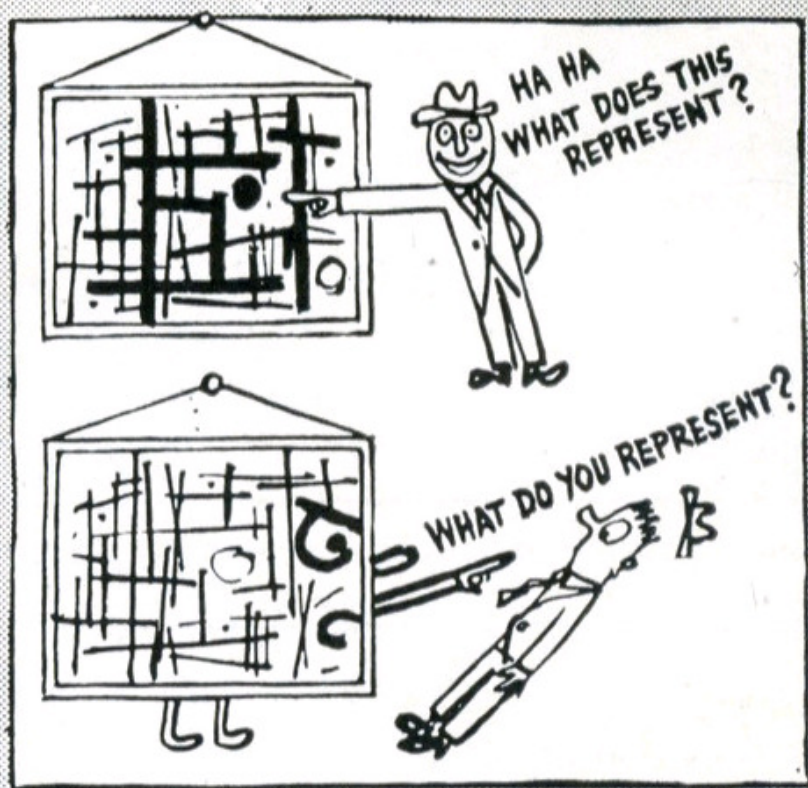


# The Meaning of the Message

Jacob Martin



An abstract painting will react to you if you react to it. You get from it what you bring to it. It will meet you half way but no further. It is alive if you are. It represents something and so do you. YOU, SIR, ARE A SPACE, TOO.



## But What Does it Mean?

We clamor for meaning wherever we find text or symbolism. If we encounter something in a language we don't know, (or something incomprehensible in a language that we do), our first inclination is to ask, "Yes, but what does it mean?" Or, more realistically, "What is it saying?" As if the inscription were a living thing which could speak and it, even right now, is telling us something that we desperately need to know.

But that isn't the only place that the search for meaning comes up. If someone does something out of place or out of character or something otherwise *incomprehensible*, we ask "What did they mean?" Or if someone says something the literal meaning of which is clear but in the wrong context, we say, "What could they have possibly meant?"

*incomprehensible*—from Latin *incomprehensibilis*, in- (see prefix in-), denoting not; *comprehensibilis*, from *comprehendō* (princ. parts, *comprehendō*, *comprehendere*, *comprehendī*, *comprehensus*, to lay hold of or grasp, first in the literal meaning, then in the figurative); and *-ibilis*, suffix denoting possibility. (Adapted from the OED etymology entries.)

**Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. —John 1:1**

“In the beginning was the word,” tells us the writer of John’s Gospel. Ignoring the literal meaning and philosophical implications of the Greek word *logos*, let us consider this as an English sentence.

The universe is, apparently at least, *ordered*. There is a comprehensibility to it. We can reason about and understand its workings. The Gospel of John later says that all things came to being through this Word, as if this Word were the ordering principle which makes things intelligible in the first place.

The scholastic monastics (Aquinas and following) said that God must be rational because the universe is rational, but they were following Aristotle in saying this. But it’s interesting that *word* should be taken as the principle which does this ordering.

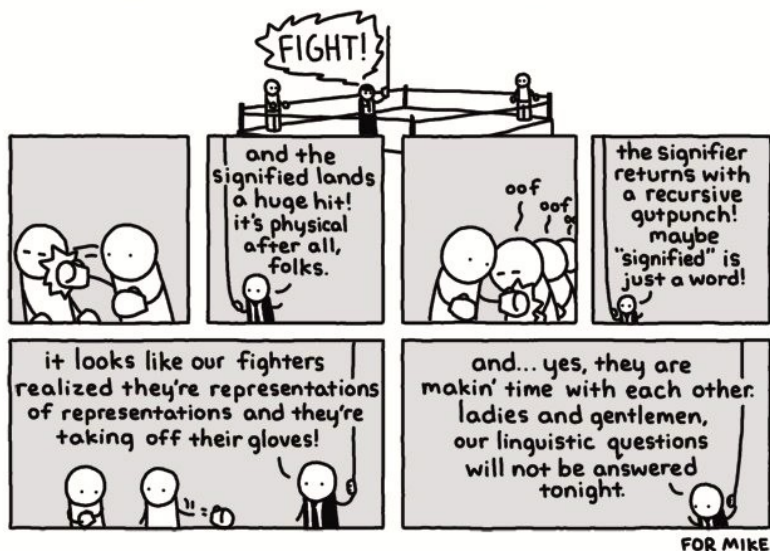


Ferdinand de Saussure said that the linguistic unit was the *sign*, which consisted of a signifier, the word or words being said, and the signified being what they *mean*. In fact, an old way of saying “this means that” is to say “this signifies that.”

## Give me a Sign

Of course, John never met Saussure, but every writer has a keen sense that their words do not mean only what they intend on meaning but must taken as a whole, within context. John’s first words, Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, (= in the beginning was the word) could very well have meant, “The treasurer was in the midst of a body of troops,” given another context. (Black, *Learn to Read New Testament Greek*, prologue)

# THE SIGNIFIER VS. THE SIGNIFIED

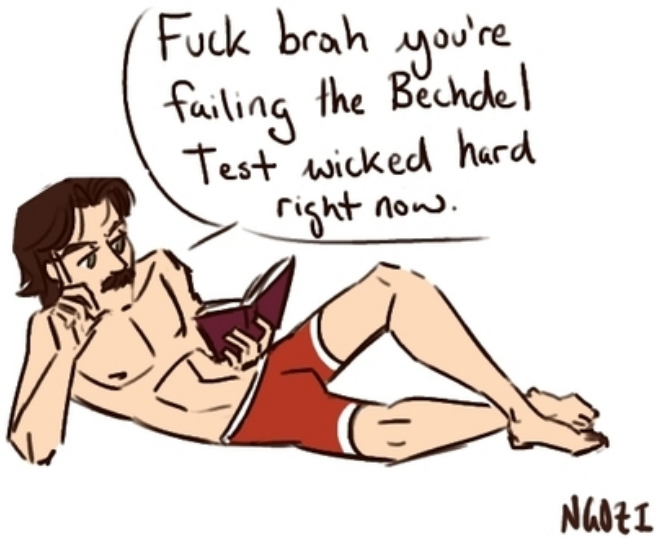


This last translation, however, takes a few leaps. We get “treasurer” from the fact that treasurers work with numbers, which are logical and work kind of like words. Hence, in an extended metonymic way, “treasurer” can be represented like “word.”



treasurer money numbers  
money numbers word



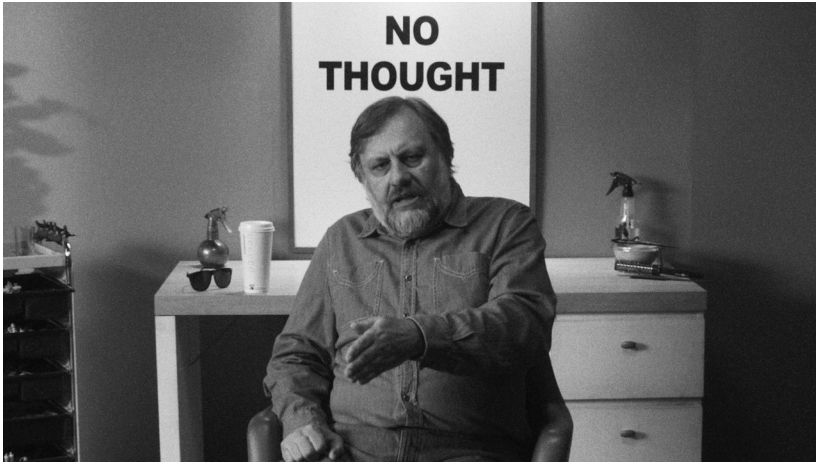


## Cultural Context

Of course, a full exegesis of John 1:1 would be incomplete without considering all of the loaded meanings behind the Greek word *logos*, which at the time of the writing of the Gospel of John had undergone significant philosophical and cultural development.

And so it is with every word, loaded with the context that the language existed, sometimes inside of a history of violence or racism or misogyny, sometimes within a geographical context that doesn't include every possible thing. (Indo-European languages had no need of a word for maize before they discovered it in the Americas.)





## Your World



## My World

a planet identical to your world except there is no  $H_2O$ . Instead there is XYZ, a liquid that is just like  $H_2O$  but chemically different, which we refer to on this planet as "water" also in our "English" language. Until the discovery of the chemical composition of our water and your water, the experience of people on both our "Earths" remain identical. When someone on our planet says "water" and his counterpart on your planet says "water", their brains are identical in state to each other's. Can we still say then that meaning is in the mind?



@Sturrrfridge



Not really how I imagined the second coming



“For I did not speak of my own accord.” —John 12:49

# **No, Lady Gaga Is Not Friends with Marxist Philosopher Slavoj Žižek**

A story on collaboration between the two has  
been discredited

“This is what makes covering Trump so difficult: What does he mean when he says words?”—Reporter Covering Donald Trump (From the Zachary Wolf show)

“I think a lot of the voters for Trump take him seriously but not literally.”  
—Peter Thiel, adviser to Trump

For decades, a classic joke has been circulating among Lacanians to exemplify the key role of the Other's knowledge: a man who believes himself to be a kernel of grain is taken to a mental institution where the doctors do their best to convince him that he is not a kernel of grain but a man; however, when he is cured (convinced that he is not a kernel of grain but a man) and allowed to leave the hospital, he immediately comes back, trembling and very scared—there is a chicken outside the door, and he is afraid it will eat him. “My dear fellow,” says his doctor, “you know very well that you are not a kernel of grain but a man.” “Of course I know,” replies the patient, “but does the chicken?”—Slavoj Žižek