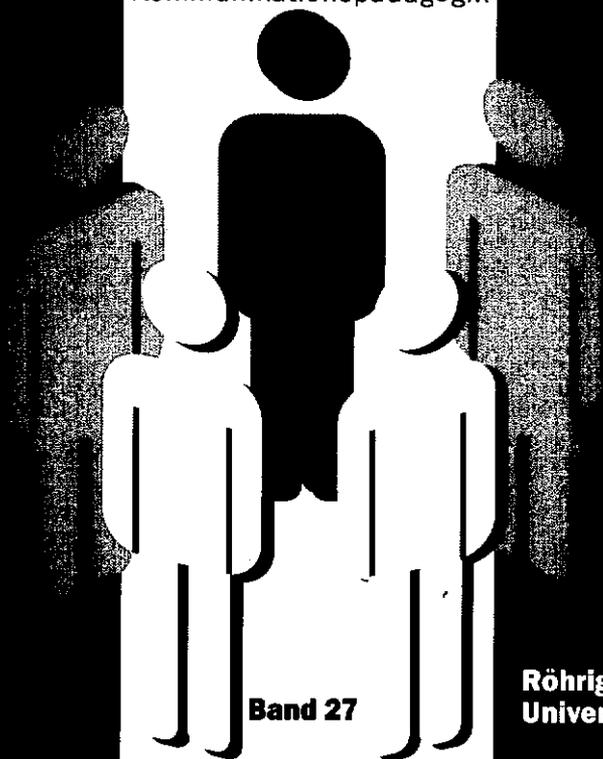


Elizabeth C. Fine /  
Bernd Schwandt (Eds.)

# Applied Communication in Organizational and International Contexts

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**Hellmut K. GEISSNER**

**RENE MAGRITTE:  
Thought Pictures of Rhetorical Communication**

In memory of Dwight Conquergood

Rhetoric is generally associated with language, often exclusively with spoken language. The primary culprit for this misconception is the traditional gloss of rhetoric as the “art of speaking.”

In ancient Greece, (Plato’s) Socrates neither wrote nor gave speeches; rather he practiced a rhetoric of conversation. Nor did Plato’s rival, Isocrates, give speeches, but wrote about rhetoric. The venerable profession of “logographer,” or speechwriter, already existed back then, and many a litigant would have been helpless in court without the hired assistance of its practitioners. “Rhetorical discourses are those discourses, spoken or written, which aim to influence men (Black, 1979, 15).

There has always been rhetoric, oral and written, so there is little wonder that written rhetoric established itself as a profession, as Journalism (*Publizistik*), the study and practice of influencing public opinion. In the first half of the 20th century mass communication expanded from the printed page to film, radio broadcast, and television, which each medium adding further levels of scripting (cf. Ong 1982,18). In recent years the electronic media have seen further, epoch-making developments, so that the “rhetoricity of television” is now being eclipsed by the rhetoricity of internet communication. In both of these spheres the effect is multimedial so that the contributions of image, sound, graphics are practically impossible to distinguish (Doelker 1997,143).

A situation has now been reached that should not come as a surprise to rhetoricians, for “rhetoric is not exclusively a study of public speaking; its concern encompasses symbols of inducement whether they are expressed as speeches, essays, in films, drama, novels, poems, or

demonstrations” (cf. Bitzer/Black 1971,210). Even back in 1971 this list can only have shocked arch traditionalists. The list is remarkable in that the rhetorical fields mentioned are related almost exclusively to high literature. The sole exception is demonstrations, which go beyond not only the *genus demonstrativum*, but the logocentric pale altogether. Mass demonstrations involve banners, uniforms, colors, insignia and musical bands, whether they be military marches, protest marches, carnival parades or any other kind of parade or procession.

Amazingly, images—which have been influencing people for millennia—are represented in Bitzer’s and Black’s list solely by the genre of film. No mention is made of traditional painting, of book graphics, sculpture, monuments and architecture, let alone the more recent phenomena of happenings and video installations.

From the gradeschool primer (*rhymes with “simmer”*) on, instruction in reading and writing is rhetorical. Even the order of letters influences young speakers as they find their way into the world of writing. The pictures that appear in their textbooks, what Comenius called “*orbis pictus*” (pictorial world), influence them even more and have often tended to serve religious and political ends more than aesthetic education. This tendency carries over into the *biblia pauperum* (the Bible of the poor people) of the stained-glass church windows, and into consumer advertising and political posters, through which socialization is quietly accomplished. The various power centers are powerful indeed, for not everyone can build a church or post placards all over town or mount and sustain ad campaigns or sponsor TV programs.

For many people—in France and in Germany, for example—illustrated magazines trump books hands down, and tabloids are more persuasive than the newspapers that have more substantial text. The rhetoricity of comics and cartoons (cf. Medhurst 1981; Sewell 1986, 1987) can no more be disputed than that of picture stories (e.g. von R. Töpffer, W. Busch, Gosciny/Uderzo). Crosses marking mountain summits, flags over frontier outposts and flags raised on the moon are all equally persuasive claims of possession. (Only the sponsors vary, and the people who are supposed to believe in their claims.) The same applies to banners, whether they appear in paintings (of the annuncia-

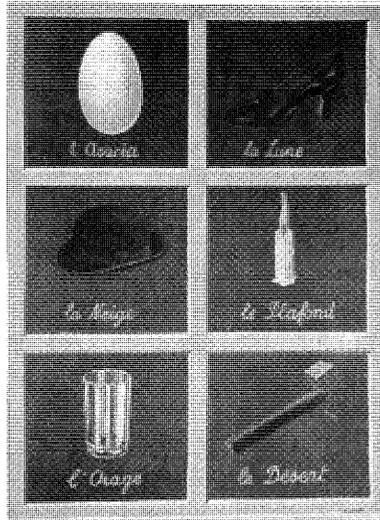
tion, for example, or of St. George's defeat of the dragon), or, with patriotic slogans, spanning the city streets of authoritarian countries, both fascist and communist, as even today in Cuba they "Vencemos!"

We in literate societies—and in literary elites—have been surrounded by visual rhetoric, whether manifest or subliminal, since well before the dawn of the "optical age." Of course most people are simply overwhelmed by the flood of images. They have neither time nor inclination to attend to the creeping influences of printed pictures, movies and television, nor have they learned criteria that would allow critical distancing. But this is true also of spoken language, of dogmas and slogans. Therefore it would be astonishing if artists did not produce rhetorical pictures as well, on the one hand in order to preserve war heroes, statesmen and heroic moments for the ages, on the other hand to commemorate horrible events: "War" (Dali), "Shtetl" (Chagall), "Guernica" (Picasso). The aims of such pictures can be readily understood in terms of the three desired effects recognized by classical rhetoric. However, only rarely has the attempt been made to bring rhetoric per se into the picture, to make the pictorial thinking itself visible. An artist who *did* make just this attempt was the Belgian painter René Magritte (1898-1967), (hereafter RM). To him, "the art of painting [is] the art of thinking" (1981, 219). Whereas verbal rhetoricians (both oralists and scripturalists) believe in the power of the word, RM calls his famous painting of a pipe (1928/29) "Betrayal of the Pictures." It is however also a betrayal of words.



RM comments: “Ah, the famous pipe ... I've been criticised enough for it. And yet ... can it be stuffed with tobacco, my pipe? No, it can't, it's just a representation. So if I had written ‘This is a Pipe’ below the picture, I would have been lying” (1966). Correct: no one can smoke this pipe, but you can't smoke the word “pipe” either. Image and word are both abstractions; neither one is a reality. Nor are they a so-called “reflection” of reality, rather they become real only in the head of the observing thinker, of the thinking speaker, writer.

Therefore it would be short-sighted to take arbitrary word meanings for the things themselves. Word meanings are conventional and it is all the same to the thing “dog” whether it is called *kyon*, *canis*, *chien*, *hund* or *dog*. It may seem strange that many words evoke images preverbally, that, in general—and even in scientific thinking—comprehension is not possible without inner images, or, on the other hand, that in states of impaired, subliminal consciousness (fatigue, drunkenness, drug-induced stupor) or in dreams, contours change and the relationship of word to image can shift and produce seemingly incongruent arrangements, connotations, transpositions and interpenetration of spheres. RM uses tables to show the ultimately contingent bond of word to image.



Not to suppress this mixing, but to let it happen, even to encourage it—this is the hallmark of surrealism, at least according to Andre Breton (1. Surreal. Manifest 1924), who claims that human beings are “no longer bound exclusively to mere reality,” but rather “to pure, psychical self-movement. One undertakes to express the real functioning of thought, whether orally, in writing or by some other means. A dictatorship of thought freed of all rational control, removed from any aesthetic or moral reservation” (Hess 1956,118).

Or, in the words of RM’s contemporary, the painter Max Ernst: “The final superstition of Western culture was the fairytale of the creativity of the artist. Among the revolutionary acts of surrealism was to attack this myth as soberly and as sharply as possible and to annihilate it, perhaps for good, by emphatically insisting on the purely *passive* role of the ‘author’ in the mechanism of poetic inspiration and by unmasking any *active* control exerted by rational, moral or aesthetic considerations as anathema to inspiration” (Hess 1956,120).

Even more important for RM than the encounter with Breton was the discovery of the “*pittura metafisica*” by Giorgio de Chirico, who had found a counter-reality in his pictures. The relationship of image to word continued to preoccupy the painter.

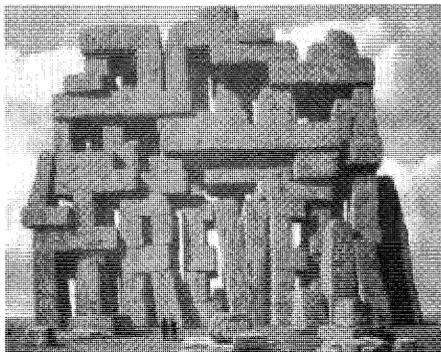
RM will write later: “In 1927 I contributed to the *révolution surréaliste* that participated in the development of surrealism ... Art is not the ground of being for the surrealist, who avails himself of art. When he uses it, it is as a means of thinking” (1962/1981, 470). In a letter to the Belgian rhetorician Chaim Perelman, RM writes: “The word ‘surréal’ has come into fashion since surrealism gave a name to a direction in thinking that had no connection to the firmly established disciplines. It is neither ‘surreal’ nor ‘irreal,’ nor ‘fantastical,’ nor ‘imaginary.’ If it were, it would be no more than another literary or artistic school ... therefore I am hardly ‘surrealistic,’ – these words, which replace thought-voids, really say nothing” (368f). “My painting (is) not dream painting. It is about presence of mind, (which) is not imaginary at all” (498). “Everything occurs in our mental universe” (163). “My pictures are visible thoughts” (444).

With all due caution regarding self-explication by artists, writers and painters – texts that offer only one of many possible paths to in-

terpretation, and a rather introspective one at that – it *is* possible to verify RM's statements in the works themselves, in his thought-pictures. "Le surréalisme de Magritte n'est pas un fait du subconscient ni d'un mode de rêves, mais de l'aspect surprenant qu'il confère consciemment à l'objet. Il le charge d'une signification insolite en le plaçant dans un cadre anti-traditionnel. Utilisant une imagerie pas trop connue, il crée ainsi une réalité qui se renouvelle à l'infini, et devient la source d'inépuisables découvertes" (Catalogue, Brussels 1958).

With the stage now set by these preliminary remarks, let us consider some of RM's thought-pictures and ask about their rhetorical implications.

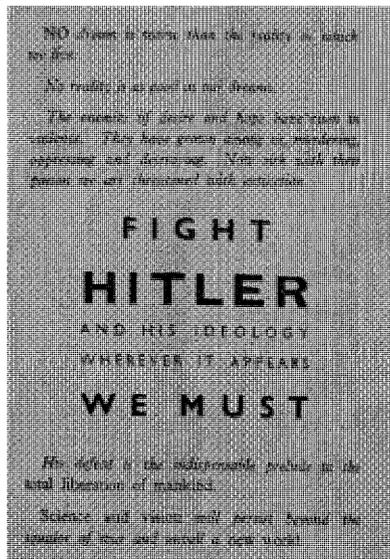
Conversation denotes the usually informal exchange of words and symbols between two or more persons with the goal of exchanging thoughts, moods, feelings and ideas. Ideally, the exchange of opinions can lead the participants, the "con-versants" (*con-versari*) to a consensus, becoming thereby rhetorical in a narrow sense. Sometimes, however, the thoughts of the conversants become independent. Something arises that is larger than what was intended by the conversant, or the opposite occurs and the conversation becomes banal and peters out. RM painted several "conversations." One of them is shown here:



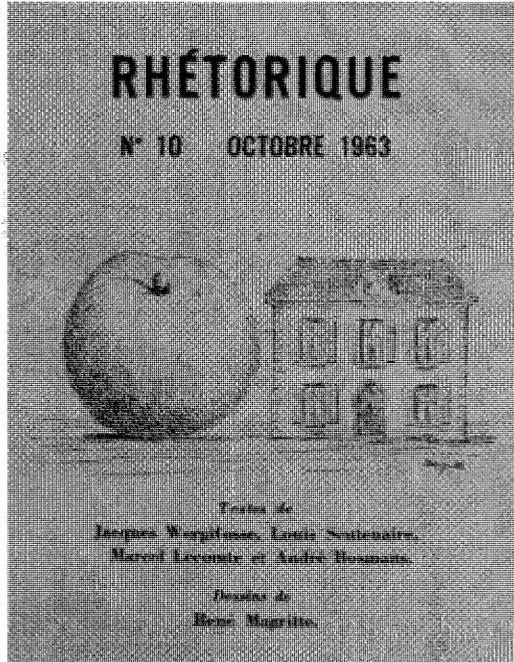
Amid rough-hewn blocks of stone the word REVE (dream) can be seen. Some interpreters have concluded that RM's visual inventions show a strong connection to Freud's analysis of dreams, although RM says himself: "Art, as I understand it, resists psychoanalysis." In fact

he is ironic on the subject: “Perhaps psychoanalysis is most appropriate when applied to psychoanalysis” (1981, 463). If an art historian asks with respect to this painting: “Isn’t the art of conversation all about using metaphorical language, that is, saying something while meaning something quite different?” then not only does this question employ a peculiar understanding of what a metaphor is, it does not get to RM’s understanding of language or of this picture. What does the word REVE mean in this “context”? To answer this question would require knowing what it means to the two diminutive men conversing in the foreground. Are their opinions identical, or does the “tower,” as is so often the case, arise precisely because their thoughts, or meanings, diverge. And if indeed “dream” is the intended meaning, is it a nightmare, a ponderous musing, a chimerical dream or merely an illusion? Does the pile of rocks become ever larger because they believe in the dream that conversations must succeed as exchanges of information?

It should not be forgotten that RM painted through the revolutionary years after World War I and during the German occupation of Belgium during WW II.



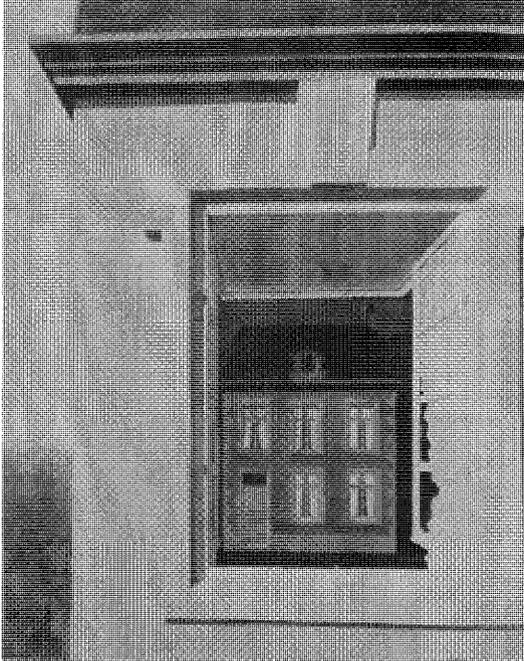
And it should not be forgotten that RM, as the politically motivated editor of the periodical *Rhétorique*, had a direct understanding of rhetorical communication.



“The real value of art depends on its capacity for liberating development . . .” (it is also true for the artist) “that his effort, like that of every worker, is necessary for the dialectical development of the world” (1981,98f). This understanding of dialectic, in those days still a leftist one, is not far from the sentiment expressed in the opening words of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*: “Rhetoric is a counterpart of Dialectic,” which he then further specifies as “an offshoot of Dialectic and of the science of Ethics, which may be reasonably called Politics.”

The dialectical uncovering of the following picture ‘*Dialectic*’ shows a window within a window, both of them comprehensible with respect to each other only from the forward limit, which enables the

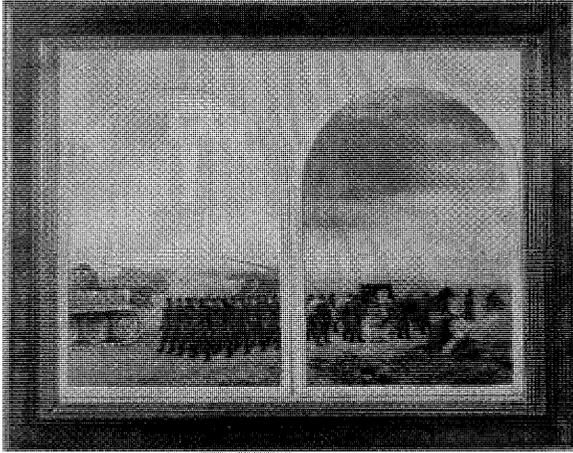
simultaneous apperception of the world—more precisely, of both worlds—in their relationship.



An important key here RM's understanding of the double meaning of perspective; on the one hand it features the vanishing point, familiar in painting since the Renaissance, on the other hand – and this is often forgotten – it features transparency, like a hole in the door that offers (not only to the voyeur) a glimpse through the door into the world behind it. This interpretation offers access to the dialectic that operates in many of RM's "double-sighted" works.

Another aspect is marked with the next picture: "*Applied Dialectic.*"

From the experience of war and occupation, RM concretizes the contingent dialectic of the two window-worlds in a juxtaposition. In the dialectical reversal the presentation or the representation of soldiers and weapons becomes a dialectic of political reality.

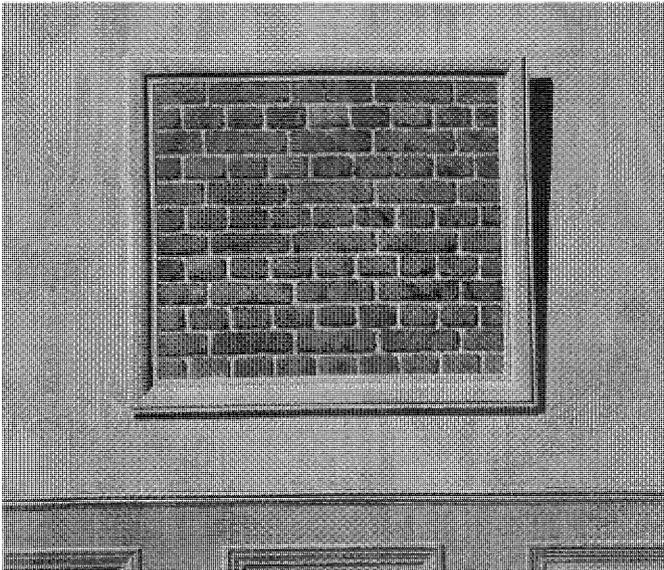


In post-Enlightenment thinking dialectic is bound to Hegel's idealism and Marx's attempt to overcome this idealism (dialectical materialism). To understand the triad of thesis, antithesis, synthesis, one has to read Hegel's *Logic*. RM avoids a conceptual involvement in all this by sending Hegel on vacation, as indicated in the subtitle: "*Hegel's vacancy.*"



It is about the dialectic of getting wet and avoiding getting wet. If the thinker knocks over the glass of water, he can get wet. If he opens the umbrella, he has nothing to fear. But the glass posed atop the umbrella remains a constant threat. A triple cancellation-sublimation (*Aufhebung*) of the dialectical tension is – in Hegel’s sense – not possible.

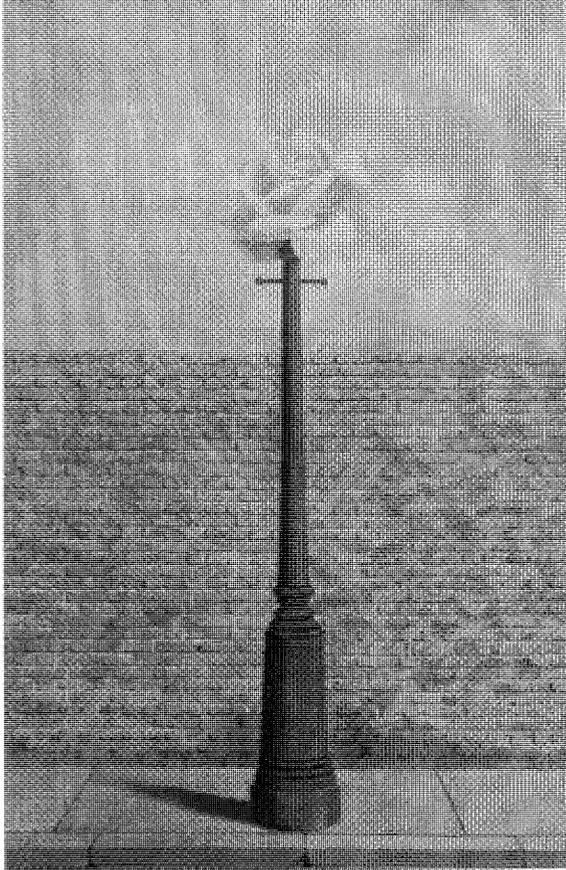
Another form of dialectics is shown by the rhetoric of “*Empty Space*.” A gold frame is applied to a wall, within the frame the plaster has been removed: framed monotony.



Communication does not take place in empty space. It requires a situative frame. There is no speech without framing. Often a speaker expends most of his care on an ornate, “gilt” frame. The speech itself is a concatenation of pathetic, pedantic, vapid sentences. Some didactic speeches, e.g. lectures, don’t even have a golden frame. They are, according to the second title, “*saignée*,” bled out.

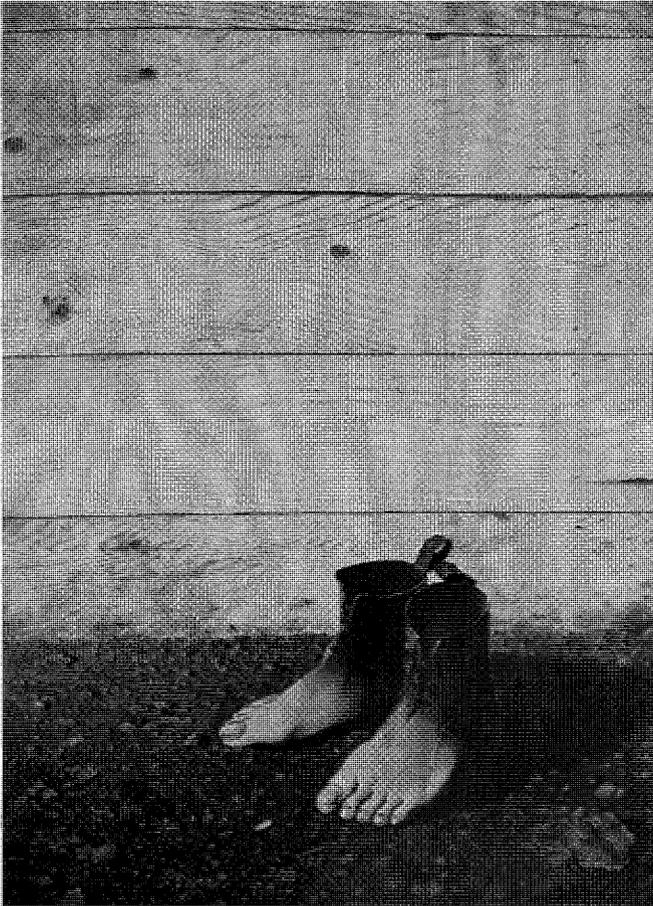
The next picture is by no means bled out, quite the reverse it represents the so-called “*Good Oration*” (*La bonne parole*): Before a wall

of nicely laid, one-inch tile stands, nicely in the middle of the picture, a nice, stable metal lightpost, which, instead of shining light, bears a blossoming rose.



No enlightenment here, but regression into hackneyed metaphors, ornament in place of cognition. In Ciceronian terms this is a rather sterile *delectatio*. This could be one of those cases that RM had in mind when he said (in: *Rhetorique* 1, 1961, 3, cf. 1981 : 436): “One is tempted to say that is not about language so much as about exercising the voice in public.”

My favorite thought picture on rhetoric, however, is: "*Rhetoric: Red Model.*"



In front of a rough wooden palisade stands a pair of ankle boots, low heeled, the toes in the wind. That indicates to me "freedom of speech": 1) "you may walk wherever you want," 2) you may make your speech – without fear to get sores on your tongue –, liberal and not artificial.

### Some final observations

RM's ambivalent images demand much of whoever contemplates them. Nevertheless, to the rhetoricians among us, their rhetoricity should be clear. At the same time it should also have become apparent how much knowledge of rhetoric and painting is necessary in order to approach them. If, as Paul Klee said, "art is an expedition to the truth," then it would be frivolous to approach art without the necessary training and intellectual equipment. This is true for all artistic media: literature, painting, music, dance—also for architecture, drama and opera. But it also means that the ambiguous paintings of the one-time communist RM are elitist, because, however easy it is to look at them, they are not so easy to understand.

Consideration of RM's "thought pictures for rhetorical communication" underscores Leonhard Nelson's observation on the understanding of works of art: "The processes of reception and interpretation cannot be separated, they are completely interdependent" (1997, 20) This view agrees with that of Ed Black who, speaking from the perspective of rhetorical criticism, said: "Beyond perception is appraisal; beyond seeing a thing is attaching a value to it. These two acts – perception and evaluation – distinguishable as they are in theory, are generally experienced as inseparable phases of the same process" (1979, 5).

Both of these statements place a burden on those who would more fully understand images and speech. If there is no separation between perception and understanding, between perception and evaluation, then this understanding is not so simply accomplished.

These opinions agree with the views of RM. "Whoever sees something cannot be isolated by his or her vision. What is seen and the meaning it is given are not pre-determined, dictated, automatic" (1981, 347). "The observer can view my pictures with the greatest freedom possible, *just as they are*, by attempting, as does the author, to think of the meaning, that is of the impossible" (307), for "I am not expressing feelings nor am I formulating ideas by means of painting ... the painting is not an idea, it is a painted image, to which the person regarding it must give ideas" (344f). "The viewer (should) see the pictures in

total freedom, *what they are*: they are HIS thinking of the sense” (295).

Such radical sentences remind us of the Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* (1918): “My sentences illuminate in that whoever understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when through them—on them—he has ascended above them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after climbing on it)” (1960, 83). In his early work RM seems to have worried that someone could come along afterward, set up the ladder again and thoughtlessly ascend into a world that is dangerous. This at least is suggested, albeit without explicit reference to Wittgenstein, by the following statement, made by RM in 1926: “It is even necessary to saw up the rungs of the ladder” (1981, 23).

Translation: John Minderhout, Ann Arbor, MI

### List of the Illustrations (size reduced and in cold print)

- 01 R. Magritte: This is not a Pipe (1948). Postcard
- 02 R. Magritte: Wort-Image Table (1930). cf. B. Noël, Südwest Verlag München 1977, p. 33
- 03 R. Magritte. The Art of Conversation. (1950)
- 04 Fight Hitler (1940). From *L'invention collective*, a journal founded by Magritte, 2 vol. published; cf. R.M. and the Surrealism in Belgium. Kunsthhaus Hamburg 1982, p.199
- 05 Frontpage of the journal *Rhétorique*, founded by R.M. 1961, 13 volumes, the last one February 1966; cf. l.c. Hamburg 1982, p.294
- 06 R. Magritte: Praise of Dialectics (1936/7) l.c. Hamburg 1982, p. 176
- 07 R. Magritte: Applied Dialectics (1945), l.c. Hamburg 1982, p.223
- 08 R. Magritte: Hegel's Vacation (1958). Postcard
- 09 R. Magritte: The rhetoric of empty Space (1934), from A-M. Hammacher: *Magritte* (dt.) DuMonts Bibliothek großer Maler. Köln 1975, p.116
- 10 R. Magritte: Beautiful Speech (1939). Postcard.
- 11 R. Magritte: Rhetoric: The Red Model (1937). l.c. Köln 1975, p.110

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