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On the Verge of the (Un)Known: *Zero Hour* by Ray Bradbury and the Paintings of René Magritte

Abstract

The article discusses the correlation of ambience in Ray Bradbury's science fiction short story *Zero Hour* and the paintings by a well-known Belgian Surrealist René Magritte. It specifies first the influences of *Scuola Metaphysica* on creating the specific poignant atmosphere visible in the works of the painter and then focuses on pointing out similar notions in the short story by Bradbury. Next, the article analyses the techniques, employed by both the artist and the writer, that help to create the above-mentioned mood. The focus is predominantly on Bradbury's narrative where the linguistic level as well as the visual one are considered and then the analysis follows in relation to such mechanisms as contrast, juxtaposition, *non sequitur* or *dépaysement*.

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Introduction

Reading Ray Bradbury's (1920–2012) short story entitled *Zero Hour*, the reader may notice that the text is characterized by a certain surreal and eerie ambience. This is thanks to Bradbury's narrator who communicates with the reader with the use of very well constructed and emotionally engaging pictures that, in turn, can be linked to the works of René Magritte (1898–1967). What connects these seemingly distant texts of culture is their atmosphere and the way this atmosphere is structured and created. Certainly such a relationship is dictated, to some extent by a subjective choice based on highly personal associations and therefore should be viewed as an instantiation of *hypotyposis*.

According to the dictionary of foreign words edited by Irena Kamińska-Szmaj, the word *hypotyposis* comes from Greek and it means an outline or pattern (Jarosz, Adamski, Kamińska-Szmaj 2001). As for its use in literature and literary studies, it is defined as a rhetorical figure which is used in the constructions of very vivid, ekphrastic narratives. Moreover, such depictions are based, to a large extent, on visual associations. A similar explanation of *hypotyposis* is provided by Władysław Kopaliński in his dictionary of foreign words and expressions (web). It is explained there as a vivid and pictorial verbal representation which refers to our sense of sight or, in other words, as a picturesque, highly illustrative demonstration of the theme. We also learn that the term comes from the Greek word *hypotyphōin* meaning to sketch. In the following vein it is referred to by Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska in *Słownik terminów literackich* [*Dictionary of Literary Terms*] (Głowiński et al. 1998: 205–206). She talks about it in a very vivid way with verbal presentation which predominantly appeals to our visual concepts. A longer discussion dealing with hypotyposis can be found in Adam Dziadek's book on the inference of arts (2011).

Analogous explanations are to be found in English sources. As stated by Richard A. Lanham, hypotyposis means “sketch, outline, pattern” and is synonymous with enargia which in turn is defined by him as “[a] generic term for visually powerful, vivid description which recreates something or someone, as several theorists say, «before your very eyes»” (1990).. He continues saying that for him “the most representative use of this term (...) is Dionysius of Halicarnassus's description of Lysias's powers of description (*Critical Essays*, “Lysias”, 7). Lysias, Dionysius writes, makes his listener feel that he can «see the actions which are being

described going on and that he is meeting face-to-face the characters in the orator's story» (ibidem). As for a thorough historical overview of hypotyposis, Sandra Logan offers it in her *Text/Events in Early Modern England. Poetics of History*. We can read there that hypotyposis is “a poetic means stimulating the experience of seeing” (Logan 2007: 4). In her book she employs hypotyposis to analyze the texts of the second half of the sixteenth century and the main political events of Elizabethan culture. As for the consideration of hypotyposis from a philosophical perspective, the article by Rei Terada *Seeing is Reading* provides a discussion over the question of hypotyposis serving as “a model for the realization of aesthetics' limits and the self-critical registration of this realization” (web). The author focuses, among others, on Kant's §59 of the *Third Critique*, “On Beauty as the Symbol of Morality” from which it is clear that for Kant “hypotyposes have intuitive content: they are schemata or symbols.” The article also refers to other approaches to hypotyposis, like Derrida's or de Man's, supplies historical perspective in the field of philosophy and aesthetics and points to the blurred borders of the trope within the spheres. Likewise, Adam Westra ponders over symbolic hypotyposis in relation to Kant's theory of symbolic representation in his book *The Typic in Kant's 'Critique of Practical Reason'. Moral Judgment and Symbolic Representation* (2016). Hypotyposis is such a broad notion that it is employed by many researchers in different fields. For instance, apart from visual arts and philosophy, hypotyposis is also a recognized tool in historical as well as topographical studies. As an example which may serve to be useful, respectively, is Kathrin Maurer's *Visualizing the Past: The Power of the Image in German Historicism* (2013), and J. L. Lightfoot's *Dionysius Periegetes. Description of the Known World* (2014), in which the ancient concept of hypotyposis is discussed in geographical terms.

Accordingly, the aim of the article is to demonstrate, using the concept of hypotyposis, the correlation of ambience in Bradbury's short story and Magritte's paintings. It is interesting to see how *Zero Hour* induces in the reader to emotions that also permeate the works of Magritte. However, before turning to the main discussion, let us first consider the influences on Magritte's artistic oeuvre. This is important since these sources significantly contributed to the development of the characteristic ambience which appeared on the canvases of the surrealist painter and can be traced in the narrative by Bradbury.

Influences or what is behind the atmosphere of Magritte's paintings

One of the strongest influences that can be accounted for in the works of Magritte are those related to *Scuola Metafisica* (the Metaphysical School) set up in 1917. Nonetheless, the beginnings of the school can be traced back to a couple of years earlier that is circa 1911–12, when a peculiar metaphysical style appeared in Italy. This was mostly thanks to Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978) and his dislike of the “fast and loud” works of Futurists. In contrast to their artistic compositions, his paintings pursued the quiet and the spiritual part of our existence. These artistic practices of de Chirico were for the first time described as “metaphysical” in 1913 by the French poet of Polish origin Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) (*Encyklopedia PWN*, web), who was also a great advocate of this new artistic approach. Yet, it was not until 1917 that de Chirico's *Pittura Metafisica* was transformed into a proper movement. That year the artist was recovering from a nervous breakdown in a hospital in Ferrara, Italy, together with another painter Carlo Carrà (1881–1966), who already knew the metaphysical style of

painting of de Chirico and was captured by it (Passeron 1993: 30). The two spent the time discussing the novel form of expression and as a result they decided to set up *Scuola Metafisica*.

The ideas introduced and popularized by the Metaphysical School were not, however, entirely new. Both Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carrà were highly affected by the theories in circulation. The most visible influence is that of the Symbolist movement. Therefore, the metaphysical paintings are frequently making use of symbols and Symbolist-like motifs and images. Next, due to de Chirico's interest in the theories and concepts of such thinkers as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), especially his approach to enigma, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), notably his idea of intuitive knowledge, and Otto Weininger (1880–1903), principally his concept of geometric metaphysics, (*Metaphysical Painting*, web) the Metaphysical School was supplied with strong philosophical foundations. As a result of the mixture of the above mentioned theories and de Chirico's own views, the major interests of the new school revolved around the unnoticed or invisible (super-natural) side of objects and figures. Hence their name *Scuola Metafisica*. In other words, the members of the movement were concerned about those features of the portrayed object which were not visible, yet they were at the same time a part of the very object. Thereupon, they believed that their art was prophetic — the painter put on canvas what he managed to see or glimpse in the moment of clear vision undisturbed by appearances. Additionally, the *Pittura Metafisica* painters were also inspired by the Early Renaissance works by such painters as Giotto, Masaccio, Piero della Francesca or Paolo Uccello. Therefore, frequent references to architecture, the usage of strong colours and inclusions of classical elements often feature in their artistic compositions.

The movement was a short-lived one for the School of Metaphysical Painting came to an end ca. 1920. Nevertheless, its impact on the next generation of artists was quite conspicuous. First and foremost, it was a springboard and an inspiration for Surrealism; many painters of the 20th century (like George Grosz, Max Ernst or Russell Drysdale) adapted the style or some of its features. Amongst them is René Magritte who seems to inherit most from *Scuola Metafisica*.

Metaphysical traces in René Magritte's oeuvre

The dominating concept permeating the works of Magritte rests on the creation of a specific atmosphere which is obtained by favouring certain spaces, focusing on contours and shapes, making the use of light and of vivid colours, playing with perspective and juxtaposing objects. Let us now look closely at the above enumerated features in relation to the artist's predecessors.

Discussing the space presented on metaphysical canvases, we can notice that it was habitually devoid of people although the elements used within the composition would point to men and their activity. For example de Chirico was fond of deserted cities, urban fragments, enigmatic vistas and claustrophobic living spaces. As for Magritte, his pictures are also pre-occupied with equally menacing spaces. Thus they frequently portray the scenes and claustrophobic interiors that are either void of people (e.g. *Memory of Voyage*¹, fig. 1; *The Listening*

¹ All illustrations come from the so-called public domain and are low-resolution images of works of art (or of their reproductions) used in the article for educational purposes only. They are a part of the commentary on either the work in question, the artistic genre or technique of the work of art or the school to which the artist belongs.

Room, fig. 2) or use humanoid figures for compositional purposes (like in *The Month of the Grape Harvest*, fig. 3; *Natural Encounters*, fig. 4). As a result, the locations, although connected with the everyday and the recognizable, give an impression of the unspecific, timeless and strange. In other words, the onlooker is to see the extraordinary and fantastic in the elements generally regarded as commonplace and familiar.

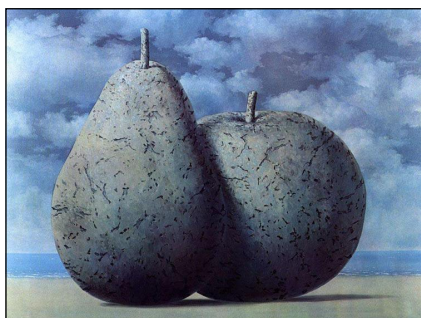


Fig. 1. *Memory of Voyage* (1952)



Fig. 2. *The Listening Room* (1952)



Fig. 3. *The Month of the Grape Harvest* (1959)

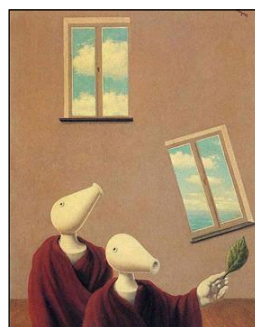


Fig. 4. *Natural Encounters* (1945)

Turning to lines and planes, one has to emphasize strong contours and geometrical shapes eagerly employed by the metaphysical painters. Whatever was portrayed, be it a view, a landscape, a cityscape or an object, it was drawn with a strong line and a sculpture-like solidity. Even the representations of people were endowed with architectural notions, being a straightforward influence of the 16th c. painting tradition. Subsequently, figures of people were treated only as additions to urban vistas; they were paralleled to objects, seemed lifeless and faceless. It was difficult to recognize a living human being in the statue-like or doll-like characters composed of geometric shapes. These features are also echoed in Magritte's canvases, for example in the already mentioned *Natural Encounters* (fig. 4).

The above delineated features and their emotional effect on the on-looker were also very much connected with light and colour. The Metaphysical artists were for clearly stated colours and the tones straightforwardly indicating the emotions the painter was driving at. For instance, de Chirico would go for dark brown, deep red, the blue of a storm stricken sky or raven colour to suggest the ominous, the unknown and the frightening, etc., whereas Carlo Carra would endow the same landscapes and objects with brighter colours to the effect that the enigma on his canvases was occasionally humorous. A similar approach is reflected in the paintings of Magritte who seems to combine de Chirico's clarity of colour and Carra's brighter, humorous tone, like in *Personal Values* (fig. 5) where a comb larger than life is sitting on a bed as if talking to other "big figures" in the room, i.e. a match and a soap relaxing on the carpet, a shaving brush lurking from above the wardrobe and a dignified glass standing in the middle. And all this presented in a quite heavenly context — the walls of the room are painted in blue sky and clouds). Next, the creepy, haunting and often apocalyptic emotions flowing from *Scuola Metafisica* works were emphasized by the conscious usage of light. Sinister shadows, hooded figures, strange objects half-hidden in the dark, unlit spaces were an important element of their compositions. The light that appears on their pictures is frequently unnatural and mysterious, coming from an unidentified source. As for Magritte, an example of such light manipulation is clearly visible in his series entitled very suggestively *The Empire of Lights* (fig. 6).



Fig. 5. *Personal Values* (1952)

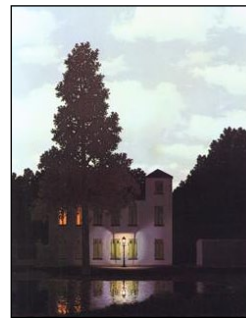


Fig. 6. *The Empire of Lights* (1950)

The above mentioned characteristics are also related to perspective. The metaphysical painters eagerly played with it producing images that would lend surprising depths to the canvas. As a result the presented views were solid and exaggerated and resembled those from dreams. This playfulness with size and perception is very well visible in Magritte's *Memory of Voyage* (fig. 1) or *The Listening Room* (fig. 2). Moreover, the works were populated with figures and objects that were taken out of their original contexts and placed in unexpected, baffling, often stupefying, patterns. This is a link with yet another characteristic feature of the compositions of de Chirico and his followers, namely juxtaposition. They would place together elements, objects, views that commonly are associated with thoroughly different environments. Turning to our Surrealist painter, one of the classic examples is his painting *Black Flag* (fig. 7), where commonly recognized objects like a window frame, a cork-screw or a door are on the one hand set against a gray, dark, sky-like space and on the other they

are juxtaposed in relation to one another thus bringing to mind unidentified flying objects rather than everyday tools. What follows is that these quite simple representations of the ordinary and the everyday become disturbing and unfamiliar, just like in the case of Giorgio de Chirico or Carlo Carra². As A. H. Hammacher rightly notices, this ostensibly common world of Magritte turns out to be very illusionary (Hammacher 1994: 7).

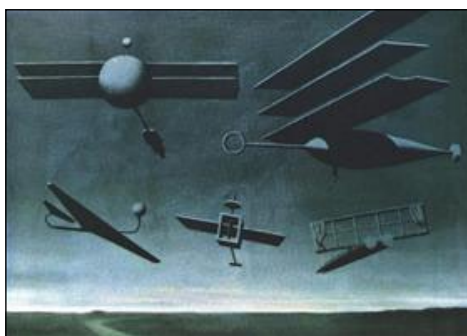


Fig. 7. *Black Flag* (1949)

Finally, in view of Ray Bradbury's *Zero Hour*, the most interesting element of the debate concerning Surrealist art is the one referring to childhood. It is interesting to notice that the works of the Surrealist are teeming with toys. And Magritte's canvases are no exception. As David Hopkins remarks, "[t]oys are perhaps the most innocuous attributes of the child, but they too can possess a sinister side" (Hopkins 2016: 273). Tracing the roots of this "childish" interest, Hopkins suggests Charles Baudelaire's essay on toys (*A Psychology of Toys*, ca. 1850) as the main influence and gives examples of Surrealist works that illustrate the point. Among them, there is de Chirico with his Toy paintings series as well as Magritte's works concentrating on the objects characteristic for a child's play. The latter would frequently resort to "the *bilboquet*, a traditional French wooden toy consisting of a lathed spike connected by a string to a ball (...), the motif [of which] metamorphosed into a more generic lathed form, suggestive of a table leg or a chess piece (as in *The Lost Jockey* of 1926)" (2016: 273). These childhood-related works of René Magritte are equally, or even more, puzzling, unsettling and eerie as "adult" ones. Probably one of the most well-known pieces is *Time Transfixed* (fig. 8) with a locomotive as if rushing on the viewer, yet at the same time being stuck in the fire place. A seemingly homely and quiet setting results, however, in a harrowing feeling. Directly responsible for this ambience is the double paradox witnessed in this painting: first, the steam suggests full motion, whereas the concrete, walled-part of the fireplace points to a trap, a vivid obstacle; second, even when we think of it as child's play, some imagination at work, the location chosen for play is commonly viewed as unsuitable for children, not to mention the fact that the room seems to be void of people (none is reflected in the mirror)

² It is worth noticing, however, that this similarity of artistic expression is not coincidental. Magritte became friends with de Chirico in the early 1920s and in 1926 produced a series of collages entitled *The Lost Jockey*. The pictures were his Surrealist manifesto.

and thus too lonely and scary for a child to be there on his/her own. And such paradoxical concerns accompany the viewers of other pieces dealing with childhood. Various canvases showing little, claustrophobic spaces, or spaces structured into compartments, may bring to mind doll's houses (e.g. *Man Reading a Newspaper*, fig. 9), a jig-saw-like compositions (*The Six Elements*, fig. 10) or children's (quite horrifying) treasure boxes (*One Night Museum*, fig. 11). Other examples relate to education, like *Let Out of School* (fig. 12) which presents an enormous black ink (?) spot leaking from behind the wall, or maybe theatre decoration, onto the floor/stage, as if some monstrous, ghostly, shapeless being, or compositions showing carefully drawn objects, each with a (false) name underneath, framed in neat little compartments (the series entitles *Key to Dreams*, fig. 13) which are very suggestive of learning aids³.

Summing up, as it is stated by Elizabeth Legge in "Nothing, Ventured: Paris Dada into Surrealism"⁴ (Legge 2016), in comparison to other Surrealists, like Yves Tanguy or Joan Miró, the unconscious in Magritte's paintings was always controlled to some degree. Additionally, the author observes that "Magritte consciously commented on Surrealist concepts" (2016: 104). She supplies examples from his artistic oeuvre which are visual reactions to the theories of Freud. For instance she presents the painting *Gigantic Days* (fig. 14) as an evocative exemplification of the Freudian theory of hysterics. Legge also brings sexual symbolism to light in *Philosopher's Lamp* (fig. 15).



Fig. 8. *Time Transfixed* (1938)



Fig. 9. *Man Reading a Newspaper* (1928)

³ For a longer discussion of Magritte's image / word compositions in the perspective of semiotics see: "Images of Resemblance: Magritte's semiotic explorations" <https://courses.washington.edu/hypertext/cgi-bin/book/wordsi-images/magritte.html>.

⁴ Several thought-provoking and comprehensive articles are collected in eight volume series on *Einstein Meets Magritte: An Interdisciplinary Reflection...* 1999.

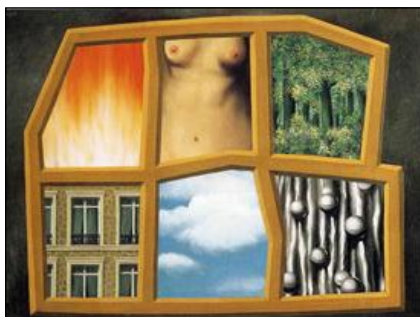


Fig. 10. *The Six Elements* (1928)

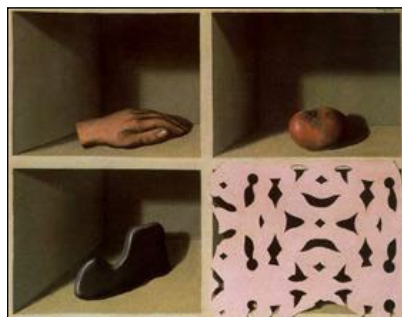


Fig. 11. *One Night Museum* (1927)



Fig. 12. *Let Out of School* (1927)

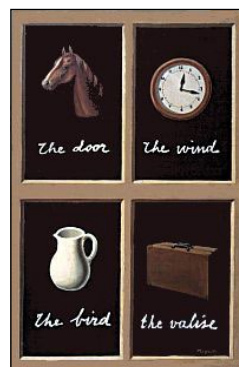


Fig. 13. *Key to Dreams* (1935)



Fig. 14. *Gigantic Days* (1928)

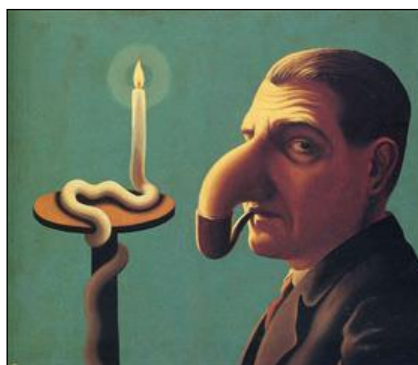


Fig. 15. *Philosopher's Lamp* (1936)

As for ambience, the dominant feeling of René Magritte's paintings is that of passivity, the emotion akin to the one related to the Metaphysical School of painting. Immobilized figures, resigned and unwilling to change anything in order to alleviate their distress or frozen, abidingly fixed objects, seem to haunt both Magritte's canvases and the viewer: a couple in a close embrace, yet unable to see each other since their heads are covered with some cloth (*The Lovers II*, fig. 16); a mirror that reflects the infinity of the sky and timelessness rather than the room it is in (*The Looking Glass*, fig. 17); the view squeezed on a small canvas which is poised on an easel blocking out the view outside the window (*The Human Condition*, fig. 18). As in a dream or in a nightmare, this physical immobility and limitation results in psychic desperation and anxiety. Magritte also makes use of surprising juxtapositions (*Manet's Balcony*, fig. 19), unexpected perspective (*The Cut-glass Bath*, fig. 20) and non sequitur images (*Time transfixed*, fig. 8 or *The Blanc Signature*, fig. 21).



Fig. 16. *The Lovers II* (1928)



Fig. 17. *The Looking Glass* (1963)



Fig. 18. *The Human Condition* (1933)



Fig. 19. *Manet's Balcony* (1950)

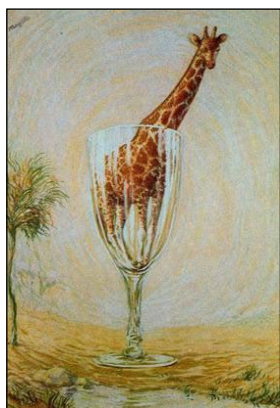


Fig. 20. *The Cut-glass Bath* (1946)



Fig. 21. *The Blanc Signature* (1965)

Having discussed the influence responsible for the ambience in René Magritte's paintings, let us now turn to the short story by Ray Bradbury. It is interesting to see how particular artistic techniques help to establish similar visual and emotional links between the two arts.

***Zero Hour* by Ray Bradbury. Flirting with Magritte**

On finishing reading Ray Bradbury's short story *Zero Hour* the reader is left with the feeling akin to the one experienced by the viewer of the pictures created by Surrealist René Magritte, i.e. the feeling of disturbing anxiety, uncertainty, unexplained fear, puzzlement and mystery. Trying to label the source of these often extreme emotions or to find answers to the questions the reader is left with, we go back to the story and attempt to read it more closely. However, the more we read, the more disquieting the narrative appears to be. And this is all due to the Magritte-like way of presenting the verbally created scenes.

First and for most, just like in the case of the paintings of the Belgian Surrealist, playing with perspective vividly comes to the fore. Although the narration is conducted from the point of view of an adult, it eventually appears to be child-like. Gradually the reader realizes that the roles are reversed: the children, their behaviour and the language they (try to) use makes us think of the world of adults, while the adults remind us of helpless children. The inversion is quickly spotted on the linguistic level. The choice of words, when it comes to both the descriptions and the utterances of the characters, is one of the most important factors responsible for directing the emotions of the reader towards the puzzling, the strange and the unknown. Let us consider the opening paragraph. It presents to us a seemingly conventional, happy picture of children playing an exciting game in the garden near their houses:

Oh, it was to be so **jolly**! What a **game**! Such **excitement** they hadn't known in years. The children catapulted this way and that across the **green lawns**, **shouting** at each other, **holding hands**, **flying in circles**, **climbing trees**, **laughing**. Overhead the rockets flew, and beetle **cars** **whispered** by on the streets, but the children played on. Such **fun**, such **tremulous joy**, such **tumbling and hearty screaming**. (Bradbury 1996:10)

However, there is something in this description that makes the reader undecided about the emotions it stirs. On the one hand what we see (children happily engrossed in their game) calls for a smile and induces a positive reaction. All the words in bold (emphasis mine) direct the reader towards the feelings related to innocent playfulness and idyllic childhood. But on the other hand there is a certain discrepancy in the description of the scene. Words and phrases like “it was to be so jolly” (so at the end it was not), “the children catapulted this way and that” (as if fired) already introduce certain doubts and make a mark on the otherwise idyllic picture. To laugh or not to laugh is the question that haunts the reader from the initial paragraph and stays with him until the end of the story.

Reading on, the reader comes across descriptions of Mink, a seven-year old girl, and the children she plays with:

Mink ran into the house, **all dirty and sweat**. For her seven years she was **loud and strong and definite**. (...) She was gone, **like a rocket**. (...) she **yanked out drawers and rattled pans and tools into a large sack**. (...) **fury and bustle** occurred only among the younger children.
(Bradbury 1996: 10)

Due to the words emphasized above (emphasis mine), the safe playground is transformed into a small battle field with scattered (catapulted) soldiers who are busily firing, shooting, running. The very same tone underlines the brief conversations between Mink and her Mom. On the surface the language used by the characters seems to fall into a familiar and thus expected pattern of parent-child exchange:

«Heavens, Mink, what’s going on?»
«The most exciting game ever!» gasped Mink, pink-faced.
«Stop and get your breath», said the mother.
«No, I’m all right», gasped Mink. «Okay I take these things, Mom?»
«But don’t dent them», said Mrs. Morris.
«Thank you, thank you!» cried Mink, and boom! She was gone, like a rocket. Mrs. Morris surveyed the fleeing tot. «What’s the name of the game?»
«Invasion!» said Mink. The door slammed.

(Bradbury 1996: 10)

Yet, again there is a disquieting element that may be noticed, namely the contrast between the safe and relaxed ambience of the scene (caring mother, pink-faced daughter, garden, home, having a good time with friends) and the words used in reference to it: “and **boom!** She was gone, **like a rocket**”, “**fleeing** tot”, “the **door slammed**” and the name of the game itself, i.e. ‘**Invasion**’. Like in the already quoted fragments, they sound ominous and enhance the feeling of estrangement.

Furthermore, the strangeness as far as the language is concerned is visible in the way the two groups employ it, namely children try extremely hard to make it more complex whereas the mother goes for simplification. Not only do Mink and her playground friends constantly talk about invasion and its strategy, but they also make an effort to use the vocabulary which nether matches their age nor their educational development:

«Triangle», said Mink.

«What's a tri,» said Anna with difficulty, «angle?»

(...) «How you spell it?» asked Anna.

«T-r-i —» spelled Mink slowly, then snapped, «Oh, spell it yourself!» She went on to other words. «Beam», she said.

(...) «Four-nine-seven-A-and-B-and-X», said Mink, far away, seriously. «And a fork and a string and a -hex-hex-agony— hexagonal!»

(...) «And then there's something about dim-dims».

«Dim-dims?»

«Dimens-shuns».

«Dimensions?»

«Four of 'em!»

(...) «What's lodge-ick?»

«Logic? Why, dear, logic is knowing what things are true and not true».

(...) «And what's im-pres-sion-able?» It took her a minute to say it. «Why, it means — ' Her mother looked at the floor, laughing gently. 'It means — to be a child, dear».

(Bradbury 1996: 12–16)

They use long, complex words as if to prove that they are old and learnt enough for the task someone assigned them with. As for mom, she treats Mink's questions about the meaning of the phrases as funny for in her opinion their seriousness and complexity do not correspond with playfulness and childhood. Moreover, trying to be understood, she feeds Mink with very general explanations which are stereotypical and thus banal.

Consequently, the contrast between the expectations of the reader and the realization is the dominant technique used in the discussed short story. Bradbury, like Magritte, shocks and puzzles his audiences by mixing registers and juxtaposing the elements that commonly do not appear next to each other. A pipe is actually not a pipe, to paraphrase a famous inscription of Magritte's picture (*The Treachery of Images*, 1929). Such mode of playing with the reader's emotions is maintained throughout the whole text, up to the very end. What changes is only the proportion of the positive and the negative poignant emotions. As was noted above, at first we only slightly sense the uneasy, dense and unnatural atmosphere of the story. Yet, gradually the balance shifts and anxiety and frustration take over. Almost with every paragraph of the story the atmosphere thickens. More and more lexical items used refer to war and terror, and the idyllic, tranquil ambience of the place is frequently contrasted with the feverish movement of children or ominous stirrings of nature: "The streets were lined with good green and peaceful trees. Only the wind made a conflict across the city, across the country, across the continent". Paradoxically, immobility (associated with death) is praised whereas movement (associated with life) is shown as leading to a conflict which gradually spreads across the world, just like the new game. By analogy, Mrs. Morris, Mink's mother, is like a tree – symbolically fixed at home (home, sweet home), and the daughter is like the wind (of some ominous change). Meanwhile, Mink who plays outside, gets home occasionally either to eat, to drink or to get some things needed for the game. But every time she is in and talks to her mom, she is in a great hurry, is irritated by her parent's questions and constantly talks about "the invasion":

During all this Mink fidgeted. «Hurry, Mom! This is a matter of life and death! Aw-»
 (...) «Mom, I got to run if we want to have the Invasion!»
 (...) «They couldn't figure a way to attack, Mom. Drill says - he says in order to make a good fight you got to have a new way of surprising people. That way you win. And he says also you got to have help from your enemy».
 «A fifth column», said Mom.
 (...) «I hate them worst. We'll kill them first».

(Bradbury 1996:13–14)

And it is not only due to the accumulation of the war-like vocabulary items that the atmosphere changes into something more and more gruesome. Some words are repeated at certain intervals that get shorter and shorter. These are: “invasion” in various forms and “zero hour”, the key phrases of the game. Additionally, towards the end of the story, they are merged with the clock ticking and time passing, making the tension unbearable:

«Zero hour. Five o'clock! Bye». Mink exited, zipping her yo-yo.
 Time passed. A curious, waiting silence came upon the street, deepening. Five o'clock. A clock sang softly somewhere in the house in a quiet musical voice: «Five o'clock — five o'clock. Time's a-wasting. Five o'clock —» and purred away into silence. Zero hour.
 Mrs. Morris chuckled in her throat. Zero hour.

(Bradbury 1996: 18)

The scene appears as if it is copied from Magritte's paintings — it is stilled, pregnant with silence, immobilized in time. Also, the more the mother feels worried, the more anxious the reader becomes. And just like the mother, we do not want to acknowledge that something horrible is about to happen.

The figure of the mother is an important element in building the atmosphere. Since the narration is conducted from her perspective, the reader follows her emotional state and adopts her way of coping with intuitive fear. Whenever the mother feels uneasy, she classifies it as irrational since she cannot *see* anything in her surroundings that should make her feel so. Therefore Mrs. Morris tries to focus her attention on the “rational”, i.e. the everyday and the known, thus (seemingly) unchangeable and stable. She prepares the meals, does the housework, chats to a friend on the videophone, listens to the typical, reassuring noises of the neighbourhood (“Meanwhile, parents came and went in chromium beetles. Repair men came to repair the vacuum elevators in houses, to fix fluttering television sets or hammer upon stubborn food-delivery tubes”; Bradbury 1996: 10–11) and ponders over children: “The children. She looked upon them and shook her head. Well, they'd eat well, sleep well, and be in school on Monday. Bless their vigorous little bodies. She listened” (1996: 12).

But all these actions are to mask her real concerns. A moment later, when she sees how “Mink talked earnestly to someone near the rose bush — though there was no one there”. She concludes: “These **odd** children”. (*Emphasis mine*; Bradbury 1996: 12).

What is more, trying to cope with the surging feeling of something apocalyptic looming large, Mrs. Morris tries to laugh her fears away:

«He's — well — maybe from Jupiter or Saturn or Venus. Anyway, he's had a hard time».
 «I imagine». Mrs. Morris **hid her mouth behind her hand**.
 «We're impregnable». said Mom in **mock seriousness**.

«And they couldn't figure a way to surprise Earth or get help».
 «No wonder. We're pretty darn strong». **Mom laughed**, cleaning up.
 (...) «Until, one day», whispered Mink melodramatically, «they thought of children!»
 «Well» **said** Mrs. Morris **brightly**.
 «It's getting late in the day and, if you want to have **your** Invasion before your supper bath, you'd better jump».

(Bradbury 1996)

Seemingly playful like a child (see the words in bold — my emphasis), Mrs. Morris merely pretends, also before herself, that she is cheerful and that she is emotionally engaged in the game. Also the reader is coaxed to believe that nothing bad or tragic is really going to happen. This is due, among others, to the employment of juxtaposition and contrast visible in the composition of the narration. Just like in the case of Mink's mother, who resorts to everydayness in order to defuse tension and nervousness, the reader is presented alternatively with the disquieting pictures highly charged with negative emotions (descriptions of the game, angry Mink, conversations related to invasion) and with the images pointing directly or indirectly to the routine of everyday life, and safety. This layer-cake structure of narration culminates at the point of highest tension, namely when the ticking of the clock is audible thanks to the phrase "the clock sang" ("softly", "in a quiet musical tone") as well as the repetition of the hour (five o'clock) several times within one short paragraph (see the passage quoted above). Thus, again, on the one hand the negative emotions and brooding feelings are awakened by the underlined ticking of the clock and the passing of time. The reader knows that five o'clock is the zero hour — the time of the supposed attack. Yet, on the other hand this particular time of the day is associated with tea time, a regular break in daily activities and chores. What follows is the fact that one more time we half believe that something terrible is about to happen. Similarly as in previously described instances, our emotional reaction overlaps with that of the mother. When the clock finally strikes five, the only other sounds Mrs Morris hears are those of a regular afternoon:

A beetle car hummed into the driveway. Mr. Morris. Mrs. Morris smiled. Mr. Morris got out of the beetle, locked it, and called hello to Mink at her work. Mink ignored him. He laughed and stood for a moment watching the children. Then he walked up the front steps.

«Hello, darling».

«Hello, Henry».

(Bradbury 1996: 18–19)

Everything seems to be over now. Mrs. Morris gives a smile of relief — an apparent sign for the reader to do the same. Moreover, now she is not alone to deal with her fears and worries, be it rational or irrational. The moment Mr. Morris, the father, appears a whole range of conventional thoughts also enter: the traditional breadwinner, all day long busy with his work, not particularly aware of home affairs, has neither time nor will to pursue irrational feelings and above all does not want his peaceful, boring but at the same time very stable and reassuring, routine to be damaged or interrupted; the father figure. Nevertheless, this fairly-tale bliss comes to an end almost immediately:

The children were silent. Too silent. He emptied his pipe⁵, refilled it. «Swell day. Makes you glad to be alive». Buzz.

«What's that?» asked Henry.

«I don't know». She got up suddenly, her eyes widening. She was going to say something. She stopped it. Ridiculous. Her nerves jumped. (...) The buzzing grew louder.

«What are they up to? I'd better go look, all right».

(Bradbury 1996: 19)

The Father's question "What's that?" seems to be a matter-of-fact one, but the mother is visibly startled. Quite interestingly, the father is not convinced that something is (very) wrong even when he and his wife experience the explosions ("The explosion! The house shook with dull sound. There were other explosions in other yards on other street"; Bradbury 1996: 19). Nor is he convinced by the insane acting of his wife (she runs screaming upstairs, to the attic, forcing her husband to follow her, then once in, she locks the door from the inside and throws the key away): "Are you crazy? Why'd you throw that key away? Damn it, honey!" (1996: 20). The more she is frightened, the more it gets on his nerves. Still further, upon hearing someone entering the house, Mr. Morris is ready to ignore her pleading to stay where he is and be quite, and wants to go and check what is really happening. His actions symbolically correspond to the reader's irrational hope of a rational explanation of the on-going events.

«Quiet. They'll hear us. Oh, God, they'll find us soon enough —»

Below them, Mink's voice. The husband stopped. There was a great universal humming and sizzling, a screaming and giggling. (...) Footsteps came into the house. Heavy footsteps.

«Who's coming in my house?» demanded Henry angrily.

«Whose tramping around down there?»

Heavy feet. Twenty, thirty, forty, fifty of them. Fifty persons crowding into the house. The humming. The giggling of the children. «This way!» cried Mink, below.

«Who's downstairs?» roared Henry. «Who's there!»

(Bradbury 1996: 20)

Mr. Morris not only denies to accept the situation but he is genuinely angry, still thinking it must be a stupid joke. Moreover, his down to earth, conventional reaction makes the reader still undecided — whom to believe? To fear or not to fear is now the question. Quite ironically, the way he behaves makes us think of a fairy tale, namely "Goldilocks and the Three Bears". This, in turn, makes him more like a child. As a result the reader does not take him seriously. What is worse, it is him now who seems to act irrationally. The angry dad is not only demanding the answer but he is ready to get even with the trespassers. Consequently, the counterpunching of the scene that induces terrifying emotions with an image from a fairy tale results in stupefaction, a horrifying feeling of amazement that is closer to fear rather than to laughter. Moreover, this something that the parents are afraid of is shown neither to them nor to the reader. We only hear certain sounds (another contrast: children's giggling versus strange humming, ominous sizzling, and heavy steps) but we do not know what to expect.

The suspense never ceases, nor does the solution come, be it happy or unhappy. For when finally the father acknowledges the coming danger (alas, too late — nothing can be

⁵ A reference to a pipe can also be treated as a tribute to Magritte's work.

done now), we still do not know what it is that both now Mr. and Mrs. Morris are so afraid of — at the end the story becomes even more enigmatic and still more frightening:

They trembled together in silence in the attic, Mr. and Mrs. Morris. For some reason the electric humming, the queer cold light suddenly visible under the door crack, the strange odor and the alien sound of eagerness in Mink's voice finally got through to Henry Morris too. He stood, shivering, in the dark silence, his wife beside him.

«Mom! Dad!» Footsteps. A little humming sound. The attic-lock melted. The door opened. Mink peered inside, tall blue shadows behind her. «Peek-a-boo», said Mink.

(Bradbury 1996: 21)

Apart from the little, excited, smiling girl saying “peekaboo”, the reader is presented with the picture which, although described in detail, is quite unspecified. The scene is highly visual thanks to the references to all our senses — we can feel it (parents trembling together, father shivering), we can smell it (“the strange odor”), we can see it (“the queer cold light”, “the dark silence”, “tall blue shadows”) and above all we can hear it (“the electric humming”, “the alien (!) sound of eagerness” of Mink's voice, “footsteps”, “a little humming sound”, “peekaboo”). But as in the case of Magritte's paintings — we are no longer interested in what we see but rather in what we cannot perceive. Additionally, the final clash, i.e. the scared stiff adults and the victorious little hunter with her team that casts blue shadows, is the climax of the ominous ambience. Neither the end nor the beginning offer us the escape from it. The reader is trapped between the “peekaboo” and “zero hour” and vice versa. The title and the ending serve as frames. What is beyond them is left to our speculative imagination.

And one more element responsible for the building of the Magritte-like atmosphere, namely the juxtaposition of certain objects combined with the manipulation of perspective. In the story the children are portrayed with the objects which are conventionally associated with the world of adults.

In every yard on the street children brought out **knives** and **forks** and **pokers** and old **stove-pipes** and **can-openers**, assorted **spoons** and **wrenches**.

«Those children haven't anything dangerous out there, have they?» she said.

«Nothing but **pipes** and **hammers**. Why?»

«Nothing electrical?»

«Heck, no», said Henry. «I looked».

(Bradbury 1996: 19)

Surprisingly, the parents see nothing strange or dangerous in heavy tools and sharp objects (see the words in bold — emphasis mine). They childishly believe that merely “something electrical” can be classified as potentially detrimental to children's well-being. Such an approach is at least perturbing. Therefore, the feeling of the reader is akin to the one experienced by the viewer of Magritte's *Black Flag* (fig. 1). Taking the objects from their conventional, socially accepted contexts and placing them in “unfitting” environment results in apprehension. In the case of *Zero Hour*, the worlds of adults and children overlap and as a consequence both spheres seem to exchange some elements, including the language.

Additionally, the children are adult-like also in the way they act: they are serious, dedicated and hard-working (Mink: “Tongues in teeth, face wrinkled in thought”; Bradbury 1996: 11) and uncompromising. Adults, on the other hand, are presented as scarred children who do

not know what is going on and who are (at the end also literary) kept in the dark. They are quite uncomplicated and predictable (they go to work, drive cars, do the house chores, etc. and finally hide themselves in the attic).

Discussing the elements influencing the creation of ambience, it should be also noticed that both Magritte and Bradbury make a successful use of *dépaysement*. In *Zero Hour* it is equally the adult characters and the (adult) readership that sense that specific enstrangement — suddenly a space that seems recognizable and safe transforms into strange and hostile. As we can notice, these are not only people that are taken out of their natural context but also the objects. Like in the paintings of Magritte, the presented things, frequently simple and commonly known, lose their conventional meaning the moment they change the environment in which they appear. As a result, an intellectual game with the reader (onlooker) begins — we try to search for some other logical explanation and toil to endow the old meaning with a new, fitting one. This is not an easy task and above all, this is a never ending one. Every time we encounter “tall blue shadows” or “the queer cold light” we feel puzzled, baffled and discomforted.

The feature that links the works of the two artists is also an element of humour. Although the whole short story is founded on vague fear and puzzlement, it nevertheless includes some nonsensical situations that do make us smile. For example, the father acting like a Father Bear from the fairy tale or the very last word uttered by the girl on finding her horrified parents huddling together — whatever the reader expected, it was not the childish “peekaboo”. The very same technique can be found in the painter’s works. For example “Monet’s Balcony” (fig. 2); although coffins are associated with death and funeral, here the viewer laughs seeing them, first, on a sunny balcony, second, seeing them in a vertical position (what is more, one of them is sitting, as if its content was too heavy to bear), third, acting like humans (they seem to watch us). In both cases, however, the visualized scenes give us shivers since we are not sure where they can lead to and whether we should laugh.

When discussing the ambience of *Zero Hour* by Ray Bradbury in relation to the atmosphere which emanates from the paintings of René Magritte, the feeling of isolation and strangeness strike us as dominant. The reader/viewer respectively is to sense the alienation and dismay, experience anxiety and angst, encounter bafflement and confusion. The suggested emotions are frequently linked to the unnatural lack of motion, an all embracing inertia and disturbing, prolonged quietness in the midst of the whirling world, as if the moment was frozen in time and space and we were waiting for something unimaginable, yet terrible in all probability, to happen. The tantalizing feeling of “something” being out-of-place never ceases — the more we look for the explanation of this “something”, the more elusive it appears. The enigma looms large in both cases. Additionally, the two authors create this mysterious, treacherous feeling by resorting to similar techniques and inspirations. Both of them search for the eeriness in everyday life which they provide with prophetic air. They manage to obtain it thanks to surprising juxtapositions, unfamiliar contrasts and theatricality of the setting (overdrawn contours, exaggerated details, focus on a particular quality of an object/figure, use of light, both artificial and natural, chiaroscuro). Finally, the writer as well as the artist annoy and frighten the reader/viewer with not what they show but with what they hide from them. Bradbury, just like Magritte, using the everyday and the well-known visualizes abstract notions like fear, jeopardy, naivety or disillusionment, occasionally seasoned with (black) humour or a (bitter) smile. And the strangest and most paradoxical thing is that we like this tantalizing combination.

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