



corps
de femme

Mesdames et Messieurs,

La démonstration que nous allons faire ensemble
tendra à montrer quelques caractères propres aux mots, aux
images et aux objets réels.

(1) Un mot peut remplacer une image:

Chapeau HAT.

(2) Une image peut remplacer un mot. Je vais le démontrer
en me servant ^{d'un} ~~de~~ textes d'André Breton où je remplace un mot
par une image:

Si seulement  IF ONLY THE SUN WOULD SHINE TONIGHT.

[de Jean Sautenais] On ne peut pas ONE CANNOT GIVE BIRTH TO A FOAL 
WITHOUT BEING ONE ONESELF.

de Paul Eluard:

Dans les plus sombres yeux se ferment les plus clairs.

THE DARKEST EYES ENCLOSE THE LIGHTEST.  

[de Paul Colinet]

Il y a  THERE IS A SPHERE PLACED ON YOUR
SHOULDERS.

de David Gascoigne

[de Mesens]

Masque de veuve WIDOW'S MASK FOR THE WALTZ.

de Humphrey Jennings

the
loc

THE FLYING  BREATH
OF EDUCATION

RENÉ MAGRITTE (OR:

THE RULE OF METAPHOR)

LUXEMBOURG & DAYAN

Contents

- 9 Introduction
- 13 René Magritte
(Or: The Rule of Metaphor)
Yuval Etgar
- 19 On Truth and Lying in
a Non-Moral Sense
Friedrich Nietzsche
- 31 Notes on Exhibited Works
- 83 Exhibition Views
- 94 List of Works

How many facts or propositions are conveyed by a [picture]? None, an infinity, or one great unstatable fact? Bad question. A picture is not worth a thousand words, or any other number. Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture.¹

— Donald Davidson



René Magritte, *Le géant* (René Magritte with a chessboard), 1937

René Magritte (Or: The Rule of Metaphor)

Reflections on the Underlying
Principle of Magritte's Paintings
from the 'Paris Years', 1927–30

Yuval Etgar

Linguists and philosophers from Aristotle to Derrida have set out to explain the function of metaphor and to define its place in language, yet the debates surrounding this elusive trope have only grown bigger, broader, and the views concerning it more divided every time. To begin with, the problem of metaphor is already implied by the figurative nature of the term itself: the combination of the prefix *meta* (beyond) with the noun *phora* (change of place) paints a spatial or geographical image of displacement – an immigrant word in a foreign land seeking to reinvent itself. In fact, many of the attempts to establish a definition of metaphor take on similar figurative appearances. Thus, when Donald Davidson tells us that “Metaphor is the dreamwork of language” or when Nelson Goodman writes that “Metaphor [...] is a matter of teaching an old word new tricks”, they consciously exemplify how style and composition are essential parts of metaphoric argumentation.² Aristotle, whose study of metaphor remains at the heart of this discussion, was the first to realise that metaphor belongs equally to the realms of *poetics* and *rhetoric*, claiming that metaphor partakes in both the political tradition of argumentation (as a way of convincing people) and the dramatic realm of fiction (as a way of representing the world).³ With respect to structure, Aristotle explained that metaphor consists in just one unique operation, the transfer of the meanings of words. But with respect to function, it follows the divergent destinies of political debate and poetic expression. Yet before we venture any further and try to understand the implications of this dual nature of metaphor, we must first pose the inevitable question within the context of our present enquiry, namely, why Magritte and metaphor?

Much has been written about René Magritte's fascination with the relationship between visual and literal languages during his three-year tenure in Paris between 1927 and 1930, a period generally considered to be his most innovative and prolific of all. Historians and theoreticians have elaborated

on Magritte's play between figuration and abstraction, his obsession with humour, symbolism, and perhaps most of all, his enquiry into the nature of pictorial representation. Metaphor, however, seems to remain surprisingly absent from these discussions, despite Magritte's relentless experimentation with juxtapositions of words and images. The reasons for this absence, one can only assume, are rooted in the traditional definition of metaphor: a linguistic trope that applies to the substitution of words, but not of images. Even when this definition is stretched to its limits in order to include pictorial representations, it only rarely admits interbreeding between words and images – two symbolic systems of a different order altogether. So, we ask again, why Magritte and metaphor?

The first clue on our way to answering this question can be found in Magritte's unfashionable decision to adhere almost exclusively to oil painting during the period at hand. While most of his peers within the surrealist circle broke decisively with traditional artistic media by appropriating, pasting and assembling unconventional materials and objects into their work, Magritte continued applying paint onto canvas as he had always done before. This conscious decision is often seen as a sign of a conservative and even revisionist approach to surrealism, but in practice nothing could be further from the truth. Magritte's resolution to transpose many of the surrealist enquiries of his contemporaries into the language of painting soon made him (alongside Dalí) a pioneer in the eyes of artists such as Max Ernst, who identified him as an explorer who questioned the medium of collage by means of painting. "We must not forget this other conquest of collage," Ernst wrote in his seminal essay 'Beyond Painting', in which he described Magritte's pictures as "collages entirely painted by hand".⁴ Indeed, the collage-like quality that Ernst identified in Magritte's work forms the first link between the Belgian master and the abovementioned notion of metaphor; one that is based on the idea that an image can be transferred from its conventional context and introduced to a new one in order to enrich, or possibly review it under a new light. This analogy is largely supported by the syntactical structure of collage, which unlike painting or traditional monolithic sculpture, bears resemblance to literal language due to its reliance on independent units that can be organised and reorganised in relation to each other to form new meanings each time.

In effect, Magritte's fascination with the logic of collage enabled him to appropriate and include seemingly unrelated images, objects, and signs in his work. Moreover, his so called 'painted collages' began to include representations of the medium of collage itself: paper cut-outs, postcards, photographs, wood panels, lead surfaces and wallpapers were all processed into the material conditions of painting and made part of Magritte's new body of work from 1927 onwards. "In a picture," he insisted, "words are of the same substance as images."⁵ That is to say, the inclusion of painted text and painted image enables a cancellation of the distinction between these two

otherwise different linguistic realms. With this claim in mind, and the gesture it stands for, we can now begin to think about Magritte's word-paintings, as well as his inclusion of other foreign visual sign systems into his pictures, through a more rigorous prism of metaphor. The juxtaposition of images and words in works such as *La clef des songes* (1927), *L'usage de la parole* (1928), or *Le parfum de l'abîme* (1928), and the inclusion of paper cut-outs in *L'esprit comique* (1928), or wood panels in *La saison des voyages* (1927), can all be considered as gestures of substitution, or better yet interaction, between signs as well as media within the same language.⁶ Magritte's pictorial appropriation thus stands out in this sense from that of his contemporaries due to its unusual aspiration to process and absorb the diversity of media that emerged during the first decades of the twentieth century into the medium of painting. This transition from a fragmentary approach to the work of art (characteristic of collage) towards a molecular one, where images fuse into each other, is once more nowhere close to revisionist. In fact, Magritte's so called painted collages can be perceived in hindsight as a predicament of the later sensibility that has come to characterise our relationship to images and information in the twenty-first century.

So far we have identified the material and structural conditions of Magritte's metaphoric approach to painting as a strategy that enables us to explore visual forms of representation. But I would like to suggest that Magritte's metaphorical instinct did more than just predict new material conditions of image production, it also had a significant impact on the distribution of roles and the rebalancing of power between the producer of the work and its viewer. This shift can be attributed to metaphor's capacity to surrender a portion of the creative agency from the author to the recipient by demanding them to extract or generate meanings from the relationship between two seemingly unrelated contexts, a relationship based on some undetermined measure of resemblance. In other words, metaphor is not merely a vehicle that carries information and describes the world, nor is it purely a decorative trope that embellishes our messages; instead it is an *effective* tool, a generator of meanings whose literal interpretation is only the starting point of a broader discussion in which the viewer also 'gets a say'. It differs from code, idiom, or even simile, because unlike these tropes a good metaphor cannot be deciphered, only unpacked.

Finally, we reach the last aspect of our analogy by returning to the very definition of metaphor provided at the opening of this essay, that which considers metaphor as both a rhetorical and a poetical tool – a tool that pertains to aesthetics and politics alike. It is crucial to understand that Magritte's metaphorical approach to painting was not simply concerned with the fantastical as such. His impossible combinations of symbols and his attempts to translate signs into images and then images into abstract forms is part of his wider aim to undermine our conventional use of language by

critically examining our need to reduce language to a fixed system where words and things appear tied to each other as if they have no other choice. In this respect Magritte took on board the Nietzschean imperative to consider language as “a mobile army of metaphors” that lost its power and needs shaking up.⁷ “An object is not so wedded to its name”, Magritte tried to explain, “that one cannot find another name which suits it better.”⁸ Magritte asserted his metaphorical quest in painting as one that attempted to rescue language from a state of stagnation, and did so by means of a constant search for a richer language that embraced blind spots, gaps, mismatches and abysses, and identified resemblances and connections in unexpected places. Magritte’s metaphorical practice is thus devoted to destroying the existing ‘order of things’ in an attempt to create alternative orders.⁹ Metaphors, Magritte’s work suggests, keep language alive, surprising, and evolving; or to use a metaphorical expression, they keep language ‘on its toes’.

1 Donald Davidson, ‘What Metaphors Mean’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol.5, no.1, (Chicago, Autumn 1978), p.47.

2 Davidson, 1978, and Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, (Indianapolis and New York 1968). In addition, the use of the terms ‘style’, ‘composition’, and ‘argumentation’ in this context refers to Paul Ricoeur’s analysis of Aristotelian rhetoric in his book *The Rule of Metaphor*, Routledge (London and New York, 1977), first published in French as *La Métaphore Vive*, Éditions du Seuil, (Paris, 1975).

3 For this reason Aristotle repeats the same definition of metaphor in his treatises *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*.

4 Max Ernst, ‘Beyond Painting’ (1936; Trans. 1948), *Max Ernst: Beyond Painting, And other Writings by the Artist and his Friends*, Solar Books, (Chicago, 2009), p.30.

5 Quoted in David Sylvester, *Magritte*, Thames and Hudson in association with Menil Foundation, (London, 1992), p.168.

6 In his seminal book *Models and Metaphors* (1962), the linguist Max Black suggested that the most prolific way of understanding metaphoric activity is in terms of reciprocal ‘interaction’ between the borrowed word and its new context, hereby distinguishing this approach from other approaches that consider metaphor in terms of ‘substitution’ of one word for another, or in terms of ‘comparison’ between two words.

7 Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense’, *The Birth of The Tragedy and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge, 1999), p.146. Reprinted in this publication, p.22.

8 Quoted in David Sylvester, *Magritte*, Thames and Hudson in association with Menil Foundation, (London, 1992), p.168.

9 Magritte’s preoccupation with the so-called ‘order of things’ is evident in the letters he wrote to Michel Foucault about the philosopher’s book of the same name. This correspondence led Foucault to write a book called *This is Not a Pipe* (1973) dedicated to Magritte’s work.