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FOUCAULT AND MAGRITTE

GUIDO ALMANSI

If our faces were not similar, we could not distinguish man from beast; if they were not dissimilar, we could not distinguish man from man.

Montaigne

For the anonymous author of the Holy Bible, in the beginning was chaos. For Michel Foucault, author — among numerous other books — of *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* in the beginning were two chaoses: the chaos of sameness, where everything is the same as everything else; and the chaos of difference, where everything differs from everything else. Neither admits the idea of order, which can only appear on the borderline between sameness and difference. Where everything is equal, or where everything is unequal, it is impossible to use categories of knowledge, systems of organisation, hierarchies or classifications. The very concept of order is banned both by a world of rigorous uniformity and by a world of infinite multiformity. According to Edmund Leach in his book *Genesis as Myth*, the author of the Bible creates the Universe by dividing it according to a binary code: light versus darkness, heaven versus earth, waters under the firmament versus waters above the firmament, dry land versus sea, animals that swim versus animals that fly. For Foucault, the universe is divided into two categories: things and words. Without this partition we could not understand the world, which our intellect can only grasp through the double articulation of *chooses* and *mots*, of a fact and the telling of this fact.

The concept of order presupposes the concepts of difference and sameness (between thing and thing; between word and word). The history of the world is also *Histoire du même*, *History of Sameness*. The thing called *man* only becomes *man* when it realises its opposition to the other, i.e. the *non-man*, the inhuman; when man is conscious of being the *same* as another man. But what does *same* mean? This is not the static *same* of the chaos of sameness, wallowing eternally in its own indifference; but the dynamic *same* of the living world, clashing and turning and fighting with what is different. The *History of Sameness* is no longer an autistic game of multiple mirrors but a vortex of changing images. Foucault has dedicated part of his life to the identification of the meaning of this insidious adjective: *same*.

In a history of the world seen through this double perspective there are gaps, splits, blanks, revolutions; for example, the great split between a conception of the world as God’s writ — where the visible world is an interpretable expression of its own essence — and of the writ as a transcription of the world. This is the crucial post-Renaissance crisis which Foucault analyses in the early part of his major work, *Les Mots et les choses* (in English, *The Order of Things*). At the critical moment denounced by
Foucault, towards the end of the sixteenth century, words and things fall apart, putting an end to their ancient and mysterious correspondence. Since then, and for many centuries to come, words have been forced to run after the intolerable alienness of things. The web of similarities which held the world and the language together as harmonious connected wholes is rent. Gone is the essential affinity between man and the star which governs his destiny: the affinity which vouched for the collaboration between macrocosmos and microcosmos (or for the specular reflection of one by the other). I shall use the example taken by Foucault from a sixteenth-century medical text: the aconite, a plant which cures eye diseases, used to bear the sign of a human eyelid in its texture. After the sixteenth century, this is no longer true. Worse still, the very concept of similitude disappears from the field of knowledge. Henceforth we shall have likenesses — a man may have porcine features, hence look like a pig — but no similitudes — a man with porcine features does not partake of the porcinity of the pig. Language, both in literature and in the arts, is thus demeaned and impoverished: reduced to a mediocre parasitical role, like a typist taking down the voice of nature in an arbitrary system of signs. From then on, all languages waste themselves in the mimetic effort of reproducing the miracle of likeness, which is no longer confirmed by the necessity of similitude. Why does our man with foreshortened nose, dilated nostrils, small eyes and pointed ears look like a pig although he does not share the pig's porcine essence? The downfall of Renaissance symbolism brings the vulgar aesthetic of as if: man looks as if he were a pig (but not in Magritte, whose work is 'la peinture du même', freed from the as if). Against anatomical classification (two-legged versus four-legged animals), against zoological nomenclature (homo versus sus), against vocal conventions (the human voice is unlike a pig's grunt — usually), any statement concerning the likeness between a man and a pig is a vain search for the echo of ancient metamorphoses, of meaningful similitudes, of fatal overlappings, of arcane affinities. What is different is less problematical now than what is alike.

According to Foucault, Magritte is the exception, in more than one sense. First of all, the painter has dissociated the similitude from the likeness and plays one against the other. In his letter to Foucault, printed at the end of Ceci n'est pas une pipe, Magritte protests that there are no likenesses among things: there are similitudes; but the philosopher does not seem to pay too much attention to this disclaimer, since his aesthetics need this continuous confrontation between likeness and similitude, and imposes it at the very centre of Magritte's poetic universe. Besides, Magritte is for Foucault one of the disguises of the poet. In The Order of Things we have two main characters searching for unconventional likenesses and deceitful similitudes: the fool and the poet. The former has an unreplaceable function in the experience of the West as 'l'homme aux ressemblances sauvages' (oddly translated in the Tavistock Press edition as 'the man of primitive resemblances'). 'Alienated in analogy,' the madman, 'the disordered player of the Same and the Other,' continues to believe in the short-circuits of intuitions. On the other hand

the poet is he who, beneath the named, constantly expected differences, redis-
covers the buried kinships between things, their scattered resemblances. In the language of the poet, the Sovereignty of the Same, so difficult to express, eclipses the distinction existing between signs.

His word hankers back to the time when words shone in the universal affinity of all things.

In this perspective Foucault sees Magritte as the poet *par excellence*, the hunter of lost similitudes (a function fulfilled by Raymond Roussel in Foucault’s early phase). The painter perceives the analogical booming of images in the same way as the writer hears the analogical booming of words. Magritte follows a dream of transcendental significance, beyond the ancient bifurcations between sign and image, word and icon, writing and painting, reading and seeing. In a cultural universe founded on the arbitrariness of the sign — one of the epistemological axioms most deeply rooted in the modern psyche — Magritte frantically explores the range and limitations of arbitrariness (*l’arbitraire* of the image, of the name, of likeness, of title, of analogy). As Suzi Gablik remarks in her well-known monograph, Magritte’s art is related to Wittgenstein’s preoccupation about the incantation cast by language upon us. Every user and consumer of language becomes the victim of language itself, the tool of his own tool. Language decides for him what he is going to think, say, do, be. Magritte’s rebellion is epistemological before being pictorial. His anger is aimed against the grammar of concepts more than against the syntax of things and images.

Beside this process of subversion, Magritte strives to free himself from a direct confrontation between thing and image and word, between what is a pipe and what is the image of a pipe and what is the word pipe. At times, he is urging us to confront the problem; in other paintings he is devious and evasive. Diderot said ‘Ceci n’est pas un conte’, ‘This is not a tale’. Magritte inscribes ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’, ‘This is not a pipe’, on the very canvas which ostentatiously represents a pipe; or puts the title *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* under the picture of a pipe. One of the basic principles of Western painting, according to Foucault, is the equivalence between the principle of likeness and the affirmation of a representational link (unlike, say, Egyptian painting). This principle is challenged by Kandinski:

. . . There is another principle that has governed the art of painting for a long time; it states the equivalence between the presence of a likeness and the affirmation of a representational link. An image looks like a thing (or like any other image): this is enough to insinuate in the game of painting an obvious and banal statement, repeated a thousand times and yet hardly ever voiced (. . .): ‘What you see is this.’ . . . The main point is that you cannot dissociate likeness and affirmation. The breach of this principle can be placed under the sign of Kandinski: a simultaneous obliteration of both likeness and representative link by emphasizing the very lines and colours of which Kandinski said that they were ‘things’ in their own right, just as the church object, the bridge object, or the riding-man with his bow.

Magritte, though the least abstract among the great modern artists, follows
this new anti-tradition in his own idiosyncratic way. His paintings, according to Foucault, are the opposite of trompe-l’oeil — Magritte once said that his canvasses were trompe-l’esprit. A trompe-l’oeil is always a trompe-l’esprit, but not vice versa: a trompe-l’esprit is not necessarily a trompe-l’oeil. Yet perhaps the problem is even more complex. A painting by Magritte may be a trompe-l’oeil which openly declares its nature as trompe-l’oeil, i.e. a contradiction in terms. A trompe-l’oeil with underneath a caption saying ‘I am a trompe-l’oeil’ would hardly deceive anyone. The restaurant in Paris, near Beaubourg, called Trompe-l’oeil, a name which is inscribed in the front with a trompe-l’oeil technique, is a Magrittian restaurant. In Magritte’s paintings a woman, a pipe, a gentleman with bowler hat are impeccably woman, pipe, gentleman with bowler hat, and thus they can free themselves from their iconic responsibilities (the woman has a fish tail or a fish head; the pipe is not a pipe; the gentleman with bowler hat floats above the roofs of Brussels). The treble connection between thing, image and word is put to a severe test by the painter’s extravagant raids into the territory of arbitrariness.

Foucault is well known as a staunch adversary of the personality cult in literature and the arts. He insists on the cultural and epistemological conditioning at the moment of creation. Yet even he needs a hero, the fool or the poet, whose eccentric career insures the continuity or permanence of given cultural signs beyond the coupures which interrupt the course of human thought at different points of historical time. Magritte is one of these heroes, whom Foucault attempts to place in an itinerary of subversion, going from Kandinski to the Andy Warhol of Campbell Soups, though these associates do not necessarily befit him. Magritte is a lone wolf, a nocturnal hunter of defunct relations, active in a serendipitous world of apparently fortuitous meetings (between an umbrella and a sewing-machine in the text by Leautréamont; between an umbrella and a glass full of water in the painter’s Les vacances d’Hegel). For this reason too, and not only for the punctilious brushstroke and traditional style of his pseudorealism, Magritte is, for Foucault and perhaps also for us, a reactionary revolutionary, or vice versa.

Aggressivity is required when looking at his paintings. We must above all refuse collaboration. Magritte requires an unfriendly viewer fighting against the pictures. If we accept the rules of the game, we disappoint him; but by refusing them, we can create a state of wholesome disagreement. Angry reactions and hostile feelings are preferable to placid contemplation, which Magritte hates. ‘The perfect painting does not allow for contemplation,’ he says, ‘a banal and uninteresting feeling.’ He demands an intellectual, hence critical, participation to his canvasses, which are instruments for thinking; ideas made images; unusual catalysts of cerebral activity. Magritte attempts to induce metaphysical knowledge in the same way as Dali tries to induce paranoia.

Yet this does not take into account misunderstanding, which is an essential feature of the experience of looking at Magritte’s paintings. The viewer must ignore what the painter meant, and perhaps the painter himself must at times be kept in the dark not only about his intentions (Magritte would deny there are any), but about his intuitions. Everything considered, Magritte is a
romantic who believes in the *inspired* mating of an umbrella and a glass of water, rather than in the plain glass of water, by Velazquez or Morandi, made mysterious by the technique of the artist or the bewilderment of the viewer. Magritte’s own comment on this particular combination, in a letter addressed to Suzi Gablik concerning *Les vacances d’Hegel*, is disconcerting in its naivety. He writes elsewhere: ‘All beings are mysterious’ — but where everything is mysterious, nothing is. The artist does not always understand what he paints, fortunately, and our aesthetic satisfaction is often the reward of his slip. Foucault seems aware of this *impasse*. He skilfully plays on the concept of misunderstanding, and exploits the ‘mistake’ of the pipe/non-pipe as a provisional equivocation, *un mal-écrit*, a mis-writing (just as we say *un malentendu*, a misunderstanding). But should we not concentrate on the question of misreading — rather than on misunderstanding or miswriting — which is one of the keys to Magritte’s deceitful calligrams? I am alluding here to Harold Bloom’s *A Map of Misreading*, where the conceptual distortion affecting the literature of the past appears as a manifest sign of progress, or at least of the continuity of *humanae litterae*. We read because we misread: because we do not know how, or wish to, read straight. Something similar happens with Magritte’s panoply of sly images. His oeuvre is either a map of misreading or a mismap of reading. Magritte lures us into a labyrinth of equivocations, perverse intentions and illusory solutions. It is by definition impossible (and not only improbable, as most critics seem to believe) to find one’s way in the planet Magritte. We could hope at best to find a duplication, a carbon copy of our own disorientation.

The recent publication of Magritte’s *Écrits*, a massive and austere volume of over eight hundred pages without illustrations, has only helped us to understand how inadvisable it is to understand Magritte. In his full scholarly annotations, the editor, Blavier, has compared all existing variants of Magritte’s texts and discovered the inner contradictions and mental hesitations behind the façade of theoretical dogmatism. This is most welcome nowadays, when the wildest surrealistic outbursts have crystallised in a poetics as pompous as the ones they were trying to overthrow. Since the tidal movement against the *valeurs assurées* is creating a new sort of *valeurs*, the last lesson of surrealism must be the subversion of surrealism itself.

This being said, what is the literary or philosophical value of Magritte’s writings *per se*? In spite of some critics’ eulogistic comments about Magritte’s literary style, he is not a real writer. He is no real theoretician, nor real visionary either: and maybe he is not a real painter. He is less and more than that. His theoretical writings are crudely polemical in the manifestoes, and crudely paradoxical in the interviews — where the main aim of the artist was to shock the interviewer. As for his sweeping condemnations and outraged outbursts, they are the most striking, but also the most naive, feature of his texts. According to his saws on or against surrealism, there are no surrealist painters except De Chirico as forerunner and Magritte as the paragon (with a fleeting acknowledgement to Max Ernst). In fact, if we were to follow his theoretical statements *au pied de la lettre*, we should have to admit that there has never been any other painter than Magritte, who invented, practised,
theorised and defended an explicit, intransitive, anti-symbolic painting. In *Le domaine d'Arnheim*, where the top of a mountain turns into a pigeon, there is no room for evocation, suggestiveness, symbolic transfer, mental or visual interchange, optical illusion, between the peak and the bird. The peak is, exactly, precisely, specifically, a bird. The painting is not meant to elicit an epiphanic feeling or an aesthetic illumination: it presents us with an alternative. In the same way the neck of a bottle can end as a carrot (*L'explication*); an engine can burst through the chimney (*La durée poignardée*); the face of a woman can repeat, not symbolically but literally, her body (*Le viol*). But this last painting demonstrates the inadequacy of Magritte's explanation. Aesthetics, according to Magritte, will do for the craftsman who repeats traditional subjects with a few ideas 'sans mystère'. Yet the disturbing effect of *Le viol* is purely aesthetic. It happens on the canvas and in the reaction that the canvas elicits from us: not in our brain. The forbidden superimposition of nose and navel, mouth and labia, eyes and breasts, where the gaze becomes a lurid caress, confusing beard with pubic hair, kiss and fellatio, would be a vulgar *trompe-l'œil* anywhere except in this painting. We must submit, not to the idea itself, but to the morbid incantation of those 'pupils-cum-nipples'. In my favourite painting by Magritte, *Personnage méditant sur sa propre folie* (which I do contemplate, even if the painter turns in his grave), the said character seems to have forgotten the cigarette-holder in his hand, being too absorbed watching something on a table. The table itself is half in, half outside, the canvas. The painting stands beyond all theoretical constructions, be they by Magritte writing his paintings or by the critics writing Magritte. *Personnage méditant* is not an answer to our own desires or to our own fears, but a question confronting us. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* might also be an interrogative painting disguised under an affirmative title. All the so-called logo-iconic works, such as these negated pipes (*L'aube à l'Antipode, La trahison des images*, etc.) are not forcing an answer upon us, but are inviting us to come forward with an answer. They do not exist: only our reaction does. Magritte wrote about *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*: 'Who could smoke the pipe from one of my paintings? Nobody. Hence it is not a pipe.' Is that all? Even a child of two, struggling with the deceitful duplicity of things and images, knows it. He will accept being bitten by a puppet-crocodile, but would behave quite differently if confronted with a real crocodile in a zoo or in the jungle. Foucault's comment is much more interesting:

The strangeness of this composition is not in the 'contradiction' between image and text. For a simple reason: one could only have contradiction between two statements, or within one single statement. . . . Magritte's statement is perfectly true, since it is too obvious that the drawing which represents a pipe is not in itself a pipe.

Yet there are dangers both in the smoker's pragmatics, as evidenced by Magritte, and in the logician's theoretics, as displayed by Foucault. If we were to follow Foucault's reasoning to the extreme, there could never be contradiction except in opposition to the cultural conventions determining
identity. If I say: 'I am Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt', this statement is apparently contradicted by my masculine features, by my beard, by my clothes, by the anachronism, by the fact that my nose is not beautiful and has not changed the course of history. Yet, according to Foucault, this is only a contradiction if we do not accept the cultural convention of metempsychosis, which is notoriously transtemporal and transsexual. According to this convention, the soul of Cleopatra could well have migrated into my body.

In the course of his essay, Foucault brilliantly plays on the relativism of the principle of non-contradiction, using the images of Magritte in the piège of their own double signature, within a perpetual struggle of image and word, icon and caption, painting and title. His variations on the meaning of Ceci in the phrase Ceci n'est pas une pipe are a tour de force of linguistic analysis. According to Foucault, the Klee revolution has challenged the traditional separation between visual representation and linguistic reference. This does not affect Magritte, who prefers to keep representation and reference separate and makes them fight each other. When Magritte uses captions or titles, their function is not to enhance the image, but to contend with it. They are antagonistic, not collaborative. Elsewhere we can find a reconciliation of the double signature: I am thinking of Au Pair Girl, a visual poem by Ian Hamilton Finlay where the words au pair girl form the shape of a pear. In Magritte les mots et les choses continue to murder each other within the double symbolic convention of the alphabet of letters and the alphabet of images.

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NOTES

6. Foucault, Ceci n'est pas une pipe, pp. 42–3. The translation is mine.