

Magritte, Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Language: Between the Poetry of Mystery and the Philosophy of Visual Language

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René Magritte
The Key of the Fields, 1936
(detail)

[\[+ info\]](#)

fig. 1

Magritte painting *Clairvoyance*,
Brussels, 4 October 1936
Charly Herscovici Collection,
Brussels



‘As for mystery, as for the enigmas imposed on my pictures, I will say that this was the best proof of my break with all the absurd intellectual habits that usually take the place of a genuine feeling for life.’

René Magritte, ‘Life Line 1’,¹ 1938

‘The metaphysician believes that he travels in territory in which truth and falsehood are at stake. In reality, however, he has not asserted anything, but only expressed something, like an artist.’

Rudolf Carnap, ‘The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language’,² 1932

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See the translation of ‘Life Line 1’, a lecture delivered on 20 November 1938 at the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp, in René Magritte, *Selected Writings*, ed. Kathleen Rooney and Eric Plattner, trans. Jo Levy, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 58–67, here at p. 64.

2

See ‘The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language’ in A. J. Ayer, ed., *Logical Positivism*, New York, Free Press, 1966, pp. 60–81, here at p. 79.

Magritte’s paintings evoke certain human mysteries in a sort of visual poetry, often leaving the viewer in suspense, engrossed in thought or subsequent questioning. Philosophy aspires, with varying success, to provide rational answers to the mysteries of humankind. So far, we would be forgiven for thinking that there is a certain parallel between Magritte and the discipline of philosophy. But Magritte was evidently not a philosopher and made a point of stating this more than once.



fig. 2
Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1947

3
‘Nous [...] ne sommes pas des philosophes. [...] Pour nous existe l’extramental qui prouve définitivement le saugrenu des recherches philosophiques. Ces recherches sont saugrenues [...] depuis 2000 ans et plus’; René Magritte, ‘Manifeste de l’extramentalisme (Notes)’, in *Écrits complets*, ed. André Blavier, Paris, Flammarion, 2009, p. 209. All translations from *Écrits complets* in this article are by Jenny Dodman.

4
‘There is no evidence that Magritte ever read Wittgenstein, although he was well versed in philosophy. Yet the similarity between the preoccupations of both men is striking, to the point where even the images they use often correspond’, in Suzi Gablik, *Magritte* (1970), London, Thames and Hudson, 1991, p. 96.

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A bibliographic explanation is provided further on. A good introduction to the question is the study by Emanuele Dell’Atti, ‘Language Games in Magritte and Wittgenstein’, trans. Laura Centonze, in *Segni e Comprensione*, 28, 82 (2014), Università del Salento, pp. 6–23, available at <http://siba-ese.unile.it/index.php/segnicompr/article/view/14087/12267>.

‘We are not philosophers’, he wrote. ‘For us all that exists is the extra-mental that ultimately proves the absurdity of the philosophical quest. These quests have been absurd for 2,000 years’.³ In addition, the absence of a logical explanation in several of his paintings – a characteristic of all Surrealist works – appears to stand in opposition to the logical reasoning to which any philosophical theory essentially aspires. However, aside from the mystery of Magritte’s paintings and of philosophy itself, there is a significant reason for associating the Belgian painter’s oeuvre with the ideas of some of the practitioners of what is known as the early twentieth-century philosophy of language, specifically Wittgenstein and his Vienna Circle colleagues. There is no direct documentary evidence that René Magritte (1898–1967) was familiar with the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), who was practically a contemporary of his, or indeed with those of Bertrand Russell, Rudolf Carnap or other members of the Vienna Circle. However, as pointed out in Suzi Gablik’s monograph on Magritte in 1970⁴ and recently noted by a few scholars,⁵ surprising coincidences between both lead us to wonder to what extent they may have been familiar with each other’s respective paintings and philosophical writings – either through first-hand contact or indirect references – or if they were not, to reflect on the reason for such links. Penned around the time of the exhibition *The Magritte Machine* at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza (2021–22) and the centenary of the publication of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1921) (which in its day played an essential part in establishing the philosophy of language as a discipline in its own right), this article relates Magritte’s works to those of the Austrian philosopher and other members of the group in order to offer an updated approach to this issue and shed further light on it. The first question that arises is therefore: what are the grounds for drawing this association between Magritte and the philosophy of language?

fig. 3
René Magritte
The Philosopher's Lamp, 1936
Oil on canvas, 50 × 66 cm
Private collection, Belgium



Reasons for Associating Magritte with the Philosophy of Language

We find that Magritte as well as Wittgenstein, Russell, Carnap and Schlik started out and reached their height of production precisely during the 1920s and 1930s. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*⁶ (which even fellow philosophers find difficult to interpret) influenced Russell, who wrote the introduction to the English translation of the treatise. Generally speaking, although there were evident differences between them, these thinkers explored the relationship between language and knowledge, and some (Carnap and post-*Tractatus* Wittgenstein) highlighted the question of the **fallibility**, **ineffability** and even **fallacy** of language – an issue Magritte alluded to in a fair number of his works and explored in his well-known *Treachery of Images* series of 1928–29, with his famous 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' as a paradigm. Naturally this fallibility applied to both verbal and visual language. Magritte showed different types of relations between these two language forms in a considerable number of his paintings. Very few academic studies have been devoted to this subject and apart from those philosophers' theoretical treatises, Magritte's own writings are an essential primary source.⁷ Published during his lifetime or posthumously – among them articles and lectures – they attest to his intellectual prowess and ability to engage in philosophical reflection.

⁶ From here on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* will be referred to as the *Tractatus*. See the English translation by C.K. Ogden, London and New York, Routledge, 1981.

⁷ Magritte's *Écrits complets* were edited by André Blavier and published in French by Flammarion in 1979. A selection of these writings is available in English in *Selected Writings* (Magritte 2016, see note 1).

Magritte's interest in philosophy comes across clearly in his own writings.⁸ What he says about the discipline, from ancient philosophers to his contemporary Heidegger, and including Descartes and Hegel, reflects his respect for the study of the nature of knowledge, reality and existence, though he is also critical and clearly notes its inability precisely to attain the truth of what it sets out to discuss.⁹ At one point he criticises Descartes, though he stated in an interview granted to Michèle Coraine in the last year of his life: 'I am Cartesian. More Cartesian than Descartes, because I get to the bottom of things'.¹⁰ He clearly asserted that he was not a philosopher ('I am not a philosopher, not a metaphysician'), referring to the associations and interpretations pinned on his own paintings, and underlined his difference and uniqueness as a painter with respect to earlier artists. Even on one of the several occasions when he spoke of his distance from Breton's Surrealism, he told the novelist Léo Malet: 'Like you I find Breton saddening. He no longer seeks the *philosopher's stone*'.¹² Magritte's obsession with philosophical issues in general, which may be inferred from a by no means insignificant portion of the titles of his own paintings, is particularly revealing. These titles usually have no 'logical' or deducible correspondence with what is depicted (the referent or object) and, if anything, aim to evoke the poetic or mysterious: *The Invention of Life* (1928), *The Human Condition* (1933), *The Philosopher's Lamp* (1936), *Hegel's Holiday* (1958), *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (for example, those of 1962 and 1966)... Nor is it surprising that in today's audiovisual culture many of his works have become inspiring images that illustrate philosophical texts. But as we shall see in due course, some of these titles are related not only to wisdom or knowledge but also to language itself and poetry (for example, in *In Praise of Dialectics*, 1936). Therefore, Magritte's relationship is not only with philosophy in general but especially with the philosophy of language and with poetry, with the poetic use of language as a game. Indeed, on several occasions he referred to his painting precisely as 'poetry that evokes mystery'.

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Since only some of Magritte's texts have been translated into English, unless otherwise specified from here on reference is made to André Blavier's edition of Magritte's *Écrits complets*, Paris, Flammarion, 1979 (see notes 3 and 7).

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Ibid., pp. 390–93.

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'Je suis cartésien. Plus cartésien encore que Descartes parce que je vais jusqu'au bout des choses'; *ibid.*, p. 691.

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In English in the original; *ibid.*, p. 684.

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'Je trouve comme vous que Breton est attristant. Il ne cherche plus la "pierre philosophale"'; *ibid.*, p. 207.

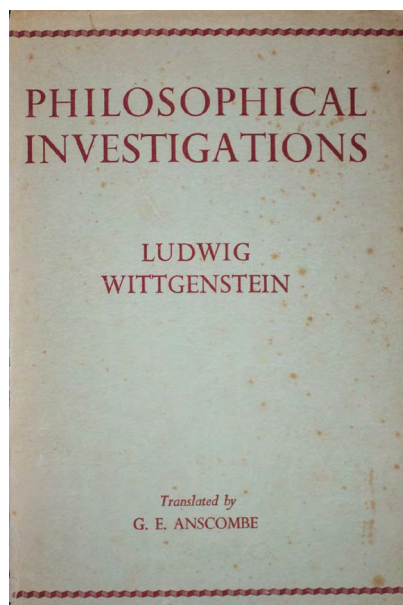


fig. 4
 Cover of Wittgenstein's
Philosophical Investigations
 (1953)

The Fallibility and Fallacy of Language: Signifier, Signified, Object

Judging from his paintings and writings, Magritte's concerns are related not so much to philosophy in general as to questioning the representation of images and words as well as of space itself – that is, the material, sensible domain. This amounts to questioning the fallibility of language, and is one of the central or essential themes of the philosophy of language, especially in Wittgenstein's writings.

It is known that philosophical reflection on language and its relationship with knowledge dates back a long way: to Pythagoras, the Stoics, Plato in *Cratylus* and book X of *The Republic*, Democritus, Aristotle in *On Interpretation*, and the Epicureans in Ancient Greece, extending to Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas of Aquinas in the Middle Ages, and John Locke and Johann Gottlieb Fichte in the early modern age. However, it was the explorations of Gottlob Frege, Charles Sanders Peirce and particularly Ludwig Wittgenstein in the contemporary period that ushered in a shift leading to the emergence of the philosophy of language as a philosophical discipline in its own right. Many of these thinkers' reflections (and Magritte's too) revolve around the dyadic conception (signifier–signified, Ferdinand de Saussure's dichotomic model) and in particular the triadic conception of the linguistic sign (Peirce's model with its respective variants, based on the old triad of language–thought–world¹³). In connection with Wittgenstein, it should furthermore be noted that although the *Tractatus* is held to be his essential and most famous work, it is not possible to understand the full extent of his philosophical thinking without reading his posthumous *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). In these he centred precisely on the 'real' as opposed to the 'theoretic–logical–abstract' use of language, including its poetic or artistic use.

It may be said, albeit summarising somewhat, that the concerns of these philosophers revolved around questioning language in relation to human thought and knowledge, based on three main pillars that are part of **semiotics or sign theory** in linguistics: signifier, signified and object. The words we use to designate particular objects or ideas do not always have a straightforward and univocal meaning; that is, they are not a direct translation of reality (hence the **arbitrariness** of linguistic signs). The word

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Peirce's triadic model consisting of object–representamen–interpretant corresponds respectively to what we now commonly call 'object', 'signifier' (the word in the case of verbal language or the image in the case of a painting) and 'signified' (that is, the idea we have in our minds about the signifier).

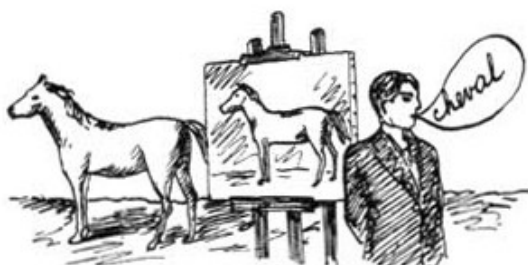


fig. 5
 Detail of a drawing by Magritte in the 12th issue
 of *La Révolution Surréaliste*, 15 December 1929,
 p. 33

(signifier) is not the object itself (referent) and its meaning does not always lead to denotation; rather, a high degree of interpretation, on the connotative plane, can be involved. In other words, verbal language is not something universal and infallible. It may be inferred from this fallibility that language is sometimes fallacious or leads us to error. Hence the conclusion drawn by some of these thinkers that philosophy had erred in its purposes throughout history not only because of the divergent opinions of various thinkers over the centuries but also because of a question of language, as the manner we find of expressing these ideas verbally is fallible to an extent or, at least, limited.¹⁴ One of the best examples for examining Magritte's reflection on this triadic conception as well as on the relationship between words and images is found precisely in an article he wrote and accompanied with several drawings. Entitled 'Les Mots et les images' [Words and Images], it was published in 1929 in the last issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste*.¹⁵ Of all of these drawings, the one that perfectly illustrates this triadic aspect of the sign is the one depicting the horse itself, the painted horse and the man who utters its name ('cheval').¹⁶ Magritte began explaining these relationships between words and images at a level very similar to that of any semiologist or philosopher of language in his famous 'London lecture' delivered in 1937.

Guillermo Solana discussed this subject in his lecture on Magritte given in 2015 in connection with the exhibition *Surrealism and the Dream*, referring to another interesting theme directly related to the previous one: the correspondence theory of truth and the theory of truth as revealing or 'unconcealment'.¹⁷ The first, which was formulated by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* and prevailed in the West from then until the emergence of the philosophy of language with Bertrand Russell, was based on a correspondence between thought and statement (what is stated or said) – that is, on a dyadic notion of the linguistic sign. The second (Solana reminds us) is Martin Heidegger's theory and instead of establishing this equivalence or correspondence between language and thought, it speaks of a revealing or 'unconcealment' (that is, a revealing of something concealed).

¹⁴ 'Thus there easily arise the most fundamental confusions (of which the whole of philosophy is full)', states Wittgenstein in section 3.324 of his *Tractatus*.

¹⁵ *La Révolution Surréaliste*, 12, 15 December 1929, vol. 1, pp. 32–33. See also Guillermo Solana, *La máquina Magritte* [exh. cat.], Madrid, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2021, p. 26, fig. 12.

¹⁶ Judging by how Magritte illustrates this image, however, we might speak here of two signifiers ('representamen' in Peirce's terminology), while the signified or mental concept is absent ('interpretant' according to Peirce).

¹⁷ Guillermo Solana, 'René Magritte', lecture delivered as part of the series *Cinco surrealistas en las colecciones Thyssen-Bornemisza*, Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2015, available at <https://www.museothyssen.org/actividades/ciclo-conferencias-cinco-surrealistas-colecciones-thyssen-bornemisza-0>.

Magritte

'This is not a pipe' (1928)

'The extra-mental universe, about which **we can say nothing**, only that it exists?'

(*Manifeste de l'extramentalisme (Notes)*, *Écrits complets*)

'The mental world [...] leads to the existence of the amental, which **we can say nothing** about except that it exists'

(*Manifeste de l'amentalisme*, *Écrits complets*)

It will evidently be necessary to **avoid philosophical language**, as this language is precisely something to be combated'

(*Manifeste de l'extramentalisme (Notes)*, *Écrits complets*)

'When someone rides a **horse** in the forest, first you see them, then you don't, but you know that they are there. [...] Our thought encompasses both **the visible and the invisible**'

(Guillermo Solana, *La máquina Magritte*, Madrid, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2021, p. 198)

Wittgenstein and Russell

'This is not red'

(Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*)

'The proposition "**this is a man**" is **neither** definitely **true nor** definitely **false**'

(Russell, 'Vagueness').

'**Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent**'

(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 7)

'It is humanly **impossible to gather immediately the logic of language**. Language **disguises** the thought'

(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.002)

'Thus [from ordinary language] there easily arise the most fundamental **confusions** (of which **the whole of philosophy** is full)'

(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 3.324)

'Most propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but **senseless**. [...] Most questions and propositions of the philosophers result from the fact that **we do not understand the logic of our language**'

(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.0031)

'When I see the **picture of a galloping horse** – do I merely know that this is the kind of movement meant? Is it superstition to think I see the horse galloping in the picture? – And does my visual impression gallop too?'

(Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*)

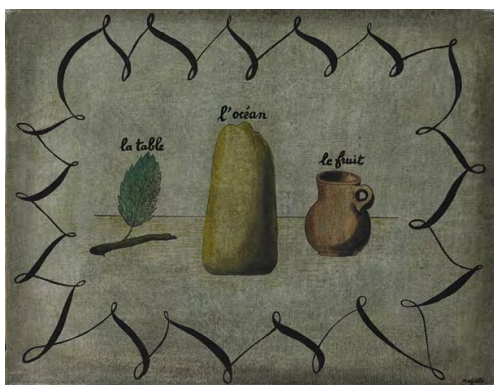


fig. 6

René Magritte
***The Treachery of Images*, 1929**
Oil on canvas, 60.3 × 81.1 cm
LACMA, Los Angeles, purchased
with funds provided by the
Mr and Mrs William Preston Harrison
Collection, 78.7

fig. 7

René Magritte
***Table, Ocean and Fruit*, 1927**
Oil on canvas, 50 × 65.2 cm
The Pearl Collection

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Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*,
with Illustrations and Letters by
René Magritte, translated and edited
by James Harkness, Berkeley–
Los Angeles–London, University
of California Press, 1983.

Whether it is based on a dyadic or a triadic conception, both the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign when viewed from a semiotic approach and the occasional lack of correspondence between signifier and signified (highlighted by Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* in 1916), together with the fallibility of language, are issues on which both Magritte and Wittgenstein and other members of the Vienna Circle agree.

It is also curious to note the comparisons between different types of language in relation to human knowledge established by some members of this group of philosophers, who provide scientific explanations based on the philosophical positivism inherited from the previous century, specifically from mathematical (Russell) or musical language (Wittgenstein in relation to musical notation, with his example of the gramophone record in his *Tractatus*). This article includes **two comparative tables containing several quotations** from Magritte's writings and from certain theoretical treatises by these philosophers so that readers can see at first glance some of the similarities between what he as a painter and the others as philosophers thought about these questions simultaneously and in parallel.

The Treachery of Images: Types of Relationships and Interplay between Images and Words

In many of his works Magritte prompts us to reflect on the **fallacy of language** – verbal (in works where words and images are intertwined) and especially visual, but ultimately also that of the whole sensible realm, which we perceive through the senses. This question, which he began exploring in particular in the series on *The Treachery of Images* with his famous 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe', was discussed at length precisely by the philosopher and psychologist Michel Foucault in his famous essay on Magritte,¹⁸ in which he even published the two letters Magritte wrote to him in 1966. There is no need to explain the meaning of this iconic series, which has not only provided such inspiration to artists and intellectuals but has made such a deep impression on the collective imaginary of contemporary visual culture, as well as questioning the treachery of visual language, which is equivalent to the fallibility of verbal language. The first twist of the screw in this reflection was made by Magritte when he began incorporating words into his pictures,

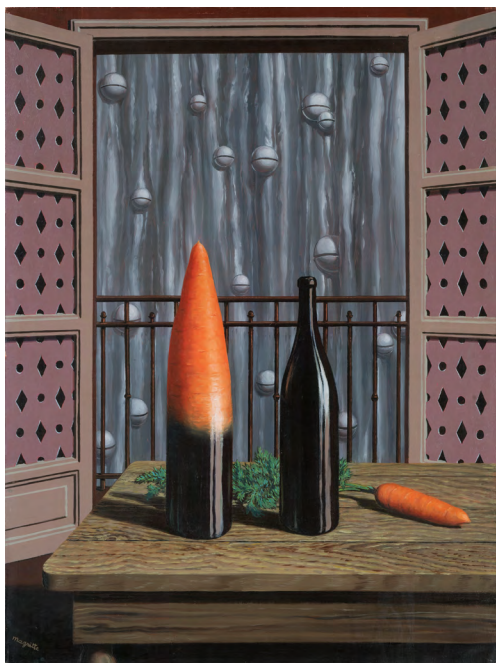


fig. 8
René Magritte
The Explanation, 1952
Oil on canvas, 80 x 60 cm
David and Ezra Nahmad

either substituting them for images or establishing a relationship of non-correspondence with them. The ‘treachery’ or fallacy that can be inferred from the shock effect this causes on the spectator can be seen in works such as *Table, Ocean and Fruit* and *The Interpretation of Dreams* (both executed in 1927).

This shock effect Magritte employs in different ways is, ultimately, a (visual) ‘language game’ or, what amounts to the same thing, a ‘deviant’ or poetic use of language (the poetic function of language according to the terminology of the famous linguist Roman Jakobson). In his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), published shortly after his death, Wittgenstein focused more specifically on the use of language rather than on language as something abstract and theoretical. He referred to ‘language games’ nearly 100 times in the book, for example: ‘I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven, a “language game”’.¹⁹

Magritte plays with the spectator in this subtle relation–non-relation between the content or meaning (if there is a specific or single one) of the work and its title. A certain ‘logical’ relation can sometimes be deduced or established between title and content, for example, the relation between the bird and the cage that Magritte referred to in his ‘London lecture’ (1937). In contrast, Magritte was not interested in suggesting a univocal, singular content; rather, he was concerned with possible meanings, **playing** with the **ambivalence** so characteristic of the other two great masters of figurative Surrealism, Dalí and Delvaux. However, his painting was more ‘eidetic’ (belonging to the realm of ideas) in scope, part of a game that was more intellectual than theirs. What is undeniable is that owing either to the possible ambivalent interpretation of the titles or the clash or lack of correspondence between the title and the subject represented in the picture (that is, between signifier and referent), Magritte plays with and presents the spectator with another fallacy of language. Indeed, **paradox** is a

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Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), *The German text with an English Translation* by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed., Chichester, Wiley–Blackwell, 2009, p. 8, available at https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/4294631/mod_resource/content/0/Ludwig%20Wittgenstein%2C%20P.%20M.%20S.%20Hacker%2C%20Joachim%20Schulte.%20Philosophical%20Investigations.%20Wiley.pdf.

fig. 9 →

René Magritte
The Key to Dreams, 1927
Oil on canvas, 38 × 53 cm
Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen-
Sammlung Moderne Kunst in der
Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, 16260



fig. 10 ↓

René Magritte
The Proper Sense IV, 1929
Oil on canvas, 73 × 54 cm
Private collection, courtesy DiDonna
Galleries, New York



literary device or language game based on the shock of contradiction. A few titles of his works also have a certain ‘vagueness’ or evocative breadth of meaning characteristic of poetic language so that the subject can be interpreted broadly (and there may accordingly be a relation between signifier and signified). In other cases, as sometimes occurs with language itself, we simply find non-sense and there is no explanation, as, ironically, in *The Explanation* (1952).

Returning to the language games in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, in one of these 100-odd mentions he referred to them using the demonstrative adjective ‘this’, as in Magritte’s famous picture of a pipe: ‘when a philosopher tries to fathom out *the* relation between name and what is named by staring at an object in front of him and repeating a name, or even the word “this”, innumerable times. For philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday’.²⁰ The Austrian philosopher also referred in this work to different types of possible language games (‘Our language-game [48] has various possibilities’²¹). And he likewise underlined the added value of ‘fallacy’ that is inherent precisely in these language games: ‘Lying is a language-game that needs to be learned like any other one’.²²

Ultimately, all these games are none other than what, according to diverse linguistic terminology, are known as **devices, literary figures or tropes**, which Magritte also called a ‘disturbing poetic effect’: metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, hypallage, antithesis, paradox... We come across many of them in Magritte’s oeuvre. As a shock or surprise, paradox is one of the most common. One of the first devices or games that Magritte explained in his ‘London lecture’ (1937) is that of **replacing images with words and vice-versa**.

²⁰ Wittgenstein 1953, see note 19, p. 23e.

²¹ Ibid., p. 30e.

²² Ibid., p. 96e.



fig. 11
René Magritte
***The Key of the Fields*, 1936**
Oil on canvas, 80 × 60 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-
Bornemisza, Madrid

In the enumerations he progressively made in his talk he gave further twists of the screw so that the words do not correspond with the images and the element of surprise or shock occurs in his works in various ways that can be summed up as language or shock games:

- Through the incorporation of foreign or even invented objects (for example in the abovementioned *The Explanation*).
- Through the lack of correspondence between the title of the work and the object represented (the most common method, as we have just explained).
- Through the lack of a logical relation (that is, of associations that would be more familiar) between the objects themselves (Magritte gives the example of the cage and the shoe. We do associate the bird with the cage, but not the shoe).
- Through the context in which the elements are shown (I will discuss this later on).
- Through the size with which the objects are depicted (hyperbole, generally with an added contradiction: this is what was examined in the section entitled 'Megalomania' in the exhibition on *The Magritte Machine* at the Museo Thyssen).
- Through defiance of the laws of physics or a question we might call 'gravitational', which applies above all to objects suspended in the air.

Naturally shocks or surprises of this kind can also be combined. There comes a point where the spectator is aware, in some way or another, of the presence of one of these language games and asks questions like: Why is there this lack of correspondence? What are those elements doing there?

The various links between Magritte's painting and literature in general furthermore operate on different levels. For one thing, they are found in the very titles of his works, in which the painter does employ literary devices of different kinds, especially metaphor, metonymy and paradox: *The Voice of the Air* (for example, the 1928 and 1931 versions), *The Cicerone* (1947), *The Discovery of Fire* (1935), *The Voice of Blood* (1948), *The Amorous Vista* (1935), *The Flame Rekindled* (1943), *The Key of the Fields* (1936) and *The Art of Conversation* (the 1950 and 1963 versions) are just a few examples. The evocative power of these broadly interpretable titles, which, as commented above, stems precisely from the 'vagueness'²³ of the language used, is evident in a great many cases.

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Russell devoted an interesting article to the issue of the vagueness of language in Bertrand Russell, 'Vagueness', *The Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy*, 1 (June 1923), pp. 84–92. It was written shortly after the publication of the 1921 English edition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, for which Russell wrote the introduction. It confirmed the extent to which his colleague's ideas had influenced his thinking.



fig. 12
René Magritte
The Reckless Sleeper, 1928
Oil on canvas, 116 × 81 cm
Tate, purchased in 1969,
T01122

Context in 'the Disturbing Poetic Effect'

An additional aspect of these language games in Magritte's painting, and one that was also discussed by these philosophers of language, is the essential role played by the **context**. In the *Blue and Brown Books*, published between 1933 and 1935, Wittgenstein stated that only by applying a name in a real discursive context (that is, its use) can we grasp its truest or most appropriate meaning.²⁴ These books are a compilation of his class notes as a teacher and contain fundamental issues that he went on to discuss in *Philosophical Investigations*; one is precisely 'language as a game'. Context is one of the six essential elements of communication, and an unusual and illogical association between objects can also stem from the context or situation in which Magritte places them. The artist referred to this in his lecture 'Life Line 1' as the concept of 'order': 'Given my wish to make the most familiar objects jar [...] I obviously had to upset the order in which objects are usually placed [...] a woman's body floating above a city was a fair exchange for the angels which have never appeared to me'.²⁵ Magritte is referring here to how, inherently or unconsciously, we tend to associate ideas and meanings with particular objects, which are usually positioned in a specific order or context: a table, for example, stands on a surface, just as a human body does not usually float in the air.

He also used the term *dépaysement* – 'decontextualisation', causing 'disorientation' – to refer to this; that is, objects that the spectator finds unsettling when they are removed from their usual/familiar context: 'from 1925 to 1936 [...] the result of a systematic search for a disturbing poetic effect which, if created by setting objects from reality out of context, would give the real world from which these objects are borrowed a **disturbing poetic sense** by a natural exchange. [...] The objects which were to be removed from their usual context were very familiar objects, in order to make the sense of disorientation as disturbing as possible'.²⁶

²⁴ Dell'Atti 2014, see note 5.

²⁵ Magritte 2016, see note 1, p. 64.

²⁶ Magritte 2016, see note 1, p. 54.

Magritte

'A **symbol** is no more than a **representative**. [...] **Symbols teach us nothing** about what they symbolise or what they supposedly *represent* through pictures. [...] If one truly saw justice, the symbol *representing* it would have no value at all. The word justice refers to an idea that only **philosophy** can make clear'

(*'Le Rappel a l'ordre'*, *Écrits complets*, 1961)

'The art of **painting** [...] cannot articulate ideas nor express feelings [...], they belong to the realm of **the invisible** [...]. The **image of a circle** is equivalent to a *circular thought* but does not represent the idea or feeling of the circle, whose definition falls to **philosophy**'

(*'L'Art de la ressemblance'*, *Écrits complets*, 1967)

'The written or printed word means nothing – unless its intention is to **amuse** men'

(Magritte quoting Rex Stout in his 'Manifeste de l'amentalisme', *Écrits complets*)

Wittgenstein and Russell

'To psychology, of course, more is relevant; for **a symbol does not mean what it symbolizes** in virtue of a logical relation alone, but in virtue also of **a psychological relation** of intention, or **association**, or what-not''

(Russell in his introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*)

'And suppose this person gives someone else the ostensive explanation "**That is called a 'circle'**", pointing to a circular object [...] – can't his hearer still interpret the explanation differently? [...] That is to say, this "**interpretation**" may also consist in how **he now makes use** of the explained word'

(Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*)

'**Lying is a language-game** that needs to be learned like any other one'

'We don't notice the **enormous variety of all the everyday language games**, because the clothing of our language makes them all alike'

(Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*)

'I propose to prove that **all language is vague** and that therefore my language is vague [...] [the] **fallacy of verbalism** [...] consists in mistaking the properties of words for the properties of things.

I think **all vagueness in language** and thought is essentially analogous to this vagueness which may exist in a photograph'

(Russell, *Vagueness*, 1923)



fig. 13
René Magritte
***Not to Be Reproduced*, 1937**
Oil on canvas, 81 × 65.5 cm
Museum Boijmans van Beuningen,
Rotterdam, 1977, 2939 (MK)

The Mirror and the Window as Symbols between Reality and Fiction: Magritte, a Poet-Painter of Mystery and of the Philosophy of Visual Language

Lastly, on the subject of Magritte's relationship with the philosophy of language, specifically these language games, special mention should be made of **symbols**, which together with metaphors are precisely one of the most important literary, expressive or artistic devices. These philosophers of language and Magritte himself discussed them. Once again it is essential to read the artist's own writings to understand why he denied or objected to certain interpretations of his work, not only in relation to symbols but also in relation to **dreams and Surrealism itself**. Magritte shunned a univocal interpretation of his oeuvre, whether from the perspective of Breton's original Surrealism or from a psychoanalytical approach or one of symbolic interpretation. Over the years he denied his connection with



fig. 14
René Magritte
***The Promenades of Euclid*, 1955**
Oil on canvas, 162.9 × 129.9 cm
Minneapolis Institute of Art,
Minneapolis, The William Hood
Dunwoody Fund, 68.3

Breton's initial Surrealism due to having drifted apart from him (as occurred with other Surrealist artists), even though the oneiric or dream world (we might even say the unconscious or subconscious) is present in most cases, at least to the spectator's sight or mind. Nevertheless, Magritte made a point of stating that his inspiration stemmed more from an 'extra-mental' state of slumber than from the dream itself.²⁷ In 'Life Line 1' (1938) he spoke of how one night in 1936, due to a 'magnificent delusion', when he woke up he saw a cage with an egg inside it instead of the bird, which had disappeared.²⁸ Even in this case he did not refer to this vision as something dreamed. He did, however, use the terms magical and extra-mental on several occasions to refer to it.

As for **symbols**, Magritte's objection to having his work associated with them stemmed from his wish that certain elements or objects that he repeated in several works should not always be interpreted in the same way, as if they were part of an iconographic repertoire. He intended his iconographic motifs to inspire reflection and suggestions based on the mysteries of his visual poetry, not a single interpretation. Far removed from any possible symbolism, his objects do not necessarily have a meaning that is always interpretable and univocal, though they can suggest ideas and meanings to the spectator. Some of these philosophers theorised precisely on the value of symbols, attempting to establish whether it was possible to aspire to a general theory on their meaning. Starting out from approaches based on Russell's logical positivism, this project or idea was gradually thwarted as a result of the ideas progressively formulated by both Wittgenstein and Carnap.

27

Coined in his manifestos on 'extra-mentalism' and 'amentalism', 'extra-mental' and 'amental' are another two adjectives that tie in fairly well with his surrealistic style, which is often considered more intellectual than that of his colleagues.

28

Magritte 2016, see note 1, p. 65.



fig. 15
René Magritte
***Attempting the Impossible*, 1928**
Oil on canvas, 116 × 81.1 cm
Toyota Municipal Museum of Art,
Toyota, 142

Of these symbols, **the mirror and the window** are motifs or objects that are repeated fairly frequently. Given their presence and different symbolic meanings throughout art history, it is no wonder that scholars have attempted to look for symbolic meanings in Magritte's paintings, however much he himself denied all possible associations. The mirror links up with the philosophical concept of the 'alter ego', otherness and even duplication, which is related in turn to the 'extramentalism' and 'amentalism' Magritte speaks of in his *Écrits*. A symbol of knowledge and self-knowledge (*nosce te ipsum*) – though by pointing this out we are going against Magritte's wishes – in the spectator's mind at least (as part of what is called the 'reception aesthetics') it conjures up an idea about knowledge and the fallacy of representation, as what we see projected is not the thing itself but an 'other'. Wittgenstein makes a similar statement about questioning and knowledge in his *Philosophical Investigations*: 'Here one might be pointing to a reflection in a mirror. But in certain circumstances, one might touch a body and ask the question [...] "Does my body look like *that?*"'²⁹ As in an 'Ariadne's thread' or a domino effect, it was one of the recurring motifs and symbols in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges – interestingly another of the great artistic geniuses of the past century, whose similarities of another kind with Magritte's paintings and Surrealism would require another study. In the artist's oeuvre, the play of mirrors reflected in each other furthermore brings us to his obsessive, so often repeated image of the infinite and the labyrinth... of the questioning of the reflected image, of the past and history... Here the mirror is also linked to the fallacy or falsifiability of the sensible realm, even language. *The False Mirror* (1929) and *Not to Be Reproduced* (1937), the latter featuring the famous portrait of Edward James, are some of his most iconic works in this respect.

²⁹

Wittgenstein 1953, see note 19, p. 131.

The mirror, as a projection screen, can also turn into a window. This links up with the other great symbol or ‘non-symbol’ (avoiding the word ‘symbol’ in accordance with Magritte’s terminological recommendations), which is connected with the subject of the window-picture and his thoughts or concerns about the representation of space and its falsifiability in this dichotomous pairing of ‘reality’ with ‘fiction’ that gave rise to the series of works he began with *The Human Condition* in 1933. Magritte discussed this painting, of which he produced different variants (such as *The Promenades of Euclid*, executed in 1955), in ‘Life Line 1’. It is worth recalling in connection with this study the relationship between this series and the question of the fallacy or ‘treachery’ of the sensible realm and in semiotic terms, of the signifier. It was a question that Michel Foucault also commented on in his abovementioned essay on Magritte, referring to the mirror functioning like a ‘fluoroscope’.³⁰ Foucault pointed out another interesting idea that has been commented on in recent years by the linguist Sémir Badir, who has also published a work on the connections between Magritte and various philosophers. In his article ‘Magritte et Wittgenstein: dire et montrer’³¹ he focuses his argument on the similarities (and also differences) between them in this division between ‘showing’ and ‘saying’; for Magritte’s paintings show as opposed to state. Foucault reminds us that early painting said a lot – a function characteristic of the ‘propositions’ of which Wittgenstein, Russell and other philosophers of language spoke so much. In this distinction between ‘saying’ and ‘showing’, Magritte’s paintings neither state nor speak of anything (that is, they are not ‘propositional’, to use Wittgenstein’s and Russell’s terminology) but show and suggest; that is why they evoke and prompt reflection and mystery. And on the subject of mystery, it is worth remembering, by way of conclusion, what Magritte stated in one of the two letters he wrote to Foucault in 1966: ‘[Thought] is as completely invisible as pleasure or pain. But painting interposes a problem: There is the thought that sees and can be visibly described. [...] What does not “lack” importance is the mystery evoked *in fact* by the visible and the invisible, and which can be evoked *in principle* by the thought that unites “things” in an order that evokes mystery’.³²

30

Foucault 1983, see note 18, p. 51.

31

Sémir Badir, ‘Magritte et Wittgenstein: dire et montrer’ (2013), in *Magritte: perspectives nouvelles, nouveaux regards*, ed. Louis Hébert, Pascal Michelucci and Éric Trudel, Montreal, Nota Bene, 2018, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317443327_Magritte_and_Wittgenstein_agree_and_disagree.

32

Foucault 1983, see note 18, p. 57.

As he underlined, Magritte was not a philosopher, but this very denial, like those contained in his iconic pipe and in the contradictions found in some of his very many works, should at least leave us in suspense and doubt. He did not verbally establish a systematised philosophical theory as such; however, the theorising capacity of his writings on human thinking in general and on language as a form of expression of knowledge provide an insight into the poetic and mysterious scope of the genius of his painting, in which connections with the philosophy of language are sometimes evident. Through his pictures Magritte expressed his ability to reach the part-surrealist, part-extra-mentalist and part-intellectual universe located at the floating boundary between reality and fiction. This universe is but one of the great mysteries of humankind, akin to the notion of life as a dream to which Calderón de la Barca alluded in one of his plays. **A poet-painter of mystery and the philosophy of visual language**, Magritte captured this mystery between reality and fiction in the huge and promethean task of ‘attempting the impossible’, as stated in the title of one of his most iconic paintings. During those years both Ludwig Wittgenstein and, influenced by him, Bertrand Russell, as well as Rudolf Carnap not only realised the fallibility of language. Through its ‘falsehood’ or – as Magritte put it – ‘disturbing poetic effect’, they also became aware of its power to attain this realm of the ‘extra-mental’ and metaphysical. As Rudolf Carnap maintained, ‘the metaphysician believes that he travels in territory in which truth and falsehood are at stake. In reality, however, he has not asserted anything, but only expressed something, like an artist’.³³ ●

33

Rudolf Carnap, ‘Psychologie in physikalischer Sprache’, *Erkenntnis*, 3, 1 (1932), pp. 107–42; English translation from ‘The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language’, see note 2, pp. 59–81, here at p. 79.

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