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## VISIBLE POETRY: METAPHOR AND METONYMY IN THE PAINTINGS OF RENÉ MAGRITTE

*Randa Dubnick*

The relationship between verbal and visual images is explored in the painting of René Magritte, the Belgian surrealist who said that “the function of painting is to make poetry visible.”<sup>1</sup> Magritte uses some of the poet’s tools, notably figurative language, as he translates metaphor and metonymy into visual form. The work of structural linguist Roman Jakobson, whose interest in metaphor and metonymy is well known, facilitates an examination of Magritte’s images.

Metaphor and metonymy are terms usually applied to literature, but by showing that these two types of figurative language are based on relationships of similarity and contiguity which exist outside of verbal realms, Jakobson made those terms applicable to visual expression. Jakobson notes that “the internal relation of similarity (and contrast) underlies the metaphor; the external relation of contiguity (and remoteness) determines the metonymy.”<sup>2</sup> For example, the stimulus of the word *hut* might produce “the following substitutive reactions: the tautology *hut*, the synonyms *cabin* and *hovel*; the antonym *palace*, and the metaphors *den* and *burrow*. . . . [A]ll these responses are linked to the stimulus by semantic similarity (or contrast). Metonymic responses to the same stimulus, such as *thatch*, *litter*, *poverty*, combine and contrast the positional similarity with semantic contiguity.”<sup>3</sup> Metaphor associates entities on the basis of their similarity or dissimilarity, while metonymy associates entities on the basis of a spatial or temporal relationship.

Roland Barthes points out that Jakobson pioneered the use of the terms metaphor and metonymy in extra-verbal realms by

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Suzi Gablik, *Magritte* (1970; rpt. Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), p. 147.

<sup>2</sup>Roman Jakobson, *Studies on Child Language and Aphasia*, Janua Linguarum, Series Minor, No. 114 (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup>Jakobson, p. 68.

applying the opposition of the *metaphor* . . . and the *metonymy* . . . to non-linguistic languages: there will therefore be “discourses” of the metaphorical and of the metonymic types; it is obvious that neither type implies the exclusive use of one of the two models . . . but only implies the dominance of one of them. To the metaphoric order (in which the associations by substitution predominate) belong . . . the Russian lyrical songs, the works of Romanticism and of Symbolism, Surrealist painting. . . . To the metonymic order . . . belong the heroic epics, the narratives of the Realist school. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Jakobson suggests the application of the distinction between metaphor and metonymy to analysis of visual art:

The alternative predominance of one or the other [metaphor or metonymy] . . . is by no means confined to verbal art. The same oscillation occurs in sign systems other than language. A salient example from the history of painting is the manifestly metonymical orientation of cubism, where the object is transformed into a set of synecdoches; the surrealist painters responded with a patently metaphorical attitude.<sup>5</sup>

Although Magritte was labeled a surrealist, his images are not exclusively metaphorical. In fact, his work relies as heavily on metonymy as on metaphor. But this confirms, not contradicts, Jakobson’s ideas: Magritte is a surrealist in his vision, but a realist in his mimetic rendering of the ordinary objects which he transforms into the marvelous.

In any case at some points the distinction between the two types of relationship becomes tenuous. Two objects related by similarity are contiguous in that association; the two objects linked by contiguity take part in a common pool of substitutions. So, as Barthes writes, “in metaphor, selection becomes contiguity, and in metonymy, contiguity [sic] becomes a field to select from. It therefore seems that it is always on the frontiers of the two planes that creation has a chance to occur.”<sup>6</sup>

René Magritte uses both metaphor and metonymy, manipulating them playfully and arbitrarily in his surreal images. He plays games with contiguity and similarity in his humorous creation of spatially alogical situations, fantastic hybrid objects, and witty visual puns.

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<sup>4</sup>Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. 60.

<sup>5</sup>Jakobson, pp. 69–70.

<sup>6</sup>Barthes, p. 88.

Using only familiar objects and traditional perspective, he arbitrarily juxtaposes unlike objects to reveal a hidden similarity, and playfully upsets normal contiguity. Although he often distorts both similarity and contiguity at once, many of his images play games primarily with metaphors, while others concentrate on metonymy.

The surrealists revolutionized the image by basing it not on the evident similarity of two entities (a metaphorical relationship), but instead on the juxtaposition of what Reverdy calls “two distant realities,”<sup>7</sup> of two dissimilar objects that would practically shriek at being together, like Lautréamont’s “fortuitous meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table.”<sup>8</sup> These strange combinations, according to Breton, produce a shock or spark: “It is . . . from the fortuitous juxtaposition of the two terms that a particular light has sprung, *the light of the image*. . . . The value of the image depends upon the beauty of the spark obtained; it is, consequently, a function of the difference of potential between the two conductors.”<sup>9</sup> A surprise is created as the link becomes apparent. This juxtaposition of unlike objects is really a metaphorical relationship, for Jakobson regards substitution by similarity as well as by dissimilarity to be essentially the same operation.<sup>10</sup>

The surrealists practiced almost limitless and arbitrary use of the metaphor and of manipulated similarities. In *Age of Surrealism* Wallace Fowle says that in the poetic images of the surrealists, “everything is comparable to everything else. . . . In the image everything finds an echo and a resemblance. . . . It contains both resemblances and oppositions, and illustrates what Baudelaire called . . . the logic of the absurd (*la logique de l’Absurde*).”<sup>11</sup> But though Magritte uses metaphors arbitrarily, they are often more logical than absurd, especially in comparison with most surrealist images. Gablik wrote that one of Magritte’s contributions to surrealist ideas is that he not only “juxtaposed *dissimilar* objects in what had become the classic surrealist manner; he now explored the hidden *affinities* between

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<sup>7</sup>Quoted in André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924; rpt. in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1972), p. 36.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in André Breton, “Surrealist Situation of the Object” (1935; rpt. in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*), p. 275.

<sup>9</sup>Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” p. 37.

<sup>10</sup>Jakobson, p. 54.

<sup>11</sup>Wallace Fowle, *Age of Surrealism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 141–42.

objects.”<sup>12</sup> The seemingly unrelated objects that Magritte combines have a latent link which usually has a logical basis. Gablik quotes Magritte’s account of the discovery of one such link:

One night . . . I awoke in a room in which a cage and the bird sleeping in it had been placed. A magnificent error caused me to see an egg in the cage instead of the bird. I then grasped a new and astonishing poetic secret, because the shock I experienced had been provoked precisely by the affinity of the two objects, the cage and the egg, *whereas I used to provoke this shock by causing the encounter of unrelated objects*. Ever since that revelation I have sought to discover if objects other than the cage could not likewise manifest—by bringing to light some element peculiar to them and rigorously predetermined—the same evident poetry that the egg and the cage were able to produce by their meeting.

This element to be discovered, this thing among all others obscurely attached to each object, suddenly came to me in the course of my investigations, and I realized that I had always known it beforehand, but that the knowledge of it was as if lost in the recesses of my mind. . . . [M]y investigations resembled the pursuit of the solution to a problem for which I had three data: the object, the thing attached to it in the shadow of my consciousness, and the light wherein that thing would become apparent.<sup>13</sup>

Although there at first appear to be only two terms in this image, (egg and cage), there are really three. The missing term is *bird*. The hidden affinity between egg and cage is that both objects encase the bird. And enclosed in an egg, a bird cannot fly away. Thus the humor of this image comes from the redundancy of function.

Gablik writes that “an image for Magritte would often be the result of complex investigations—an authentic revelation after a long period of calculated reflection.”<sup>14</sup> The “hidden affinity” so discovered arose from both subconscious processes and logical calculation. The result was the unearthing of a subtle association based either on contiguity (metonymy) or similarity (metaphor).

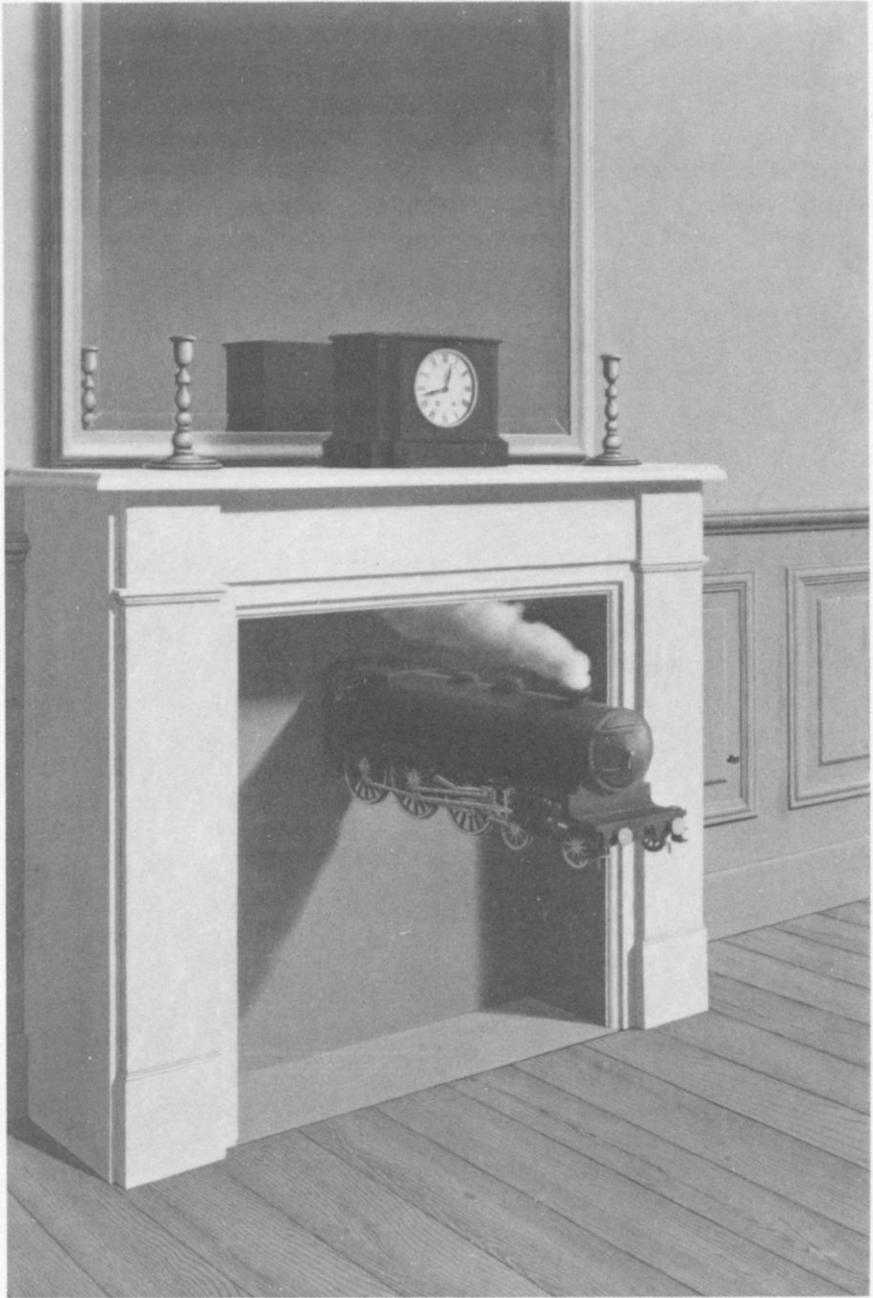
Metaphoric images predominate in many of Magritte’s paintings, with similarity/dissimilarity being the key relationship. For example, in *La Durée poignardée (Time Transfixed, 1939)* a locomotive is frozen in a fireplace while smoke pours from its smokestack and goes up the chimney (see figure 1). Here the similarity is visual. The fireplace resembles a tunnel in shape and color, and also because of the

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<sup>12</sup>Gablik, p. 103.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Gablik, pp. 104–5.

<sup>14</sup>Gablik, p. 105.



*Figure 1. René Magritte, Time Transfixed. Collection of The Art Institute of Chicago.*

locomotive's position in relation to the fireplace, which reconciles the disjunction in scale. In this metaphoric image, one object is substituted for another. The locomotive replaces the fire which normally produces smoke in a fireplace, and the smoke from its smokestack backs up and rises up the flue. The duration of this substitution is limited to a particular moment in time. Were the train to continue forward out of the fireplace/tunnel, the engine could no longer take the place of the fire.

Sometimes Magritte's metaphors are more literary. In *Le Thérapeute* (*The Therapist*, 1937)<sup>15</sup> a man's chest is replaced by a cage, with one white bird perched inside the cage and one outside. The cage acts not only as spatial substitute for part of the human body, but creates a visual pun on the "thoracic cage" by emphasizing the similarity of the anatomical and man-made structures. This substitution is reinforced by the red cape, which can also function visually as a cloth cover for a bird cage. The traditional metaphor of the body as a prison (cage) for the soul is combined with the symbolic association of the dove with the spirit. Thus there are hidden visual and verbal affinities among the objects man, bird, and cage. Because this metaphoric image functions by substituting one object for another, and is presented in very concrete visual terms, the resulting work, in which part of the human body is missing, seems grotesque at first. But these objects seem to "shriek at being together" only at first glance. Soon their physical and "literary" affinities for each other seem too obvious to overlook.

Often in a Magritte image, the hidden affinity between two objects is more patently logical. For example, in *Les Vacances de Hegel* (*Hegel's Holiday*, 1958), a glass of water is poised atop an umbrella. But it is not only the spatial contiguity of the two objects that is strange. The hidden similarity between them is that both are inventions used by human beings to control water, the glass to pour it into themselves, and the umbrella to keep it from pouring down on them. Magritte explains this painting in a letter quoted by Gablik:

I began by drawing many glasses of water, always with a linear mark on the glass. This line . . . widened out and finally took the form of an umbrella. The umbrella was then put into the glass, and to conclude, underneath the

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<sup>15</sup> Reproductions of the Magritte paintings discussed but not pictured here can be found in *Magritte*, ed. David Larkin with an introduction by Eddie Wolfram (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972) and in Suzi Gablik's *Magritte* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973).

glass. . . . I then thought that Hegel . . . would have been very sensitive to this object which has two opposing functions: at the same time not to admit any water (repelling it) and to admit it (containing it). He would have been delighted . . . or amused (as on a vacation) and I call the painting *Hegel's Holiday*.<sup>16</sup>

And this image “provokes laughter,” a desirable characteristic for the surreal image, according to André Breton,<sup>17</sup> because if the water is contained by the glass, then the umbrella is unnecessary. Redundancy of function again is the source of the humor.

Working with the relationship of similarity, Magritte sometimes turns two apparently dissimilar and unrelated objects into one. Gablik calls this process hybridization: “Two familiar objects are combined to produce a third, ‘bewildering’ one.”<sup>18</sup> Metaphors work not only by juxtaposing dissimilar objects or revealing hidden similarities between them, but sometimes by making the two compared objects seem momentarily to fuse or coalesce.<sup>19</sup> This would seem much harder to achieve when a metaphor is expressed visually rather than verbally. And in Magritte’s paintings, metaphor usually functions by juxtaposing two objects or by substituting one for the other. But by creating hybrid objects, Magritte sometimes achieves metaphoric images that make two dissimilar objects into one.

Magritte’s hybridization of a cigar and a fish in *Hommage à Alphonse Allais* (*Homage to Alphonse Allais*, 1964) is certainly “bewildering.” Although these two objects merge easily enough from a physical point of view, being similar in shape and proportion, the combination is paradoxical. One object is native to water; the other would be extinguished by it. If the fish is in water as it appears to be, then how can the cigar be smoking? Perhaps the hidden similarity between a fish and a cigar is based on a pun: both can be smoked. A good deal of the tension in this image is caused because it relies so directly on both similarity and opposition.

Sometimes Magritte’s metaphors are more verbal than visual. In *La Légende dorée* (*The Golden Legend*, 1958) long loaves of bread float in mid-air just outside a window. (Defying gravity is one of Magritte’s favorite tricks.) This image illustrates what might happen if

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<sup>16</sup>Quoted in Gablik, p. 122.

<sup>17</sup>Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” p. 38.

<sup>18</sup>Gablik, p. 125.

<sup>19</sup>See the discussion of metaphor in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), p. 493.



one could bake bread that was literally as “light as a cloud.”<sup>20</sup> Magritte’s skillful use of perspective to play games with relationships of spatial contiguity is largely responsible for the success of the metaphoric image.

The spatial relationships set up by the picture plane and the relationships of pictorial elements to each other—their nearness, remoteness, etc.—have to do with contiguity. These spatial relationships set up by traditional perspective supply information about the relative positions of the objects depicted. In language, this kind of information is supplied by prepositions: “in front of,” “in back of,” “above,” “below,” words and phrases which Jakobson associates with the relationship of contiguity.<sup>21</sup> Many surrealists use the conventions of Renaissance perspective. Magritte not only uses them but plays tricks with them.

One of his favorite tricks concerns the Renaissance notion of the painting as a “window on the world.” Gablik states:

Magritte had tried to define . . . the ambiguity which exists between a real object, one’s mental image of it, and the painted representation. . . . The “painting-within-a-painting” theme is a stunning contra-position to the Renaissance concept of painting as a “window on reality.” Is the landscape we see one which is painted on the canvas inside the room, or is it one which is outside the room?<sup>22</sup>

Gablik is referring to a series of paintings typified by *Les Promenades d’Euclide* (*Euclidean Walks*, 1955) in which the painting of a view from a window is placed in front of that same window, obstructing the view (see figure 2). Because the perspective on the canvas merges perfectly with the perspective of the view itself, it is ambiguous which is fiction and which is reality. Gablik records Magritte’s discussion of his “solution to the problem of the window”:

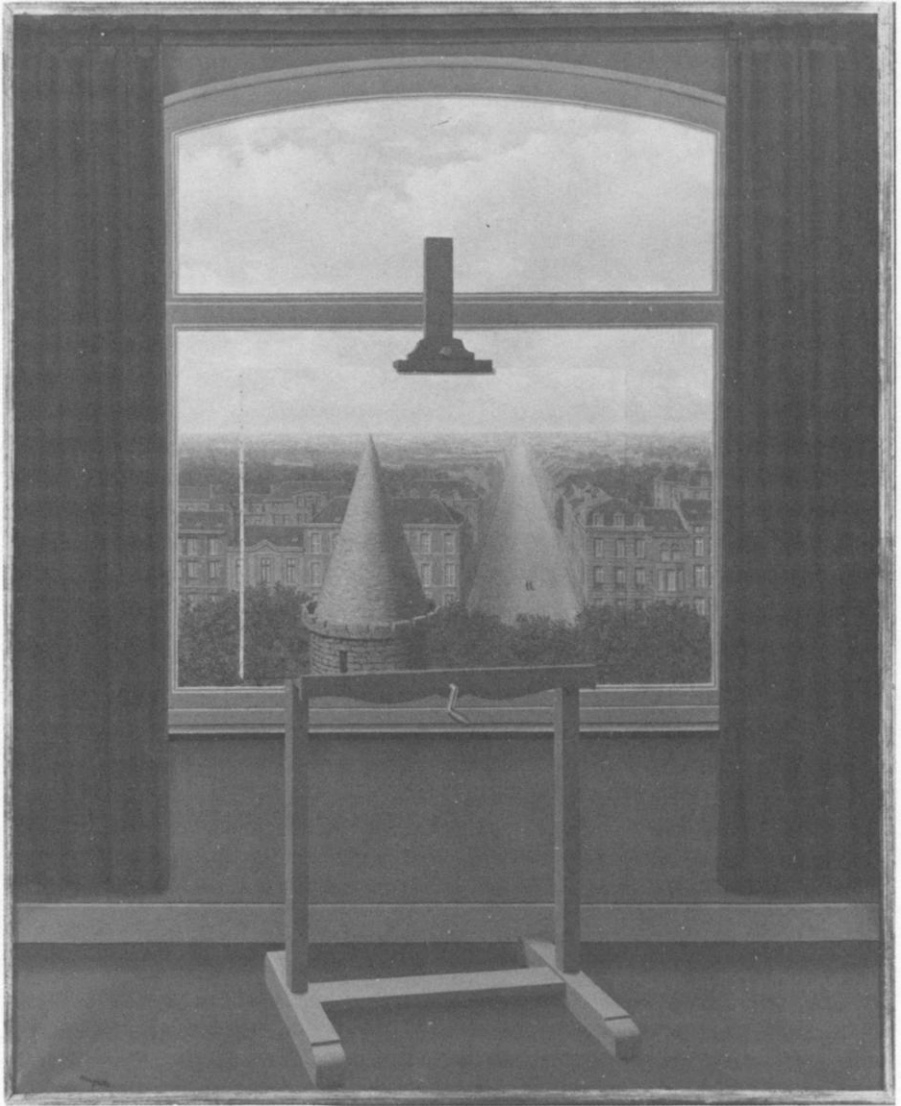
I placed in front of a window, seen from inside a room, a painting representing exactly that part of the landscape which was hidden from view by the painting. Therefore, the tree represented in the painting hid from view the tree situated behind it, outside the room. It existed for the spectator . . . simultaneously in his mind, as both inside the room in the painting and outside in the real landscape. Which is how we see the world:

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<sup>20</sup>Wolfram’s introduction to Larkin’s *Magritte*, n.p.

<sup>21</sup>Jakobson, p. 64.

<sup>22</sup>Gablik, p. 96.



*Figure 2. René Magritte, Les Promenades d'Euclide. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.*

we see it as being outside ourselves even though it is only a mental representation of it that we experience inside ourselves.<sup>23</sup>

Although Magritte has his jokes about traditional perspective, he uses it to make his surreal images work. This is true not only of Magritte, but to some degree even of the more abstract biomorphic surrealist painters such as Tanguy. In fact, the spatial relationships in Tanguy's paintings seem conservative alongside the gravity-defying stunts Magritte executes.

While using traditional relationships of spatial contiguity, the surrealists made the metaphor, and along with it relationships based on similarity, arbitrary. But Magritte's use of contiguity is just as arbitrary as his use of similarity. Anything can be anywhere, as Magritte toys with ordinary notions of gravity and scale. Often he creates the "marvelous," Breton's basis for the surreal aesthetic, just by painting very pedestrian objects in unusual spatial relationships with each other, or by isolating an ordinary object from its normally contiguous field and placing it where it doesn't belong.

For example, by changing the relative size of objects, Magritte creates the surreal from the ordinary. These changes in scale distort the ordinary spatial relationships of objects and their relative positions which scale and perspective normally allow the viewer to read. In *Les Valeurs personnelles* (*Personal values*, 1952) objects normally associated by contiguity (the bed, the bureau, the comb, the shaving brush) are astonishing not in their proximity but in their relative sizes: the comb and the shaving brush are as big as the bed. Only expert use of traditional perspective could make this violation of ordinary spatial relationships as convincing as it is. Moreover, Magritte has bent the sky into wallpaper, assaulting the ordinary relationships of inside and outside. This is one of his favorite and most significant games, especially when seen as a metaphor for the ambiguous relationships between subjective and objective realms that so interested surrealists.

In his "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), Breton praises the surrealist image because "it implies the negation of some elementary physical property."<sup>24</sup> Magritte often creates allogical images which deny physical properties, notably gravity. For example, in *Le Château des Pyrénées* (*The Castle of the Pyrenees*) a giant boulder with a castle chiseled on top of it floats, or falls, through the air above the sea.

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<sup>23</sup>Quoted in Gablik, p. 97.

<sup>24</sup>Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," p. 38.

Magritte's arbitrary manipulation of contiguity seems to occur just as often as his arbitrary play with relationships of similarity, relationships more commonly distorted by surrealists. Metonymy plays the key role in many of Magritte's most striking images, while metaphor, which Breton once called one of the poet's most important tools,<sup>25</sup> is secondary. For example, an eyeball replaces a man's head in *La Traversée difficile* (*Difficult Crossing*, 1963). This substitution of a part for the whole creates a metonymic image—a grotesque one at that, because it distorts human anatomy. (The spherical eyeball also visually echoes the white globe in the background. Magritte often toys with similarity and contiguity at once.)

*Le Viol* (*The Rape*, 1934) which substitutes a woman's torso for her face, is predominantly metonymic though relationships of similarity are also important. The breasts are substituted for eyes, the navel for the nose, and perhaps a risqué pun on the word *labia* is intended. This monstrous image is both funny and grotesque. But even though this image may convey a metaphorical and moral message about the sexual basis of a woman's identity, especially in the eyes of the rapist, the core of the painting is really the vulgar synecdoche which replaces the word "woman" with a slang term for a female's genitals. Thus, this is both a verbal and a visual pun.

The metaphoric and metonymic poles also interact in Magritte's *Golconda* (1953), which plays tricks with contiguity by making bowler-hatted men "precipitate from clear skies like April showers."<sup>26</sup> Taken alone, none of the objects pictured is unusual. What is unusual is the use of spatial relationships between objects as contiguity is toyed with in this image. Metaphorically speaking, these anonymous men are as indistinguishable as raindrops. This anonymity is the hidden affinity underlying the substitution. The resulting image is surreal in its irrationality. It not only defies gravity but presents the kind of image commonly experienced in dreams. Similarly, *Les Grâces naturelles* (*The Natural Graces*, 1963) and other images of bird/leaf hybrids are based on both similarity and contiguity. They make visual comparisons between the similar shapes of birds' bodies and plumage to leaves, thus revealing hidden affinities between dissimilar objects, and at the same time, these images freeze the normal contiguous relationship of bird to branch as the two objects merge visually.

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<sup>25</sup>Breton, "Surrealist Situation of the Object," p. 268.

<sup>26</sup>Wolfram's introduction to Larkin's *Magritte*, n.p.

Magritte's arbitrary use of both similarity and contiguity reinforces the theme that the image (or the word) is not the thing itself; in structural terms, the signifier and signified are not identical, and the sign is not equivalent to the referent. This Saussurian interest in the doubleness of language is manifested in the ambiguity of image and reality in pictures similar to *Euclidean Walks*, discussed earlier. Magritte's painting-within-a-painting series can be seen as a meta-linguistic metaphor for the relationship of art to reality. The canvas in the painting stands for art, and the view from the window represents reality. The same theme is expressed by the "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" trick, as in *L'Usage de la parole I (The Use of Words I, 1928–29)*. The representation of a pipe is indeed not the thing it represents: it is only a sign, not the referent. Magritte uses many devices to convey the message that the image or word is not the thing itself: mislabeled objects in many paintings, titles that contradict the content of the painting, as in *La Cascade (The Waterfall, 1961)* which isn't a waterfall. (Perhaps this is related to Aristotle's idea that the essence of metaphor is calling an object by "an alien name.")<sup>27</sup>

The fact that art does not equal reality makes possible Magritte's defiance of gravity and negation of normal spatial relationships. In *La Bataille de l'Argonne (The Battle of the Argonne, 1959)* a rock can float as easily as the adjacent cloud and thereby invite comparison because of its similar shape. The rock is as light as the cloud because both are made of paint, and of course pictorial or "virtual" space has neither weight nor density.

Jakobson's linguistic theories about metaphor and metonymy suggest that the phrase "visible poetry" was not an empty metaphor for Magritte, who created figures of speech with paint. His images do not merely shock, as do the images of many surrealists. Rather, these images make visible unseen affinities between objects, relationships hovering on the horizon of the viewer's consciousness. Magritte uses the techniques of realism to undermine reality and the rational tool of perspective to create a realm in which the laws of the natural universe are suspended. Perhaps his images are so satisfying because by presenting ordinary objects realistically portrayed while manipulating spatial relationships and by making the figurative seem

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<sup>27</sup> Aristotle's *Theory of Poetry and Fine Art: With a Critical Text and Translation of the Poetics*, 4th ed., trans. S. H. Butcher (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), p. 77 (*Poetics* 1457 b).

literal, Magritte more closely imitates the dream world than does any other surrealist.

The boundary between art and literature is only one of the frontiers Magritte explored. Because he raised fundamental issues about art and reality, language and object, signifier and signified, his work is still exciting and important, not only for the art world, but to all those interested in the relationship of art and literature and in “The Use of Words” altogether.

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