

Chiara Scarlato

The question of language in René Magritte's aesthetics

Abstract

Throughout the present paper, I propose an analysis of René Magritte's artwork Les mots et les images (La Révolution surréaliste, 1929) in connection with a reflection on the associated theories he formulated in the handout for his London lecture (1937). Read in reference to selected writings (and in erratic observation with other artworks of his oeuvre), the eighteen propositions of Les mots et les images, along with their development in the 1937 document, might help at investigating the aesthetic principles that guide and characterise Magritte's reflection around language. In this same regard, in the last part of my article I will focus on Michel Foucault's Ceci n'est pas une pipe (1973) and, particularly, on the distinction between resemblance (ressemblance) and similitude (similitude). These last remarks, I argue, offer the opportunity not only to think about the way in which images and words are related to each other in Magritte's works, but also to investigate the vital issue of language, which has occupied a crucial place within French thought.

Keywords

René Magritte, Michel Foucault, Aesthetics

Received: 22/08/2023

Approved: 27/09/2023

Editing by: Agostino Bertolotti

© 2023 The Author. Open Access published under the terms of the CC-BY-4.0.
chiara.scarlato@unich.it (Università di Chieti)

1. Introduction

Around 1922, in a text titled *Pure Art: A Defence of the Aesthetic*, devoted to the investigation of questions concerning painting and architecture, René Magritte and Victor Servranckx propose an emblematic definition of aesthetics, which, in their words, “is not a means of finding the perfect solution to some problem, but it certainly is the essence of a particular problem: art” (Magritte 2016: 8). While this excerpt introduces a section dedicated to painting, it also aims to clarify the general task of art, which is to recognize a series of “particular” problems as inherently belonging to the domain of aesthetics. Only a few pages earlier, the authors assert that “the work of art, synonymous with the artist’s ‘discovery-creation’, is to trigger the aesthetic sensation in the viewer AUTOMATICALLY” (Magritte 2016: 3). They also add that the work of art – like “any other product of human activity” (Magritte 2016: 3) – has a “particular” function that is exercised within the domain of aesthetics, which is to say the same domain in which the “particular” problem of art arises.

In another significant passage, Magritte and Servranckx’s essay outlines the time lag between the creation of a work of art and its contemporary public’s appreciation, by noting that the more art exhibits progress, the more the public accepts it “grudgingly”. In this regard, they point out that the public assumes that “the image of an object is pictured in the same way in a man’s eyes, an ox’s eyes or in the open eyes of a corpse”, but if “compared to the average man, the ox is not considered competent to judge an object, the same comparison holds for the man in the herd and the artist” (Magritte 2016: 10). In other words, Magritte and Servranckx provide a range of possible viewing experiences to demonstrate how the same objects can be perceived diversely by an ox, a corpse, an average man, or an artist, by emphasizing that each one of these individual perceptions creates “particular” images of these objects. However, it is important to retain that, by embarking in a process of knowledge, all of these subjects exercise their ability to perceive real objects in the form of images. As mentioned earlier, the quoted essay focuses on issues related to painting and architecture, and, according to the editor of Magritte’s writings, André Blavier, Magritte was the main author of this text. This detail is crucial to consider how the Belgian artist’s theoretical and aesthetic reflection kept pace with his painting.

The relationship among real objects, perception and images is of great importance in Magritte’s thinking. For example, in his work *You*, written between late 1926 and early 1927, Magritte provides various definitions

of painting, capturing its ability to excite “your admiration by the likeness of things whose originals you do not admire” (Magritte 2016: 17). Magritte’s focus here is on the concept of likeness between “things” and their “originals”, specifically when it comes to the perception of real objects through the creation of certain images. This interest (or concern) is still at the heart of Magritte’s letter to Paul Nougé in November 1927, where he discusses a project that involves “writing without the use of analysis, or synthesis”, but instead relying on “images in the text that would identify a state or an object, if the name designates it in too general a way in order to achieve an effect that might shock the reader...” (Magritte 1979: 62, my translation). This project would culminate in the publication of *Les mots et les images* (1929), which I will discuss extensively later. Thus, from the very beginning of his artistic career, Magritte has questioned the way human beings perceive real objects in the world, undertaking a complex inquiry around perception and images, words and language.

Drawing on Magritte’s selected writings and artworks, this article outlines the stages of the process that allows us – as human beings – to perceive an object as an image and, consequently, to designate it through language. Read in reference to selected writings (and in erratic observation with other artworks of his *oeuvre*), the analysis of *Les mots et les images* in conjunction with the associated theories he formulated in the London lecture handout (1937) is pivotal in describing Magritte’s aesthetics. Thus, through a detailed investigation of these works, this study aims to highlight how Magritte explored visual representation and linguistic designation through his reflections on perception, images, words, and real objects. Finally, this paper centres specifically on Magritte’s 1966 written correspondence with Michel Foucault (collected in *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*, 1973). Particular attention will be paid to the distinction between resemblance (*ressemblance*) and similitude (*similitude*) in Magritte’s *oeuvre* and Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses* (1966). These latter insights extend beyond the attempt to explore Magritte’s aesthetics, proposing a broader reflection on the nature of language and providing opportunities for further research in this field of study¹.

¹ To a general overview on Magritte’s work, see, among others: Jongen 1994; Donà 2006; Allmer 2009; Taddio 2012; Levy 2013; Lipinski 2020; Defeyt, Vandepitte 2023.

2. *Visible and invisible*

"To think of an image means Seeing an image. The painting gives the sense of sight a visible image. The sense of sight registers the image in the picture in reverse, without Seeing, according to the laws of optics, like a camera" (Magritte 2016: 154). In his essay titled *Thought and images* (1954), Magritte establishes a connection between the act of thinking and the gesture of "Seeing an image". This essay, which was featured in the special issue of *Arts plastiques* focused on the 27th edition of the Venice Biennale International Art Exhibition, underlines that the relationship between the acts of "Seeing" and thinking is crucial. Interestingly, after the affirmation of equivalence between thinking and "Seeing", Magritte differentiates the sense of sight – which merely "registers the image" visible in paintings – from Seeing – which enables the consideration of the relationship between thought and images. According to Magritte, Seeing involves the human ability to recognize an object in form of an image, while thinking entails the power to ascribe a word to an image/object, making it available for thought and speech. Given the complexity of his reflections on these subjects, it is possible to say that Magritte carried out a substantial *philosophical opus/operation* within a broader consideration on the aesthetic nature of language. This observation is not only a general principle that can be surmised by examining almost all of his paintings, but it is also supported by several theories, considerations and thoughts that Magritte fully expressed in his written works.

For example, in the aforementioned *Thought and images*, Magritte emphasises that the primary purpose of art is to make possible the contemplation of what is typically only seen visually. In other words, Magritte sought to enable viewers to "See an image" by providing an alternative sensory experience through his paintings. In a letter to Hornik, Magritte clarifies this assumption by affirming that it is only after that "the image is painted, [that] one can consider the relationships that this image would have with ideas or words. This assertion is not baseless as images, ideas, and words are *distinct* determinations of *one only* entity: thought" (Magritte 1994: 136, my translation). For this very reason, Magritte's artistic intention can be summarised as an attempt to detail the process of apprehending reality, which involves a continuity among perceiving images, formulating thoughts, and enunciating words that function to designate both images and thoughts. In a context of cognitive processes, the speed of these phases is erased by Magritte's operation, which depicts each stage individually. This operation, furthermore, allows us to

reflect on the ways in which we relate to the sensory world, while experiencing it through the creation of “particular” images and words.

It is worth, in this context, to recall the Belgian artist's answer to Charles Estienne and José Pierre on the occasion of the 1955 survey on Surrealism promoted by *Medium*, in which he declared that “pictorial language helps us to See what we think of ourselves and the world around us” (Magritte 1979: 396, my translation). To illustrate this passage, it is also useful to mention an interview with Claude Vial (1966) in which Magritte proposes a parallelism between painting and writing, stating that, for a painter, canvases and brushes are what grammar is for a writer: in both cases, these are instruments capable of evoking the mystery of the world through art. However, it would be incorrect to see the relationship between writing and painting as a form of assimilation between the two, implying that Magritte might support the concept of “literary painting”. In 1962, Jan Walravens prompted Magritte to elaborate further on this point, which led the artist to state that his painting is “a non-literary and even anti-literary painting”. This is because it “does not express any ideas or feelings” and rather it is “merely the description (with no originality or fantasy) of a thought whose only terms of reference are figures in the visible world. These figures are united in an order that can leave no one indifferent. But they are not responsible for the ideas and feelings that arise when we look at them” (Magritte 2016: 201-2). Therefore, consistent with his 1954 writing, Magritte here reiterates the significance of prioritising the image over “ideas and feelings” or “words”.

From this perspective, the writing (including letters, words, and sentences) that appears in much of Magritte's work should be considered an exemplification representing the process described above, namely that of perceiving an object as an image, and then expressing it through a specific word. This implies that the depicted images and words in Magritte's paintings are for meaning to be formed through an incoherent juxtaposition, as they actually respond to the artist's intention to describe the relationship between the images of the objects and the words that describe them, just as everyday language. It is noteworthy that at a time when the avant-garde and experimental art were dominant, Magritte did not attempt to create a *new way of painting things* but rather carefully selected objects to paint. This choice was inspired by an intuition in 1926 that led him to look for “poetry in the world of familiar objects – and I look for mystery” (Magritte 1966: 114), as he states in the interview given to *Life*

in 1966². The importance of this episode in Magritte's artistic life means that the year 1926 can be considered as the inaugural moment of his professional project in which he began to experiment and explore the status of images and words.

The aforementioned "epiphany", however, was not the only one in the artist's life. In later works, Magritte recalls a series of revelations that enabled him to develop and refine his artistic vision. One of the most notable instances occurred during his lecture titled *Life line*, which he delivered on 20th November 1938 at the Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts in Antwerp. During this lecture, he listed the recurring and distinguishing elements of his painting.

Creating new objects; transforming ordinary objects; changing the substance of some objects [...]; using words with images; calling an image by the wrong name; [...] putting into practice ideas suggested by friends; portraying certain visions of the half-awake state [...] were, on the whole, ways to force objects to be sensational at last. [...] The titles are chosen to prevent my pictures from being placed in a reassuring region in which the mechanical functioning of the mind would place them, in order to underestimate their significance. Titles must be an additional protection to discourage all attempts to reduce poetry to a pointless game. (Magritte 2016: 65)

The most innovative aspects of Magritte's work can be said to be his points about "using words with images" and "portraying certain visions of the half-awake state". There are at least two reasons for this. In the first place, within the paintings, words are also treated like images and become an integral part of the complex system of representation, allowing one to observe and interpret them. Secondly, the use of the half-awake visions reflects the importance given to images that precede thought and appear before they can be rationally understood. Given the foregoing, Magritte's paintings serve to illustrate the process of understanding, which starts with the perception of an object, goes on with the formation of an image and ends with the formulation of a pronounced (or thought)

² In this same occasion he clarifies that the "problem was not to look for a new style, but to know what you must show and then to paint it in a precise way. I suppose you can call me a surrealist. But one should really say I am concerned with realism, even though that usually refers to daily life in the streets. It should be that realism means the real with the mystery that is in the real. I want to show reality in such a way that it evokes the mystery" (Magritte 1966: 117).

word. Magritte fully addresses this sequence in *Les mots et les images*, as we will see in the next section³.

3. Words, images, objects

Les mots et les images is an image-text consisting of eighteen propositions, each accompanied by a corresponding illustration. It was published in the twelfth issue of the journal *La Révolution surréaliste* on 15 December 1929. *Les mots et les images*, which I here propose to consider a *painting* to be observed in its entirety rather than an intervention printed on two pages, has a unique characteristic: while the image and its corresponding text are equivalent, understanding the work's meaning is impossible without considering all of its component parts placed in sequential order from first to last. This is the reason why *Les mots et les images* serves its purpose both through reading and observation, namely: reading the texts and observing the drawings that illustrate the content of what is written. Predictably, the primary meaning of the proposed analysis is to extract the various forms in which the object/image/word relationship is articulated. From this perspective, *Les mots et les images* suggests that images and words are interchangeable within a naming process based on the detection of an object/*objet* (or, equally, a thing/*chose*, a shape/*figure*, an image/*image*) and the subsequent attribution of a word/*mot* (or a name/*nom*) to this object. The eighteen propositions (and their illustrations), in fact, describe various ways of naming things in the world⁴.

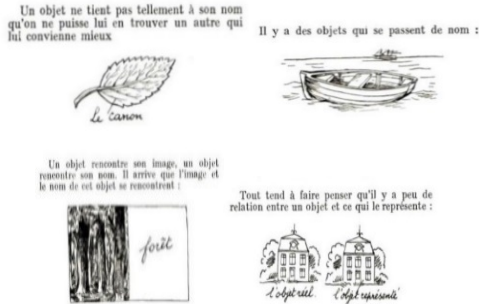
Based on the interrelatedness of the components of the work, I propose to organize the propositions into six sets using an equal number of key concepts that describe the varied ways in which the complex process

³ Playfulness is another intriguing aspect of Magritte's *oeuvre*, often encouraging viewers to go beyond the surface of images and try to find a personal way of understanding artworks. Also for this reason, the meaning behind Magritte's paintings may not be immediately apparent; Magritte himself addressed this issue on numerous occasions, including in an interview with Jean Stévo in 1959, where he states: "It seems obvious that riddles and puzzles have a charm for the mind. The game is to find what is hidden. But the game does not affect the images whose meaning remains unknown. I believe the mind likes the unknown – that is, what is not within the bounds of knowledge, since the meaning of the mind itself is unknown" (Magritte 2016: 189). On this specific issue see Stoltzfus 1999 and Taddio 2011.

⁴ To a detailed analysis of this work – including historical notes about the context in which it was developed – see Yu 1996.

of visual perception and linguistic attribution can come into play. The key concepts are as follows:

1) CONTINGENCY



1. "No object is so tied to its name that we cannot find another one that suits it better"; 2. "Some objects do without a name"; 4. "An object encounters its image, an object encounters its name. The object's image and name happen to meet"; 9. "Everything tends to suggest that there is little connection between an object and what represents it".

2) SELF-REFERENCE

Un mot ne sert parfois qu'à se désigner soi-même :



3. "Sometimes a word merely serves to designate itself";

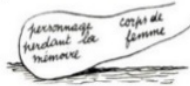
3) SUBSTITUTION



5. "At times the name of an object stands in for an image"; 6. "A word can take the place of an object in reality"; 7. "An image can take the place of a word in a statement"; 13. "Any old shape can replace the image of an object".

4) DIFFERENCE

Les mots qui servent à désigner deux objets différents ne montrent pas ce qui peut séparer ces objets l'un de l'autre :



On voit autrement les images et les mots dans un tableau :



Un objet ne fait jamais le même office que son nom ou que son image :



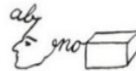
10. "The words referring to two different objects do not show what can separate these objects from each other"; 12. "Images and words are seen differently in a picture"; 14. "An object never does the same job as its name or image";

5) PERCEPTION

Un objet fait supposer qu'il y en a d'autres derrière lui :



Dans un tableau, les mots sont de la même substance que les images :



Or, les contours visibles des objets, dans la réalité, se touchent comme s'ils formaient une mosaïque :



8. "An object hints at other objects behind it"; 11. "In a picture words have the same substance as images"; 15. "Now, the visible outlines of objects touch in reality as if they make up a mosaic";

6) VAGUENESS

Les figures vagues ont une signification aussi nécessaire aussi parfaite que les précises :



Parfois, les noms écrits dans un tableau désignent des choses précises, et les images des choses vagues :



Ou bien le contraire :



16. "Indefinite shapes have a significance that is as necessary, as perfect as precise ones"; 17. "Sometimes written words in a picture refer to precise things, and images refer to indefinite things"; 18. "Or else, the opposite".

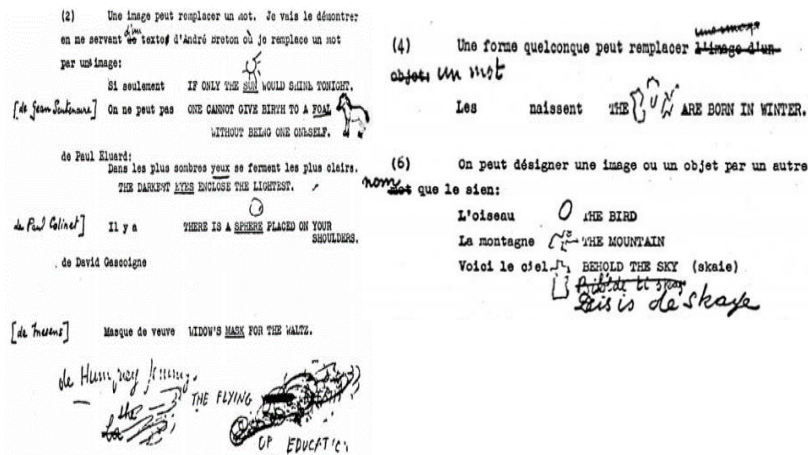
In analyzing Magritte's work, six key concepts – contingency, self-reference, substitution, difference, perception, vagueness – are essential in indicating the strategies differently employed in establishing a relationship between words and images, whereby the latter are regarded as equal to (and replacing) objects, things and/or shapes. In reference to words (or names), it is fundamental to reiterate that there is a distinction between what is written and said: in the former case, a word is potentially also received in the form of an image (note the eleventh proposition which affirms the homology between words and images through the case of painting).

Assuming that human beings only retain the image of an object (a thing or a shape), Magritte demonstrates the inherent arbitrariness in the relationship between visually perceived objects (images) and vocally pronounced entities (words). The work describes the variable relationship that connects an object to its name, acknowledging that this relationship is based on a form of reciprocity where the word performs its function through a simple designation (contingency in the first, second, fourth, and ninth pairs; self-reference in the third pair). Magritte explicitly lays down a composite criterion of substitution, affirming that the name of an object can replace an image (pair five), similar to how a word can replace a real object (pair six). Additionally, in a written text, an image can act as a replacement for a word, provided that it represents it (pair seven); finally, any shape can take the place of the image itself (pair thirteen).

Proposition/image pairs ten, twelve and fourteen provide an example of this aspect. By presenting difference as an issue, they demonstrate, respectively: how words do not indicate what distinguishes two objects from each other; how words and images are perceived and considered differently in an image; how an object differs from its designated image and word. However, it is worth noting that images are the result of an individual perception of an external object; thus, they are analogous to the words that are conventionally (and arbitrarily) used to describe them. It is arguable that images and words share the quality of arbitrariness, as depicted in pair eleven, where both are present. This is evident by observing that it is impossible to immediately detect if an object hides another object (pair eight) or to determine the exact contours of an object in some cases (pair fifteen). Continuing in the same vein, the last three pairs of

artworks (relating to the key concept of vagueness) emphasise that an ambiguous and/or imperfect shape does not affect the meaning of the object it represents, and that neither words nor images have an indisputable function within an image. Despite being contradictory in many respects, Magritte's "picture" simply underscores the contradiction that characterizes any possible link among perception, images, words, and objects.

In this sense, it is remarkable that certain propositions, devoid of their respective images, are reintroduced by Magritte during his February 1937 lecture (or "experiment", Magritte 2016: 54) at the London Gallery on the occasion of the exhibition of young Belgian artists, when the artist declared his hope "to demonstrate certain characteristics of words, images, and real objects" (Magritte 2016: 54). What sets this work apart from *Les mots et les images* is that the illustrations and propositions are not closely interrelated. In detail: the second proposition employs drawings instead of words in quotations borrowed from literary works of the time⁵; the fourth and sixth propositions employ illustrations to aid in conveying their intended message. Lastly, it is important to note that this text was not initially created for publishing; therefore, the presence of illustrations signifies Magritte's mode of presenting his argument on the connection among images, words, and tangible objects.



⁵ The authors mentioned by Magritte are André Breton, Jean Scutenaire, Paul Éluard, Paul Colinet, David Gascoigne and Humphrey Jennings. To an accurate analysis of the relationship between Magritte and literature, see Stoltzfus 2013.

Out of the seven presented propositions, the first six largely deal with the topic of substitution⁶, except for the final one, which reads as follows.

Certain images have a secret affinity. This is also true of the objects represented by these images. Let us try and find out what we mean. We know the bird in the cage. It is more interesting to replace the bird with a fish, or a show. These are strange images. Unfortunately, they are arbitrary, gratuitous. [...] Let's try something less arbitrary: let's make a hole in the wall beside the door, which is another door. The union would be perfect if we reduce these two objects to one single one. The whole is then quite naturally in the door, and through the hole you see darkness. This image can be further enriched if we shed light on another invisible thing hidden in the dark. We want to see farther and farther, we want at last to see the object, the reason for our existence. (Magritte 2016: 54-5)

Magritte's text explores the arbitrariness and accidentality of images, as evidenced by allusions to some of his works from shortly after 1926, specifically *Les affinités électives* (1933) and *La condition humaine* (1935, in the version currently owned by the Norfolk Museum). The two paintings exemplify the desire to see beyond the surface of perceived things, demonstrating the process of apprehending reality in which imagination mediates between object and human perception. Furthermore, at the end of his "experiment", Magritte proposes an analogy between "the reason of our existence" and the "object", stressing the importance of the latter in determining the meaning of human existence in the world.

Magritte's final proposition, contrary to being a metaphor or allegory without concreteness, reflects both a deep observation of reality and the processes underlying human knowledge of the world, as discussed in the preceding paragraphs. By allowing us to identify the object represented in an image, the exploration of the relationship among perception, images, words and real objects illustrates how language serves as the primary means of aesthetic expression. In addition to generalizing the contents of *Les mots et les images*, the preparatory text for the London lecture suggests a process based on three principles or themes: perception, enunciation, and attribution. In simpler terms, one can only acquire knowledge of a real object by *perceiving* and *naming* it through an *attributive* process.

⁶ The propositions are as follows: "1. A word can replace an image"; "2. An image can replace a word"; "3. A real object can replace a word"; "4. Any shape can replace a word"; "5. A word can do the work of an object"; "6. You can designate an image or an object by a name other than its own" (Magritte 2016: 54).

However, this process is not always linear, as demonstrated in the painting *Le Chef-d'Œuvre ou Les mystères de l'horizon* (1928). In this artwork, every man has *his* moon placed at the top of his respective silhouette, indicating that each person sees a different image of the same external object, by thinking (Seeing) it in different ways. Although it is undeniable that each of the three moons shown in the painting *resembles* to the other, no moon is *identical* to the other. This last point enables us to contemplate an additional issue conveyed by the theme of *resemblance*. Together with the three principles mentioned earlier (perception, enunciation, and attribution), this theme serves to complete a quadrangle in which to inscribe Magritte's artistic research in which language played a prominent role. However, it is the principle of resemblance to be classified, in his view, as the most crucial one because of its guarantee to ensure human beings' *freedom to think*, as Magritte implies in the two letters he addressed to Michel Foucault following his reading of the book *Les mots et les choses* (1966).

Before I proceed to analyse these letters, by observing the path taken so far, we can recognise the philosophical significance of Magritte's theoretical reflection, as well as the methodological rigour he applied in addressing philosophically relevant issues. In fact, the artist explored the intricate connections between the human perception of the world and human thought, something we will examine more extensively in the next section. In doing so, he anticipated several of the preoccupations that would steer future research in philosophy, literature, and art. Hence, Magritte's fascination with words and images is indicative of a more extensive and tangible response to the emerging questions posed by his times, in the context of a renewed focus on the human being that – in Foucault's words – is “a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and [which] will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form” (Foucault 1971: XXIII). A figure that remains caught in the space between thought and language, words and images, invisible and visible, resemblance and similitude.

4. *Resemblance and similitude: Magritte and Foucault*

In the letter he wrote to Foucault on 23 May 1966, Magritte emphasizes the difference between resemblance (*ressemblance*) and similitude (*similitude*), stating that “things do not have resemblances, they do or do

not have similitude” because it is only the “thought [that] resembles. It resembles by being what it sees, hears, or knows; it becomes what the world offers it” (Magritte in Foucault 1983: 57). Nonetheless, a little later Magritte explains that the equilibrium between the similitude of things and the resemblance of thought is disturbed by that sort of painting that exhibits “the thought that sees and can be visibly described” (Magritte in Foucault 1983: 57). In this context, referring to Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*, Magritte accentuates the contradiction of an invisible thought composed of visible images, underscoring “a curios priority” accorded to the invisible, a priority that “vanishes if we remember that the visible can be hidden, but the invisible hides nothing; it can be known or not known, no more. There is no reason to accord more importance to the invisible than to the visible, nor vice versa” (Magritte in Foucault 1983: 57). According to the Belgian artist, painting shows the encounter between the visible and the invisible, and it is precisely this conjunction that articulates the mystery on which his work, and art in general, is based. In other words, Magritte believed that the “invisible” thought becomes “visible” through images in painting, showing that there is no contradiction (or primacy) between visibility and invisibility, but rather a form of complementarity which originates from the artist’s mind⁷.

The excerpt from the letter quoted above seems to refer directly to some image-proposition pairs of *Les mots et les images*, which deal with the question of human perception of images (of objects) and (their corresponding) words which serve to designate them. By way of explanation, we should recall that Magritte’s eighth, eleventh and fifteenth propositions of his 1929 work intend to provide a description of the ways in which human beings get to know the world, being conscious of the certainty that: one object eventually conceals others (visibility and invisibility of things); invisible language can become visible within a picture (visibility of the invisible); it is impossible to exactly separate real objects at the very moment of their vision (partial invisibility of the visible field).

In other words, although the dynamic between visible and invisible is at work in perceiving, understanding, and enunciating things in the world, through observing paintings, we gain a concrete insight into how human beings perceive reality. This process relies on recognizing a resemblance between the visible external world and the invisible internal thought. This is the reason why, in his first letter to Foucault, Magritte insists on the

⁷ On the relationship between Magritte and Foucault, see, among others: Levy 1990; Soussloff 2017: 69-96; Amato 2020.

need to recognize and reaffirm a distinction between “resemblance and similitude”, the same words (or themes) that, in Magritte’s view, enabled Foucault to introduce, to treat and to speak of “the presence – utterly foreign – of the world and ourselves” in *The order of things* (Magritte in Foucault 1983: 57).

Without embarking on a precise analysis of the recurrence of these themes in Foucault’s 1966 work, it is significant to note that a large part of the text *This is not a pipe*, which Foucault dedicated to Magritte in 1968 (and which was later republished in 1973), is dedicated precisely to emphasise the distinction between resemblance and similitude.

To me it appears that Magritte dissociated similitude from resemblance, and brought the former into play against the latter. Resemblance has a “model”, an original element that orders and hierarchizes the increasingly less faithful copies that can be struck from it. Resemblance presupposes a primary reference that prescribes and classes. The similar develops in series that have neither beginning nor end, that can be followed in one direction as easily as in another, that obey no hierarchy, but propagate themselves from small differences among small differences. Resemblance serves representation, which rules over it; similitude serves repetition, which ranges across it. Resemblance predicates itself upon a model it must return to and reveal; similitude circulates the simulacrum as an indefinite and reversible relation of the similar to the similar. (Foucault 1983: 44)

By echoing the way in which he himself had adopted these categories in the reconstruction of the Renaissance epistemological system in *The order of things*, Foucault takes up Magritte’s position on resemblance and similitude to describe further the inner process of representation that allows human beings to acknowledge the world. In this context, the form and the content of the world correspond to each other and vice versa, displaying a clear distinction between resemblance and similitude. From these notes, it is evident that the two authors share a common line of research regarding the relationships between words, images, and objects; this research directs both Magritte’s painting and Foucault’s philosophical research. In fact, Foucault later returns to the subject of resemblance, expressing an even more crucial viewpoint.

Hounded from the space of the painting, excluded from the relation between things that refer to one another, resemblance vanishes. But is it not in order to reign elsewhere, freed from the indefinite play of similitude? Is it not the role of resemblance to be the sovereign that makes things appear? Is not resemblance, a property of objects, also the property of thought as well? [...] Thought resembles without similitude, becoming those things whose mutual similitude excludes resemblance. Magritte’s painting doubtlessly rests here, where thought in the mode

of resemblance and things in relations of similitude have just vertically intersected. (Foucault 1983: 46-7)

The connection between Foucault and Magritte appears increasingly profound in the quoted passage. According to Foucault, painting can reveal the difference between resemblance, which is related to thoughts, and similitude, which is related to things and everything else that is visible in the world. The painted image can establish a flawless association between vision and representation in the space between visible and invisible, as it would be impossible to achieve in reality. Similarly, in his first letter to Foucault, Magritte states that “a painted image – intangible by its very nature – hides nothing, while the tangibly visible object hides another visible thing – if we trust experience” (Magritte in Foucault 1983: 57). Once again, it is almost redundant to note the connection of these ideas to those expressed in *Les mots et les images*. What is most important to underline, furthermore, is the central role of painting foregrounded here as a means of orientation in the complex relationship between images and words, both of which intervene in place of real objects taken and perceived on the assumption of similitude.

In this sense, the multiple quotations from Magritte's 1929 work in *This is not a pipe* are not accidental: Foucault makes clear, by introducing the eleventh and twelfth propositions of *Les mots et les images* – “In a painting, words are of the same cloth as images. Rather one sees images and words differently in a painting” (Foucault 1983: 39) – that there is no contradiction between them, but rather that they refer “to the inextricable tangle of words and images and to the absence of a common ground to sustain them” (Foucault 1983: 38-9). The “common ground”, which resonates with that “common ground” mentioned in the preface to *The order of things*, provides the *framework* for the entire analysis; this framework explores the invisible ground where images and words encounter each other in their respective visibility, i.e. the everyday experience of the world where real objects are named using language.

Here, the common ground and the framework refer to the idea of the “operating table” that Foucault borrowed from Raymond Roussel. This alludes to the dual meaning of the word *table* which is both “the nickel-plated, rubbery table swathed in white, glittering beneath a glass sun devouring all shadow – the table where, for an instant, perhaps forever, the umbrella encounters the sewing-machine”, and *tableau*, “tabula, that enables thought to operate upon the entities of our world, to put them in order, to divide them into classes, to group them according to names that

designate their similarities and their differences – the table upon which, since the beginning of time, language has intersected space” (Foucault 1971: XVII). The expression of a relationship of resemblance occurs in the realm *table* of thought, whereas the identification of material similitudes governs the appearance of objects in the *tableau* of the world.

A passage in the second letter written by Magritte on 4 June reveals that Foucault noted a certain resemblance between the work of the Belgian artist and that of Roussel. And in Magritte’s words, Roussel’s work “evokes nothing imaginary, it evokes the reality of the world that experience and reason treat in a confused manner” (Magritte in Foucault 1983: 92). The resemblance between their works is particularly noticeable in pieces like Magritte’s *Le mariage de minuit* (1926) or *Le jouer secret* (1927), which introduce unusual elements to complicate the vision of a likely situation. Roussel’s works also present unusual characteristics, developed around a complex writing procedure focused on emphasizing the visibility of language, that is, highlighting its essential nature as a sign. Following this path, it is possible to say that Magritte’s reflection on images (signs) and words (language), which was addressed in 1929, traced a line that corresponds to Roussel’s work and later became systematised in the works written between the 1960s and 1970s by Foucault. However, it is not merely a matter of acknowledging a shared connection among the three but rather about recognizing the crucial preoccupation with specific themes that started to gain significance from the mid-1920s in the French-speaking context.

This reflection on images and words aims to construct a language that closely relates to the human experience in the world. It is not an exemplification of a sterile thought far removed from reality, as the connection between Magritte and Foucault shows⁸. As Magritte wrote in 1960, likeness (*ressemblance*) “is identified with the essential activity of the mind: that of likening something to something else. The mind picks up likeness by coinciding with what the world offers and restoring what is offered to the mystery without which there would be no possibility of a world, nor of thought. Inspiration is the circumstance in which likeness arises” (Magritte 2016: 193): i.e., a circumstance that requires our presence in the world in order to separate and merge images, things,

⁸ As a further confirmation of the trend highlighted, something that comes to mind is the affinity between Magritte’s painting *Personnage méditant sur la folie* (1929) and Foucault’s *Madness and civilization* (1961).

objects and words, in pursuing the attempt of giving a visible form to our most invisible, profound, and unseen thoughts.

Bibliography

Allmer, P., *René Magritte: beyond painting*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2009.

Amato, P., *Filosofia del sottosuolo. Ipotesi sull'ultimo Foucault*, Pisa, ETS, 2020.

Defeyt, C., Vandepitte, F., *René Magritte: the artist's materials*, Los Angeles, Getty Conservation Institute, 2023.

Donà, M., *Il mistero dell'esistere: arte, verità e insignificanza nella riflessione teorica di René Magritte*, Milano - Udine, Mimesis, 2006.

Foucault, M., *Le mots et les choses*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966; Engl. transl. A. Sheridan, *The order of things* (1966), New York, Random House, 1971.

Foucault, M., *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1973; ed. and Engl. transl. J. Harkness, *This is not a pipe*, Berkeley - Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1983.

Jongen, R.-M., *René Magritte ou la pensée imagée de l'invisible. Réflexions et recherches*, Bruxelles, Presses de l'Université Saint-Louis, 1994.

Levy, S., *Foucault on Magritte on resemblance*, "The modern language review", n. 85/1 (1990), pp. 50-6.

Levy, S., *Decoding Magritte*, Bristol, Sansom & Co, 2013.

Lipinski, L., *René Magritte and the art of thinking*, London - New York, Routledge, 2020.

Magritte, R., *Visions of René Magritte: the artist talks about his enigmatic paintings*, "Life", n. 60/16 (1966), pp. 113-9.

Magritte, R., *Écrits complets*, ed. A. Blavier, Paris, Flammarion, 1979; Engl. transl. J. Levy, *René Magritte. Selected writings*, ed. K. Rooney, E. Plattner, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Magritte, R., *Les mots et les images : choix d'écrits*, préface de J. Lennep, lecture d'É. Clémens, Bruxelles, Éditions Labor, 1994.

Soussloff, C.M., *The negativity of painting: Magritte's This Is not a pipe*, in Id., *Foucault on painting*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 69-96.

Stoltzfus, B., *La Belle Captive: Magritte, Robbe-Grillet and Surrealism*, "The French review", n. 72/4 (1999), pp. 709-18.

Stoltzfus, B., *Magritte and literature: elective affinities*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2013.

Taddio, L., *Fare cose con i fenomeni. Immagini e percezione: Magritte e la natura delle rappresentazioni pittoriche*, "Rivista di estetica", n. 48 (2011), pp. 175-201.

Taddio, L., *I due misteri: da Magritte alla natura della rappresentazione pittorica*, Milano - Udine, Mimesis, 2012.

Yu, M., *Magritte: une poétique des mots et des images (1927-1930)*, "Textyles", n. 12 (1996), pp. 181-92.