

# Free research paper on analysis of salvadors dali the persistence of memory

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The First World War was a traumatizing event that caused people and artists to question the veracity of traditional values. Having experienced tremendous distress, people were thrown into a state of anxiety, which was marked by their struggle to find meaning in life. Society itself seemed to have succumbed into a state of cosmic insecurity, fueled by the bitterness and the disillusionment of the war. Individual and national psyches were marked by important, even radical changes, which the artists at the time, including the surrealist painters, successfully incorporated into their artworks. They embraced everything that was new, experimental and to some extent, irrational. These tendencies, along with new psychological discoveries about the workings of the human mind, are vividly reflected in the works of surrealist painters. Surrealists aimed “ to express in art the world of dreams and the unconscious” 1. Salvador Dali is representative for the surrealist movement, as his work explores new territories situated beyond the limits of rational thought. Also, Dali specifically makes use of art in order to investigate his own self, with the help of psychoanalysis and dream interpretation. This way, Salvador Dali’s painting “ The Persistence of Memory” incorporates all the characteristics of the surrealist movement: it makes use of the paranoiac-critical method to explore the unconscious, it facilitates the intersection between reality and fantasy through its dream-like, bizarre atmosphere and it employs the “ hand-painted photographs” technique that was so frequently used by Dali.

Inspired by Freud’s theories, surrealism aimed to bring out thoughts that were often repressed and to materialize them on the canvas. That represented the ultimate freedom of expression in the sense that artists

were supposed to free their ideas from the scrutiny of their own consciousness. Surrealism was about unleashing the darkest and most powerful creative forces that inhabited the human mind; it mixed the real world with the fantastic world. There were two important techniques developed by the surrealists: automatic drawing, which recorded the free flow of images, sentiments and desires that lay in the layers of the unconscious and “ old master technique in which the Surrealist images are carefully drawn in photographic style”<sup>2</sup> or the technique of “ hand-painted dream photographs”, as Salvador Dali later called it. At the same time, he introduced and explored the paranoiac-critical method that simulated the paranoiac mental activity and thus attempted to resurface images and desires that were deeply hidden in the unconscious. Through the paranoiac-critical method Dali aimed to “ create a new order or system from elements taken in the external world which otherwise would be unrelated to one another, and thereby subvert the world of reality”<sup>3</sup>. He attempted to establish an alternative concrete reality, in which imagination and irrationality had the same legitimacy as natural phenomena in the exterior world. Dali himself had an eccentric personality, always pushing the boundaries of creativity and imagination. It is important to understand these characteristics representative for the surrealist movement as well as Dali's character in order to apply them to the analysis of the painting “ The Persistence of Memory”.

“ The Persistence of Memory” (oil on canvas) was created in 1931, and as Kleiner suggests, it is “ a haunting allegory of empty space where time has ended”<sup>4</sup>. Even if the objects depicted don't seem to have a reasonable

connection with one another, the composition in itself is very well-balanced. The background is a representation of a barren shore line, strongly emphasized by the bright tones of yellow and orange. The beach stretches alongside a body of still water, while the latter blends with an empty, featureless sky; the rocky cliffs appear stiff in the corner and their orange nuance contrasts the blue color of the water and the sky. While the background is lit and accentuated by light, the foreground is darkened by a mysterious shadow. In the upper left corner, there is a strange rectangular form, while the foreground hosts a boxy-looking architectural block from which a small, lifeless tree emerges, without any leaves and with most of its branches ripped off. From the only branch that is left hangs a melting pocket watch, accompanied by other decaying watches lower on the block. In the middle-ground there lies a strange white creature with disturbingly long eyelashes; the creature resembles a fish that died on the dry sand tormented by the desperate lack of water. All the pocked watches are colored in variations of blue, while the last one on the big architectural block is of a red-orange color. This same watch is not depicted as being melted, but it is covered with ants instead; as if it is an organic life form in the process of degradation, to which ants are almost magnetically drawn to. A fly is also to be noticed on one of the melted watches, as if attracted to a degrading organic body. It seems that all organic life and all lifeless objects depicted in the scenery are subjected to a slow process of decay. At the same time, the soft-looking and almost dripping watches contrast with the rocky cliffs represented in the upper-right corner, creating well-composed and somewhat pleasant image.

The painting is a collection of objects and images that seem to have no rational connection between them; this is an obvious materialization of the paranoiac-critical method, which explores irrationality as a source of artistic inspiration. There is a feeling of nonsense and aberration in this painting, as if the viewer descends into a very strange dream. As dreams make no sense and project images that do not follow any rational or preconceived plot, so does this painting bring together objects that simply do not belong together. These objects might represent different codified desires that were pulled out of the artist's unconscious and brought out to light by using art as a medium for deeply subjective expression<sup>5</sup>. Some critics suggested the idea that the creature's extremely long eyelashes might have sexual connotations (related to Freud's theories about the unconscious), while others conveyed the idea that the depiction of the melted watches and the dead figure in the center represents the artist's realization that death is an impending event of mystical proportions that abolishes all notion of time. At the same time, the ants drawn to the solid pocket watch may represent Dali's anxieties and fears that move quickly and industriously within his mind. In any way, the painting is surely a depiction of the artist's most inner troubles and emotions, those beyond the control of the rational mind.

At the same time, the painting looks like the immortalization of a dream, following the technique of "hand-drawn photographs" that Dali usually resorted to: he "rendered every detail of this dreamscape with precise control, striving to make the world of his paintings as convincingly real as the most meticulously rendered landscape based on a real scene from nature" <sup>6</sup>. Dali uses the realistic background to accentuate the irrationality of the

melting watches in the foreground. Pocket watches, these normal and ordinary objects are shown from a different perspective. The watches seem to be melted, passing from solid to liquid state, creating a bizarre and nonsensical atmosphere, a dream-like scenario. The fact that the background is realistic and yet the melting watches look abnormal proves the fact that this painting mixes reality with fantasy and makes us question the normality of our own lives. It conveys the idea that the same object can be seen from different perspectives and that reality is not the absolute truth about the state of things and people. Also, the painting conveys the feeling that time ceases to exist, just like in dreams, where the notion of time disappears, being replaced by a sort of chronological vacuum. The motionless background with the still waters and the clear sky significantly contribute to this particular atmosphere of timelessness. The background might have been derived from Dali's childhood memories as a reflection of a landscape often found in the region where he grew up<sup>7</sup>. This conveys the idea that time becomes somewhat irrelevant when we look into ourselves and explore our past memories.

All in all, "The Persistence of Memory" is an expression of Dali's hidden emotions: the fear of death, the longing for his long-lost childhood years, the need to escape from the banality of normal life and the constant recording of time. The painting is a perfect example of his paranoiac-critical method and has a clear affiliation with the Freudian theories about the power of the unconscious. This way, within the Freudian thought system, "The Persistence of Memory" might also be interpreted as "the persistence of the subconscious" - its superiority over the momentary and common distractions

of real life, as well as its unchanged relevance over the course of someone's existence. The irrationality and the nonsense that persists across the canvas aims to impress the viewer, imposing him or her to reflect upon what is fantastic and what is real in life. It is however important to note that Dali has an incredible sense of equilibrium in the way that he knows how much of the bizarre and the strange to put into his paintings so he would dazzle and intrigue the viewers, but not scare them off. At the same time, the artist conveys the idea that the fantastic and the real world are equally veritable perspectives on any given subject and that sometimes, a bridge can be established between the two, letting them blend in a beautiful mix of reason and imaginative subjectivity. In "The Persistence of Memory", the combination of the orange and blue colors, along with the melting, almost dripping, watches that stand on lifeless and dead objects and creatures establish a dream-like atmosphere, which is also very much intriguing and even pleasing, through its well-balanced composition. The viewers are drawn in, unconsciously finding their eyes curiously examining the melting watches and their thoughts wandering around the sandy grounds, as if time is suspended; and within the stillness and the calmness of all things, the whole scenery seems so unreal, so surreal.

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