination of visual analysis, theoretical frameworks, and psychoanalytic interpretation, focusing on specific surrealist artworks

to illustrate the intersections between these concepts. The approach is designed to not only understand how surrealist artists engaged with the concept of mimesis but also how they redefined it through the lens of psychological theory.

## **FINDINGS: ECHOES OF REALITY THE MIMESIS, SYMBOLISM, AND THE ART OF THE ANCIENTS**

Representation or imitation of reality, mimesis, has been a perennial concern in all ages' artwork and particularly in ancient Roman and ancient Greek art work. It involves not only the accurate description of the material world but also probing for ultimate symbolic, cultural, and philosophical meaning. "Imitation Prohibited? The Art Pedagogical Topicality of Mimesis" by Krautz and Sowa and "Mimesis in Ancient Art" by Blasone present insightful discussions regarding how mimesis directed the production, interpretation, and teaching of artwork. Through them, we are compelled to consider mimesis as much an evocative approach to coming to terms with culture and identity and the complexities of the human condition as it is an artistic device of realism.

Krautz and Sowa assert that mimesis, usually in modern art instruction interpreted as naive imitation, instead holds the role of a legitimate and viable mechanism of acquisition. Krautz and Sowa emphasize there exists an aspect beyond imitation in mimesis; it involves earnest work with what has been done before in order to learn their technique and interpretation and space for individual interpretation and innovation as well. This pedagogic approach allows the students to learn technique and creative touch. For Krautz and Sowa, imitation or reenactment of art plays an important role in the development of the individuality of the artist through synthesizing old patterns and present interpretations.

Blasone, on the other hand, writes of mimesis in ancient Roman and Greek art as an inherent practice of the representation of reality. In ancient times, mimesis wasn't a simple imitation of nature but creating representations in a faithful but transorative manner. Artists in ancient times worked towards replicating nature's shape, colors, and textures but also trying to embed in their creations higher messages reflecting culture-based ideals, values, and beliefs. This definition of mimesis as a transorative and cognitive process in either contemporary art education or ancient art confirms the multifaceted relationship between representation and art production.

Blasone's walk-through of ancient images illustrates how mimesis was a device for depicting the everyday and the divine as much as it was for depicting the natural world. Ancient Roman and Greek art and the guest-gift (*xenia*), and its rhopographic function, or images of everyday items of provisions and foodstuffs, animals, and vessels, specifically suggested concern with realism in depicting the material world in an accurate and detailed manner. (Blasone, 2009) These images, the frescos and mosaics of still-life items of provisions and vessels and dishes and animals, refer to material embodiments of the everyday but signal wealth, plenty, and social acts of hospitality. The classic "*xenia*" still-lives in mosaics and frescos represented the cultural ideals of generosity and binding and made mimesis an essential device for the conveyance of communal ideals. (Blasone, 2009)

Also evident in portraits of human subjects in the Fayyum and in the Pompeian frescoes is mimesis as a way of making the subject live on by bringing their essence into perpetuity. Realism and symbolism are also evident in the manner in which artists depicted their subjects in idealized portraits in a blending of individualized features and universal ones. Blasone illustrates how mimesis was less an exercise in imitation of life and more an exercise in transcending it, in creating images that represent a extended cultural and/or philosophical purpose. This twofold nature of mimesis of naturalism and of symbolic interpretation was at the center of art conception and production in ancient times. (Blasone, 2009)

The work of Krautz, Sowa, and Blasone also depicts the function of mimesis at the interface of philosophy, culture, and arts. In ancient Greece and Rome, mimesis had been treated

by philosophers Plato and Aristotle as an artistic imitation and as a device for communicating moral or philosophical lessons. (Krautz, 2020) For Aristotle, mimesis had been linked to catharsis, the cleansing of the emotions experienced by the onlookers by means of art. This had been brought to acting out the beauty of life as well as its attendant tragedy and in the process facilitating the coming to terms of bystanders with life complexities in a replicated environment and in safety. (Krautz, 2020)

Similarly, Stoic and Platonic-influenced mimesis played an important role in ancient art insofar as mimesis took on an artistic mode of representation of material reality as much as abstract entities such as virtue, destiny, and the divine. For example, the Mosaic of the Doves and other Hellenistic still life-paintings were beyond an imitation of nature; they had symbolic connotations whereby one could consider the transitory nature of life. As Blasone illustrates, the fact such works were translated into simulacra representations beyond the material as signs for greater concepts helps to show how mimesis in ancient art helped to engage with a larger philosophical concern over the nature of reality and representation. (Blasone, 2009)

The influence of ancient mimesis can be seen in subsequent art traditions in the Renaissance and the Baroque as well, where artists Raphael and Caravaggio again pursued the use of realism and symbolism as topics as well and looked towards ancient sources as an influence in their work again. (Blasone, 2009)

Here does the circle between ancient mimesis and Renaissance ideals come full circle as Raphael's portrayal of Hypatia in the School of Athens accomplishes historic realism in allegoric significance. Once again, Caravaggio's Basket of Fruit captures how still life in the modern times maintained ancient convention in portraying nature beauty and stoically observing its impermanence and corruption-a built-in contradiction for a witness to human nature. (Blasone, 2009)

It is along this development in history that Krautz and Sowa have highlighted the pedagogical importance of mimesis in art education. Art education remains dependent on this ancient mimesis history of Greece and Rome inasmuch as it encourages pupils to replicate the masters and partake in the cultural and philosophical basis of their work. (Krautz, 2020) It is in this manner in which mimesis aids artists in the acquisition of their technique and equips them with richer cultural histories, ones that have informed the comprehension of art over centuries. (Krautz, 2020)

Mimesis as an active polyvalent concept in art production, art criticism, and art pedagogy concerns Krautz and Sowa and Blasone because mimesis as less an imitation and as an intellectual and imaginative process in which the material world of sense and of values in culture is addressed. In ancient Greek and Roman art and in art pedagogy now, mimesis as a process of artistic production and as a process of cultural and philosophical questioning exists. This abiding relevance speaks to the universal human impulse to represent, understand, and transcend the world in art.

"The Arnolfini Portrait," painted by Jan van Eyck in 1434, remains one of the most intriguing works of art of the Northern Renaissance era. "The Arnolfini Portrait" holds the honor of being the most detailed piece of work in the history of art, the symbolism in it, and the groundbreaking approach in the process of its creation, all depicting the society and culture of the era in question. In the portrait, there sits a man and a woman in a room with an array of sumptuous furnishings. Both the poses of the two and the objects around them convey the importance of the event as if it were the wedding ceremony or the ceremony of betrothal (Goffen, 1998). One of the most intriguing features of the portrait lies in the detail of the portrait in keeping with van Eyck's work of art. The texture of the fabric, the glaze on the chandelier made of brass, and the curved picture in the mirror are so carefully painted that they invite the viewer to approach the work of art. This level of detail can be likened to being emotionally stirred by surroundings. Van Eyck's work tells us much regarding the affluence and class of the Arnolfini couple; it shows the sumptuous material and the refined patterns on their attire and upholstery. (Goffen, 1998)

Symbolism can also be found in "The Arnolfini Portrait." Use of objects in the work can be termed as symbolic. The dog at the couple's feet, for example, represents fidelity and loyalty, and the fruits on the windowsill represent perhaps fertility and productivity. (Campbell, 1998). Such symbolic application here relates to some degree of level of meaning as can be encountered in van Eyck's work as well. Light and darkness in "The Arnolfini Portrait" are maximally employed by van Eyck. Soft and diffused light falls on the room and, on the figures, and accentuates the three-dimensional quality of figures and room, much as does the quality of light on shape, and achieves once again realism and depth in the work. Briefly, "The Arnolfini Portrait" depicts the mimesis technique in classic style for all its elaboration, symbolic nature, and use of lighting have their equivalent in inherent features of the style. Van Eyck took their surroundings as source for inspiration much as any other artists would ever do so, but observation and imitation in art enabled them to produce works of cultural reference and beauty. (Campbell, 1998) At this point then, the mimesis technique becomes universal in nature in cultures and in time and unifies them in shared artistic principles. (Campbell, 1998)

Concept of mimesis in Malay art has a link to the Malay relationship with nature. Malays have over a very long time depended on easily available natural resources for sustenance as well as sources of idea in their art works. This can be evident in the sphere of how they perceive and interpret their world and come up with unique works of art as an imitation of their world and in depicting their values and beliefs in life. This captures the richness in nature as a source of information and source of ideas in the Malay world. (Aziz, August/2021)

The beauty and pursuit of study of nature vary according to people's interests such as those in rural communities. Malays can be said to be very perceptive and observant towards their world as they have interpreted this in their art works. Observation of flora and fauna gave rise to use of many patterns in the different genres of Malay art such as "This then serves to prove the creativity and wisdom of Malays in interpreting natural elements into art works. Some of the patterns such as the sun and stars are non-ornamental in nature though very much valued in culture. For instance, the sun represents power and energy and serves as a guide for daily conduct in the old Malay life. Equally, the star motif represents guidance and wisdom and captures the Malays' strong fascination with the universe and how aware they are of its power in their lives (Aziz, August/2021)

Additionally, the relationship between nature and the Malays is defined as harmonious existence where nature is cherished and preserved. This relationship exemplifies the relationship as understood by the Malays where nature becomes a part of them as evident in their sayings and proverbs highlighting the importance of nature in their life. This attitude ensures accountability with nature in such a manner that it gets sanctified and preserved for the coming generations. (Aziz, August/2021)

The mimesis concept in Malay art depicts a deep relationship between the Malay people and nature. With meticulous observation and interpretation of nature, the Malay people manage to create a rich culture of arts reflective of Malay philosophy and values. Their incorporation of nature-based motives in their work of art far from being aesthetically satisfactory as it assumes much larger philosophical connotations testifying to the place of nature in Malay life. This persistent association keeps inspiring and informing the work of art of the Malay people in such a manner that their culture gets made dynamic and meaningful. (Aziz, August/2021)

To study "Tepi Sungai" by Abdullah Ariff (1948) based on the mimesis approach, we can see how the work reflects nature, and the Malay society values discussed in the document on Malay art.

Mimesis, imitation, belongs to the fundamental rules on how artists like Abdullah Ariff draw inspiration from the world around them. In "Tepi Sungai," the river and the landscape around it are likely an indication of how close the Malays have been to nature as discussed in the document where it contains the statement "*alam ciptaan Tuhan merupakan gedung atau khazanah ilmu terlulu banyak menyimpan serta memiliki rahsia sentiasa tersedia untuk diterokai*" Such an inclination emphasizes the importance of nature as the source of art inspiration. (Aziz,

August/2021) The work could also represent the keen perception and logic characteristic of the mimesis type. The work bears witness to the fact that "*karyawan Melayu tidak melihat sesuatu sekadar dengan matanya tetapi mengamati serta menelaahnya menerusi akal minda serta hati nuraninya*" (Aziz August 2021).

It follows then that Abdullah Ariff, as most Malay artists, would have resonated strongly with the elements of the landscape and documented not only the external shape of the river but also its cultural and emotional connotation. Also, the shapes and motifs in "Tepi Sungai" can be interpreted as a Malay perspective where "*setiap penciptaan seni mempunyai rupa bentuk yang tersendiri yang berlainan antara satu sama lain*". (Aziz, August/2021) The shapes and connotation inherent in the work and representative of the work are reflective of Malay values and philosophy and show how the natural environment influences art creation. Overall, the use of mimesis approach on "Tepi Sungai" confirms how observation, imitation, and sense of culture in Malay art have been exhibited by Abdullah Ariff in his work. This work bears testament to the Malays' rich relationship with nature and illustrates the degree of perception and appreciation involved in their work.

### **FINDINGS: DREAMSCAPES AND MIND, WHERE PSYCHOLOGY AND SURREALISM CONVERGE**

Psychological theories developed have impacted the process of art production along with the way the viewers have begun expressing themselves in response to the work. Varying from Freudian psychoanalysis to newer neurasthenics' innovation, the psychological theories have provided paradigms for artists' production to bring to the fore human experience, feeling, and perception. These theories also directed the process of creating visual material, calling the viewer to react to art works in highly psychological ways.

It was Freud's examination of repressed desire and the irrational mind that ultimately encouraged artists to access the unconscious in the process of creating art work. (Berenbaum, 2015) It can be exemplified in Salvador Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), where melting clocks and distorted landscapes show the malleability of time and the logic-defying nature of dreams. In the use of dream images by Dalí, the viewer can access his or her unconscious associations; the boundary between reality and fantasy, then, is erased—a theme squarely based on Freud's theory of the return of repressed affect in dreams. (Green, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 88(4),

Another level of psychological insight in art is the archetypal and collective unconscious theory by Carl Jung. These universal symbols based on the collective unconscious, as stated by Jung, can have the ability to extend beyond the individual experience and function on an universal human psyche. Jung himself tested this concept with his own work in *The Red Book* (1914-1930), in which he had intense symbolic sketches based on his own individual unconscious. (Micale, 1996) This is an account of his belief in art as a source to access universal archetypes and the shadow—the repressed parts of the self. With this concept of universal symbols, artists were encouraged to use mythological and symbolic as well as archetypal imagery, adding to the richness of meaning in the works themselves. (Berenbaum, 2015)

Psychological interpretation of art in an artist's mind and unconscious and heavily relying on Freud and Jungian thought. The approach looks for deeper psychological motivations for why an individual paints and interprets his/her work as an unconscious thought, conflict resolved or repressed desire. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis left a lasting influence on the idea of the unconscious mind behind art interpretation. Much of human behaviour, Freud believed, results from people's unconscious desires, having been triggered by sex and aggression and expressing an outlet in art and other creative activities. (Freud, 1910)

The principle behind the theory lies in the repressed parts of the mind of the artist expressing themselves in symbolism and coded messages in the work of art of which the creator may or may not be aware. For example, Freud's interpretation of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* posited the repressed feelings the creator had towards his family and his upbringing were expressed in his work in symbolism from his unconscious. Freudian interpretation also dominated the surrealist school of art where artists such as Salvador Dalí employed methods such as free association and dreams in order to reach unconscious material. Surrealists believed by reaching the unconscious mind they could overcome rational thought and express their deepest and usually repressed feelings and wishes. (Freud, 1910)

Freud's most prominent disciple, Carl Jung, took this thought further by adding the concept of the collective unconscious. Jungian psychology posits an unconscious shared by all people, a repository of archetypes or source images and patterns responding to universal human feelings and concepts. These materialize in art as repeated images-e.g., "anima," "shadow," or "hero"-representing universal human feelings. Jung believed on this basis that deep truth can be spoken concerning the human situation by art, and indeed by its symbolic and abstract character inasmuch as it contains those archetypes shared by all human beings (Berenbaum, 2015). Jung's own use of art in his work focuses as well on individuation and on self-seeking. His patients were encouraged to use creative activities such as painting in order to access deeper strata of the psyche and to bring inward strife to an end. For Jung himself, creating art was as valuable as the work itself produced, for it represented a route to individuation and to awareness of the unconscious aspect of the self. Jung's theory of art and his own use of art in his work also call for an appreciation of the internal life of the creator as much as an appreciation of his work itself. These theories allow much subtler interpretations of both how art is created and how it is perceived by its spectators by exploring art as a vehicle to the unconscious mind. (Berenbaum, 2015)

*The Persistence of Memory* by Salvador Dalí, created in 1931, is a surrealist masterpiece that speaks to the fluidity of time and the subconscious. This painting is surely considered among the best for its dreamlike quality, featuring melting clocks draped over various objects in a barren landscape. (Micale, 1996) These soft watches are symbolic of the malleability of time itself, likening time in the world of dreams to something not fixed, instead susceptible to distortion and decay. Using surreal imagery, Dalí expressed his fascination with the unconscious mind and how it influences human perception in the painting. The background landscape, which is based on Dalí's native Catalonia, is juxtaposed with the bizarre elements of melting clocks and a distorted face that is thought to be a self-portrait of the artist. (Micale, 1996) (Sontag, 1969)

The fact that ants, associated with decomposition, crawl over a gold pocket watch, emphasizes the passing of time and the decaying. Dalí actually described the inspiration for the melting clocks as a result of a vision of Camembert cheese melting in the sun, humorously deviating from more abstract theories like Einstein's theory of relativity, though many art historians also suggest that Dalí's work indirectly reflects modern scientific ideas about the relativity of time. (Sontag, 1969) This iconic painting continues to inspire audiences by blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy while inviting viewers to contemplate the nature of time, memory, and the subconscious mind. It remains one of Dalí's most recognized works and a defining example of surrealism, hailed for its bold examination into dream states and the irrationality of the human experience. (Sontag, 1969)

Salvador Dalí's painting *The Persistence of Memory*, created in 1931, is closely related to psychological theory, especially Freudian and Jungian theories. In Dalí's surrealist painting, time and the subconscious mind are both flowing pieces that are major focuses of psychological analysis. (Riley H. , 2013). Here is how the painting relates to these theories: Most of the theories of Sigmund Freud about the unconscious mind and repressed desires are reflected in Dalí's work. According to Freud, dreams and symbols that appeared in art very often indicated the repressed thoughts, particularly those connected with sexuality and trauma. Dalí took inspiration from Freud's theories, particularly the idea of the unconscious mind making its presence known through



symbolism. This is reflected in the common usage of melting clocks found in his famous work *The Persistence of Memory*. (Riley H. , 2013)

In this painting, time once a solid, consistent entity now flows and contorts, similar to how Freud postulated repressed memories and emotions disrupt the conscious mind. The melting and bending distorted clocks may symbolize the collapse of structured reality-the mind's unconscious state in which time, like memory, is warped and subjective. The ants crawling over the watch also evoke images of decay, the common Freudian analytic symbol for corruption of the self, reflecting the passage of time and the inevitability of death. (Micale, 1996).

Another theory by Carl Jung involving the collective unconscious and archetypes also pertains to Dalí's work. For Jung, symbols in art could represent universal themes that tapped into shared human experiences, such as life, death, and time. In this light, the clocks in *The Persistence of Memory* can be considered the archetypal symbol of time, passing beyond the individual experience to a common human experience. (Riley H. , 2013) The surrealist imagery of Dalí also agrees with the concept of individuation by Jung, such as the distorted self-portrait in the middle of the painting. This dreamlike landscape filled with eerie combinations of familiar and unfamiliar elements may symbolically be likened to the means through which the unconscious mind surfaces in dreams, especially of a personal current, intermingled with universal symbols. (Sontag, 1969)

Freud and Jung also believed in dreams as a gateway into the unconscious and the dream state itself is an extension of this in Dalí's work. Hyperrealism of technique and irrationality of subject matter are brought together to create the dream paradox of hallucinatory and disturbing nature but in contradiction to reality logic. (Sontag, 1969)

Dalí's dream work transports people on a subconscious journey where fantasy and reality have no dividing lines. This *Persistence of Memory* is a prime piece to illustrate how Dalí tapped into psychological thought to map the unconscious mind. In the use of plasticity in time, repressed libido energy and universal archetypes in Freudian and Jungian terminology and presenting it visually as an interpretation of the human psyche complexities, people are permitted to continue empathizing with the call of the mystery of the mind, individual and collective. (Micale, 1996)

Latiff Mohidin's *Mindscape* series (1973) speaks to the abstract shapes of memory and unconscious experience. This series follows on from his work in his *Pago-Pago* series in speaking to the interiors with dynamic and free-flowing color and expressive shape. His work evidence Southeast Asian influences in travels made throughout the region. (Tobin, 2015) This series evidences an addressing of Southeast Asian identity in speaking to personal and cultural landscape in his work in the abstract; it also speaks to psychological theory in speaking to unconscious content in the use of abstract shape, some of which engage very nicely with Freudian and Jungian principle. In the fluid and symbolism in the work is unconscious desire, personal memory, and identification with culture, this connecting up to Freud's principle of repressed experience. Also addressed is the underlying principle of the collective unconscious by Jung as the work incorporates Southeast Asian cultural symbolism and consequently engages universal archetypes between the artist's heritage and human consciousness. (Tobin, 2015)

Latiff Mohidin's *Mindscape* series (1973) represents subconscious experience in abstracted image and color and conjoins personal memory and cultural symbol. Ingrained in Southeast Asian culture, the work responds to Mohidin's journey along the region's landscape and religious culture and interior psychology. (Tobin, 2015)

The abstracted images invite viewers into deeper, intangible spaces of identity and suggest an interconnectivity between subconscious experience, cultural history, and memory. With organic, curvilinear forms recalling the artist's musings on how identity conditions the interior life, the series is attained. (Tobin, 2015)

Latiff Mohidin's *Mindscape* series can be explained by Freud and Jung theories of the psychological beliefs based on the unconscious and repressed desire and emotions. Freud emphasized unconscious mind and repressed desire, and this could be expressed in abstract art. In *Mindscape*, flowing and active shapes could be interpreted as repressed emotions and memory

from the unconscious and in Freud's context as repressed desire and unconscious mind. Abstract shapes and organic patterns in the work point towards repressed states and inarticulate emotions in a psychological context as dreams express our deepest fears and wants. (Tobin, 2015)

Mohidin in utilizing the use of Southeast Asian symbols to represent issues universal in nature points towards Jung's theory of archetypes and collective unconsciousness. These dynamic, connected shapes could be archetypal images from the collective unconscious and represent human experiences beyond individual existence and resonate with larger archetypes in culture and spirit in Southeast Asian existence. (Tobin, 2015)

Malaysurrealist artists walk the complex dance between tradition and modernism and individualism. This complexity can be discerned in the negotiation of identities in Malay art in a sense where artists subvert hegemonic cultural discourses and reappropriate indigenous arts and culture. The idea of multiphrenia by Farahmandian (2015) in how individuals manage to deal with fractured identities because of pressures in society and culture specifically holds in Malay art where artists balance their heritage and contemporary art in portraying individual and collective traumas.

Latiff Mohidin and Abdullah Ariff's work contains surrealist elements challenging mainstream representations of Malay identity. Their work contains symbolic distortions and dreamscapes as a reaction to pressures from society as much as an examination of the negotiation of the individual in a rapidly changing society. Through surrealist modes of work, such artists produce a visual narrative of the psychological fragmentation inherent in the examination of Malaysian literature on multiphrenia by Farahmandian (2015). Just as literary characters in Malaysian literature struggle against patriarchal and societal pressures, Malay artists use surrealist visual aesthetics to represent a fractured sense of individual, between history and memory and modernity. This examination of Malay art reveals culture and psychological dimensions of artistic production in response to pressures in society and individual agency (Farahmandian, 2015).

Moreover, Malaysian visual culture construction of masculinity has been an interest of scholarship in particular regarding the role of media in reinforcing and subverting conventional representations of masculinity and gender norms. In their work on the intersection of visual interpretation in Malaysian television and collective practices of masculinity in media storytelling and how this influences hegemonic masculinity and societal interpretations of gender roles, Uma and Kaur (2018) discuss the work of visual description in reinforcing and subverting dominant discourses as much as undermining them, a thematic concern of surrealist art in itself as well. Just as television media constructs masculinity in visual storytelling, Malay surrealist artists employ symbolic distortions in order to comment on conventional hierarchies and traditional roles in society (Uma and Kaur, 2018). In tracing out where and how such motifs cross over, this paper then goes on to address the employment of surrealist art as a subversion of dominant visual discourses. Bridging the real and unreal, this study attempts to represent how surrealist art reimagines mimesis as a critical commentary on perception and memory construction and the workings of the subconscious mind.

## **FINDINGS: THE ART OF ILLUSION BRIDGING MIMESIS AND SURREALISM**

Again and again, Surrealism means re-imagery or transformation in which reality gets deformed in order to achieve unconscious desire and/or unseen realities. One could call this re-imagery process a mimesis in the sense in which the artist is precisely imitating something- namely the workings of the mind and/or dreams and/or emotions-but in a manner in which it goes beyond the mere imitation of the external world. In surrealist art, reality becomes something else-more complex and profound.

Example: Max Ernst's *The Robing of the Bride*, 1940, presents us with a classic example of how surrealist art represents the world but with elements transformed and re-imagined. The

figure of the bride becomes deformed and combines the human and animal shape in such a manner as to produce a sense of disjointment and dislocation and to create accordingly in the viewer a sense of unease and disturbance in order to represent reality's translation into the symbolic and the psychic. (Ades, 1976)

Max Ernst's *The Robing of the Bride* (1940) is fraught with all the surrealist connotations of mystery, transformation, and the unconscious. This is a mysterious image rich in symbolic material, with dream-like imagery and sexual connotation and disturbing juxtaposition of human and animal qualities characteristic of Ernst's surrealist works. (Ades, 1976) The center of *The Robing of the Bride* is a woman enveloped in a red-feather cloak making her resemble a creature half-human and half-fowl. Her head assumes the shape of an owl-beast typically associated with wisdom but also mystery and the occult. Alongside and at the rear of this woman are two other figures: the stooping figure of a small man and a masked and naked human figure with beaked facial features. In the background and looking out around a doorway and adding to the voyeurism and secrecy of the picture is a male figure half-hidden in shadow. (Ades, 1976)

The background of the painting remains ambiguous and dreamlike; its darkly coloured textured planes and avoidance of definite reference to space create a dream-but-partially-oppressive atmosphere. This painting illustrates very nicely the surrealist fondness for blurring edges between the real and imaginary. (Hopkins, 1998)

Ernst had a very strong interest in Freudian psychoanalysis, but *The Robing of the Bride* can be said to investigate repressed desire and the unconscious mind. Birdlike details such as these on the bride lead towards a sense of transformation and point towards an interest in metamorphosis and fecundity and drives of an animal nature.

The bride: Here she appears in a double aspect: the bride can be interpreted to represent some sort of transition or ritual. Humanness and animal characteristics of life are brought together in her. The bright red colour on her cloak speaks of danger and passion and adds to the erotic and threatening connotation of the picture. The owl link with the subconscious and night-time mystery relates to the surrealist interest in those aspects of the mind repressed. The Male Figure: The peeping male figure suggests either the voyeurism of the male gaze or the watchful eye of society as a means of presenting issues of control and voyeurism. (Hopkins, 1998)

When it comes to surrealism, it often disrupts the way we mimic reality, but Max Ernst takes a different approach. He uses mimetic techniques to ground his fantastical imagery in a realistic framework. The textures of feathers, skin, and fabrics are so detailed that they convincingly reflect the physical world. (Ades, 1976) Yet, the way these elements are combined defies conventional logic, transforming our understanding of a cohesive reality into something dreamlike. This shift from realistic details to a surrealist scene showcases Ernst's focus not on reality itself, but on the internal, subconscious experience of it. Created at the onset of World War II, *The Robing of the Bride* likely mirrors the anxieties and uncertainties of that time. The painting's surreal atmosphere and fragmented forms may convey the disintegration of social and moral norms during the war. Max Ernst's surrealist masterpiece, *The Robing of the Bride*, pushes the boundaries of how we think about representation and reality. Through dreamlike imagery and symbolic elements, the painting explores themes of transformation, desire, and the subconscious. (Hopkins, 1998) Ernst skillfully employs mimetic realism to depict fantastical forms, highlighting surrealism's unique connection to mimesis in works that feel both familiar and strange, rational yet irrational. The outcome is haunting and evocative, inviting endless interpretation and contemplation.

## CONCLUSION

The connection between mimesis and surrealism showcases a captivating shift in how we think about and practice artistic representation. Traditionally, mimesis has been all about mimicking the world we can see, but surrealism takes it a step further by diving into the depths of our

unconscious, dreams, and the more irrational aspects of human experience. This shift really shakes up the old-school idea of art as just a copy of reality; instead, it positions art as a powerful means to uncover the hidden truths and complexities of our minds. Take a look at works like René Magritte's *The Lovers* (1928) and Max Ernst's *The Robing of the Bride* (1940). These surrealist artists show us that art can reflect not only the outside world but also the elusive, symbolic inner world we all carry (Cohen, 2014; Ades, 1976). They twist realism by weaving in elements that spark mystery, desire, and transformation, mirroring both personal and universal psychological experiences. In this way, surrealism redefines mimesis, using distortion and symbolism to suggest that reality is layered and goes beyond what we can see. By connecting the real with the surreal, surrealist art highlights mimesis as a lively process that can capture both the external and internal aspects of human existence. This broader perspective on imitation deepens our appreciation of art, framing it as a medium that not only reflects reality but also transcends it, inviting viewers to engage in a richer contemplation of existence, identity, and the unconscious mind. With its groundbreaking approach, surrealism continues to challenge our ideas about what art can accomplish, encouraging audiences to explore the thin line between reality and imagination. Future studies could delve deeper into how surrealism's take on mimesis has shaped modern art movements. Plus, comparing Western surrealist traditions with non-Western artistic practices could shed light on how different cultural viewpoints influence the relationship between imitation and artistic creativity. Furthermore, by comparing Western surrealist traditions with Malay artistic practices, this study contributes to broader dialogues in comparative art history and Southeast Asian visual culture, aligning with current interests in decolonizing art history and broadening the discourse beyond Eurocentric paradigms.

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