Les mots et les images.
Ambiguity and Disorientation in Language

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In 1929, René Magritte published *Les mots et les images* in the magazine *La Révolution surréaliste*, a series of eighteen illustrations that offered a conceptual experiment on the relationship between text and image. With this exercise, the Belgian painter embarked on a radical reflection on drawing, positioning it not only as a visual art form or mimetic technique but also as a critical language with its own syntax, morphology, and semantics.

The image in question is a graphic-textual composition that takes the form of a rich intermedia document questioning the epistemological relationship between words and images. Presented in tabular form –three columns by six rows, arranged over two pages– and combining sketches and typographic or handwritten text, the series is reminiscent of both visual primers and comic strips. The illustrations are deliberately simple in style, reinforcing the conceptual priority of meaning over artistic virtuosity. This choice is in line with Magritte's broader technique of visual disorientation, in which everyday objects are rendered ambiguous through juxtaposition or textual interventions. The absence of color further contributes to schematic clarity, inviting the viewer and reader to be analytical rather than aesthetic contemplation.

Les mots et les images is a philosophical treatise on semiotics articulated through the lens of visual culture. The image-text units systematically problematize the stability of the sign, presenting objects, names, and images in a state of mutual ambiguity. An example of this is the drawing of a leaf, which is labelled not as 'leaf' but as '*le canon*': this association immediately destabilizes the viewer's expectations and cognitive associations.

Each matrix of the composition presents a different semiotic problem: the fungibility of names, the inadequacy of images to fully represent their referents, the ability of language to evoke invisible concepts, and the way social norms regulate the interpretation of visual and verbal signs. Some panels suggest that objects can exist without names or that words can function without anchoring themselves to referents.

The text sometimes takes on the voice of an impersonal narrator, making statements such as "*un objet ne fait jamais le même office que son nom ou que son image*" (an object never performs the same function as its meaning or image) (magritte 1929, p. 33), referring to skepticism about the fixity of language.

Far from being a simple surrealist exercise, Magritte's work is a radical reflection on the epistemology of the sign. The illustrations, which consist of combinations of text and drawings that avoid direct correspondence, function as interrogative semiotic devices. The questions raised by the argument, which begins with what can be considered a visual essay, represent a foundational moment of what is now commonly referred to as visual culture.

Upon observing the proposed series, the first conceptual issue that emerges concerns the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, as theorized by Ferdinand de Saussure [de Saussure 2020]. In Saussure's system, the link between signifier and signified is based not on natural necessity but on social convention. Magritte takes this view to extremes, pushing it to the point of paradox. In the cartoon in which the word '*canon*' is placed under the drawing of a leaf, the Belgian painter deactivates the denotative function of language, exposing its fundamentally unstable nature. The strength of the work does not lie in its surrealist provocation. However, in its theoretical power, it produces a perceptual and cognitive disconnect, making it clear that every relationship between word and image is culturally mediated and potentially subversive [Castelli 2017]. In this sense, the work takes the form of a field of semiotic tension, where the dissonance between 'textual' linguistic code and 'visual' linguistic code is not resolved but intentionally problematized.

Michel Foucault, in his essay *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* [Foucault 1988], interprets Magritte as a visual thinker engaged in the deconstruction of the relationship between text and image. According to Foucault, the Belgian artist does not merely show the separation between language and visual representation but creates an epistemological structure in which both codes cancel each other out, revealing their mutual inconsistency. Drawing thus becomes a conceptual space, not subordinate to words but capable of generating meaning autonomously. Magritte, in fact, does not represent the object but questions it, deconstructs it, and problematizes it within a framework that is both visual and speculative.

From this perspective, Magritte's work is part of a genealogy that anticipates the demands of conceptual art. Like Joseph Kosuth in *One and Three Chairs* [Kosuth 1991], Magritte transforms the act of representation into an investigation of language itself, exposing the plurality of semiotic systems and their ideological dimension. He no longer creates images that represent the world; instead, he turns his images into reflections on the representation of the world, deconstructing the symbolic devices that govern what makes reality visible and intelligible [Mitchell 1994]. Magritte stages a crisis of the referent, revealing that every semiotic operation rests on a void –an absence that language alone attempts to fill.

Particularly relevant is the intersection between Magritte's work and some of Giorgio Agamben's reflections in his essay *Il linguaggio e la morte* (Language and Death) [Agamben 1982], where the philosopher investigates language as a place where an original negativity manifests itself. According to Agamben, human experience constructs language as a space in which the visible and the sayable intertwine through lack and separation. In this sense, readers can interpret Magritte's illustrations in *Les mots et les images* as speculative structures of thought. Rather than representing an external reality, they stage –through the short circuit between text and image– the constitutive distance between the sign and the referent. In this way, Magritte's works dismantle the equivalence between word, sign, and thing, revealing the unstable and constructed nature of the relationship between languages –whether textual or graphic– and the world they represent.

Manfredo Massironi [Massironi 2002] himself considers drawing to be an autonomous semiotic system capable of generating knowledge independently of linguistic mediation. Magritte fully anticipates this assumption: his images do not 'represent' the world but produce a critical shift from the standard view, inviting the viewer to question the codes through which meaning is articulated. The

use of words in place of images and vice versa, the association of objects with arbitrary names, and the composition of deliberately ambiguous scenes demonstrate how drawing can function as a metalanguage, questioning the very assumptions of visual representation.

The epistemic tension between word and image is further elaborated in the concept of 'iconotextuality', as formulated by William John Thomas Mitchell [Mitchell 1986]. In this context, *Les mots et les images* represent a pioneering and incredibly sophisticated example of that hybrid space in which the visual and the verbal do not complement or replace each other but co-produce a new meaning that is elusive and irreducible to either dimension.

Magritte's work is not only an aesthetic investigation but also an epistemological intervention on the very nature of representation. In *Les mots et les images*, the image becomes theoretical language, while language takes on an iconic value. This representation of reality gives rise to an epistemological questioning of the visual, and vision becomes a critical exercise. In this sense, Magritte anticipates many of the questions that still animate the debate on visual culture, regimes of meaning, and the politics of seeing.

In light of this reading, *Les mots et les images* emerges as both a founding moment in the reflection on visual culture and a conceptual laboratory that challenges the certainties of language and representation. Magritte's work, in its apparent graphic simplicity, acts as a veritable philosophical machine capable of triggering a short circuit between the 'referential' function of the text and the iconic function of the image. In this interruption of the conventional semiotic flow, a space opens up in which the visual is no longer subordinate to the text, and the text is no longer the guarantor of the image's identity.

In this sense, *Les mots et les images* takes on a maieutic function towards the observer: it does not instruct, but questions. The systematic misalignment between image and word acts as a device for semiotic dis-identification. In doing so, the work not only highlights the cultural construction of meanings but also their ontological instability. The word '*forêt*', paired with a representation of the forest, or the term '*canon*' under a leaf, are clear examples of how Magritte dismantles the meaning of sign-object correspondences, revealing the arbitrariness of the linguistic code and, at the same time, the naivety of the eye that believes it is observing reality through its representation.

The work does not aim to eliminate meaning but to multiply it, to make it porous, fluid, and open to new multiplicities of meaning, inviting the viewer to become a critical reader of the devices of signification; in this sense, his work anticipates the practices of conceptual art and contemporary visual pedagogy, both of which deconstruct and remodel the representative symbolic codes inherent in graphic-textual languages.

This work undertakes an accurate deconstructive analysis of the conventions of visual literacy. By juxtaposing words and images in ways that undermine conventional correspondence, it lays bare the very mechanisms of representation. The viewer is invited not to consider what the images and words 'mean' but to engage in a metacognitive reflection on meaning.

If we look at René Magritte's entire artistic output, we can clearly see the complexity and dialectical tension between verbal language and visual representation. Far from being simple captions or comments, the words inserted into Magritte's paintings are a structural element, destabilizing any presumed autonomy of the image. While the painter claimed that images could exist independently of words, he deliberately inserted linguistic terms —often stripped of context— into his works. The ambiguity or even contradiction of these terms, as they relate to the object represented, reveals a profound philosophical intention: to undermine confidence in the immediate correspondences between sign and referent, between name and thing. This very friction generates the poetic effect of his paintings, compelling the viewer to question not only what they see but also what they believe they know [Roque 1989]. Magritte, therefore, does not merely play with artistic or linguistic conventions but makes them the subject of radical reflection, anticipating many of the ideas of post-structuralist thought and conceptual poetics of the late 20th century.

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