

MICHEL FOUCAULT

THIS IS
NOT A PIPE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS AND LETTERS
BY RENE MAGRITTE

TRANSLATED AND EDITED
BY JAMES HARKNESS



AN ART QUANTUM

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University of California Press

Berkeley

Los Angeles

London

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California
University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England
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University of California

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Foucault, Michel.

This is not a pipe.

Translation of Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

Includes index.

1. Magritte, René, 1898-1967. 2. Art

Philosophy. I. Title.

ND673.M35F6813 759.9493 80-26627

ISBN 0-520-04232-8

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

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Acknowledgments

In translating and editing *This Is Not a Pipe*, I had the assistance of a number of persons I should like to thank here.

First and most important was Dr. Sarah Lawall, Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Massachusetts, who guided my early study of Michel Foucault. She read each draft of the translation and gave inestimable help on the way to a completed manuscript. Dr. Lawall's wide knowledge and impeccable scholarship prevented several allusions from escaping unnoticed and greatly improved the overall quality of the translation. Her colleague, Dr. Roger Green of the French Department at the State University of New York at Albany, helped unravel a couple of the more complicated puns.

I am grateful to M. Bruno Roy, at Éditions fata morgana, for aiding in securing translation rights to the text of Michel Foucault's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (Montpellier: Éditions fata morgana, 1973). Mr. Harry Torczyner, representative of René Magritte's estate and attorney for A.D.A.G.P., helped me acquire permission to reproduce the paintings that illus-

trate the present volume, none of which were included in the French version. Mr. Torczyner also provided photographs of two Magritte canvases in his private collection.

I particularly appreciate the efforts of the following individuals for photographs of paintings: Mr. and Mrs. Nesuhi Ertegun; Mr. Eric Himmel, of Abrams Publishing Company; Ms. Hildagard Kron; Mme. René Magritte; Dr. Karin Frank v. Maur, of Staatsgalerie Stuttgart; Mme. Annette Minét, of Draeger, Maître Imprimeur; Mr. Richard Oldenburg and the research library staff of the Museum of Modern Art; M. Louis Scutenaire; and Mr. David Sylvester, of the Menil Foundation's René Magritte Catalogue Raisonné project.

Finally: to Dr. and Mrs. Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., my thanks for access to library and catalog resources, and for red-tape cutting par excellence. To Mr. William McClung of the University of California Press and my editor Ms. Marilyn Schwartz, my gratitude for able guidance and—above all—patience.

THIS IS NOT A PIPE

Translator's Introduction

Arguably the most durable of the Surrealist painters, René Magritte (1898–1967) was born in Lessines, Belgium. He was the oldest of three brothers in a petit bourgeois family that moved frequently: from Lessines to Gilly, Gilly to Châtelet, and (after the suicide of his mother) on to Charleroi, where he attended primary school and enrolled at the Athénée to study classics. In 1916 Magritte traveled to Brussels to enter the Académie des Beaux-Arts. He met classes irregularly, but he began to form friendships that would influence his career: Pierre Bourgeois, Pierre Flouquet, and E. L. T. Mesens.

Magritte had begun to paint as a boy of twelve. Much of the paraphernalia of the child's world would, in abstracted and alienated form, become the raw material of the adult's art: odd balloon shapes, umbrella stands, balustrades, and broken stone columns like those in a decaying cemetery where he played with other youngsters.

As a novice, Magritte experimented with Cubism, Futurism, and other styles, but it was his discovery of Giorgio de Chirico that seems to have electrified him.

De Chirico was an early or proto-Surrealist whose austere, rather cold compositions constituted the kind of visual non sequitur that the Comte de Lautréamont¹ had praised for being “as beautiful as . . . the fortuitous encounter upon an operating table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.” In paintings such as de Chirico’s *The Song of Love* Magritte claimed to have realized “the ascendancy of poetry over painting”—a revelation, according to Suzi Gablik, that moved him to tears.²

“The ascendancy of poetry over painting”—for the fact was that Magritte very early grew bored with painting as an end in itself. Once having settled upon a style, his most persistent concerns were diametrically opposed to those of painterly aestheticism. With the exception of a few interludes (notably the Fauvist “*epoche vache*” of 1948), after 1925 Magritte’s methods grew virtually static. Despite the reproaches of some critics, formal and material problems lay almost wholly outside his realms of interest. He disliked being called an artist, preferring to be considered a thinker who communicated by means of paint. While many painters whose work holds philosophical implications are not self-consciously involved with “ideas,” Magritte read widely in philosophy and listed among his favorite authors Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre—and Michel Foucault.

In the mid-1960s Magritte read Foucault’s now famous *Les Mots et les choses*, known in English as *The Order of Things*: It was hardly surprising that the book would catch the painter’s attention. The title was the same he had given an exhibition in New York City:

The relationship between words and things was precisely the theme so many of his canvases explored with startlingly disorienting effect.

How well Magritte knew Foucault's previous work is a matter for conjecture. Already an intellectual celebrity in Paris, Michel Foucault had won acclaim for his *Histoire de la folie* (translated in the United States as *Madness and Civilization*) and *Naissance de la clinique* (*Birth of the Clinic*). He had also written a penetrating appraisal of the Surrealist author Raymond Roussel, for whom Magritte seems to have felt an affinity. Broadly interested in the Surrealists, Foucault had composed highly original essays on such figures as Georges Bataille, whose collected works he had edited. Foucault and Magritte even exchanged letters, with two by Magritte reproduced in the present volume.

An early version of *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* appeared in 1968 in the journal *Les Cahiers du chemin*. Not until 1973 did Fata Morgana bring out an expanded edition of the essay in book form—possibly because the initial article had been attacked, as Bernard Noel remarks, by “virtually everyone.”³ It came at the apogee of structuralism, with which Foucault was loosely and unwillingly associated. Structuralist partisans and their antagonists were fighting strident, bloody battles across the pages of almost every French periodical, and it seems not unreasonable to guess that much of the initial disfavor that befell *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* was ideological in nature. With the passage of time, the critical reaction to Foucault's viewpoint has moderated, becoming more positive and certainly more evenhanded.

Magritte and Foucault must have recognized in one another a common fascination with what I earlier gave the inadequate label of visual non sequiturs, and which Foucault himself has dubbed *heterotopias*. From a passage in Borges, Foucault explains in *Les Mots et les choses*, he was led to a strange suspicion

that there is a worse kind of disorder than that of the *incongruous*, the linking together of things that are inappropriate; I mean the disorder in which a large number of possible orders glitter separately, in the lawless and uncharted dimension of the *heteroclite*; and that word should be taken in its most literal etymological sense; in such a state, things are "laid," "placed," "arranged" in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a common place beneath them all. *Utopias* afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy syntax in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to but also opposite one another) to "hang together." This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: They run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the *fabula*; heterotopias . . . dessicate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of language at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.⁴

As cartographers of Heterotopia, both Foucault and Magritte engage in a critique of language—the former historico-epistemological, the latter visual. Each in his way concurs with the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in asserting the arbitrariness of the sign—that is, the essentially circumstantial, conventional, historical nature of the bond between the signifier (e.g., a word) and the signified (the object or concept represented). In Saussurean linguistics, words do not “refer” to things themselves. Rather, they have meaning as points within the entire system that is a language—a system, further, conceived as a network of graded differences. “Dog” is not somehow attached to the real animal, arising naturally from it and participating magically in its essence or presence. Instead, “dog” has conceptual signification insofar as it evokes an idea that differs from the idea of a cat, a bear, a fur seal, etc. It has syntactical signification insofar as it (a noun) differs from words such as “bark” (verb) or “furry” (adjective) and thus cannot take their places in a proposition; and it has phonetic signification insofar as it differs from more or less similar sounding signifiers such as “bog,” “dot,” “dig,” and so on.

From the commonsense vantage this seems an unnecessarily complex and circumlocutory approach to language, aimed at the most radical divorce possible between words and things. And why bother? After all, would anyone seriously argue that a word *is* what it represents—that the painting of a pipe is the pipe itself? Must we say rhetorically, with Foucault: “My God, how simpleminded!” Yet it is exactly from the commonsense vantage that, when asked to identify

the painting, we reply "It's a pipe"—words we shall choke on the moment we try to light up.

Nor is the confusion of words with things merely a minor mix-up, an easily remedied accident of everyday conversation. From antiquity to the present, persistent strains of Western thought have conceived the bond between language and reality as fundamentally mystical, a mutual sharing of essences. In the Old Testament, the Word is the Beginning (of Creation). For the Greeks, *Logos* connoted both reality and the knowledge (hence expressibility) of reality. Up to the end of the sixteenth century A.D., Europe remained trapped within a nostalgia for what it dreamed of as the language of Adam. Given directly by God (and persisting, perhaps, in the queer spatial figurations of written Hebrew), primordial language was a transparent duplication of the Universe,

an absolutely certain and transparent sign for things, because it resembled them. The names of things were lodged in the things they represented, just as strength is written in the body of the lion, regality in the eye of the eagle, just as the influence of the planets is marked upon the brows of men: by the form of similitude.

After Babel, the literal reciprocity of language and the world was destroyed; even so, language was not definitively severed from what it represented.

True, it is no longer nature in its primal visibility, but neither is it a mysterious instrument with powers known only by a few privileged persons. It is rather the figuration of a world redeeming itself, lending its ear at last to the true

word. . . . The relationship of languages to the world is one of analogy rather than signification; or rather, their value as signs and their duplicating function are superimposed; they speak the heaven and the earth of which they are the image; they reproduce in their most material architecture the cross whose coming they announce—that coming which established its existence in turn through the Scriptures and the Word.⁵

Even with the arrival of the Renaissance, Christian Europe continued to give the Word—religious revelation—precedence over both reason and the evidence of the senses as final index of the Real. During the Enlightenment, *les philosophes* often regarded words and things as more than artificially linked, witness the prominence of onomatopoeia and the principle of “similitude” in the abundant universal language schemes of the period. In the nineteenth century, Romanticism’s intense aesthetics (especially in the poetry of Mallarmé) conferred upon the Word a mystical substantiality affording the writer new stature as heir to the religious visionary and the epic hero. In our own day, finally, a complex, mathematicized, but still recognizable variation on the theme lies in the work of the Cartesian linguist Noam Chomsky.

The mystical, Platonic identification of words with the essences of things is what many of Magritte’s canvases vigorously assault. Just as in Saussurean linguistics words do not “refer” to things, in Magritte’s Surrealism the painter’s images do not really “resemble” anything whose sovereign presence would lend it the aspect of a model or origin. When

we say one thing resembles another, after all, we imply that the latter is somehow ontologically superior to, more “real” than the former—the copy predicates its existence (*qua* copy) upon whatever it submissively imitates. Major schools of traditional Western thought were unable definitively to separate language from its objects. Similarly, classical painting—using techniques ranging from perspective to *trompe-l'œil*—attempted to identify scenes or images with the “models” that inspired them. As Foucault notes, however, such a theory of representation reintroduced discursive affirmation into a space from which it had supposedly been ejected. Into the painting, in theory an exclusively visual production, there creeps a secret, inescapably linguistic element: “This painted image *is* that thing.”

How to banish resemblance and its implicit burden of discourse? Magritte's strategy involves deploying largely familiar images, but images whose recognizability is immediately subverted and rendered moot by “impossible,” “irrational,” or “senseless” conjunctions. In *L'Explication* (1952), the most obvious thing about the carrot metamorphosing into the wine bottle is that it *is not* (does not reproduce, represent, or linguistically affirm) any actual carrot or bottle. The mimetic overflowing of the inner canvases in the *Condition humaine* series is so perfect that we automatically understand they have nothing to do with actual paintings or landscapes. No real frame conforms to the reflection of a body with the active sensuality of *Représentation* (1962)—and so on.

Despite his belief in “the ascendancy of poetry over painting,” thus, Magritte's subversive enterprise falls

well within the antilinguistic program of modernism. From Klee and Kandinsky forward, modern art declares that a painting is nothing other than itself, autonomous from the language that lies buried in representational realism. But while the predominant mode for modernism's declaration of independence has been abstraction, Magritte uses literalism to undermine itself. In view of its striking bearing here, consider the following passage from *Les Mots et les choses*—elicited by another work by another artist, but equally germane for Magritte:

the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendor is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax. And the proper name, in this context, is merely an artifice: it gives us a finger to point with, in other words, to pass surreptitiously from the space where one speaks to the space where one looks; in other words, to fold one over the other as if they were equivalents.⁶

Foucault accounts for the simultaneously familiar and nonrepresentational quality of Magritte's images by drawing a distinction between *resemblance* and *similitude*. Resemblance, says Foucault, "presumes a primary reference that prescribes and classes" copies on the basis of the rigor of their mimetic relation to itself. Resemblance serves and is dominated by repre-

sentation. With similitude, on the other hand, the reference “anchor” is gone. Things are cast adrift, more or less like one another without any of them being able to claim the privileged status of “model” for the rest. Hierarchy gives way to a series of exclusively lateral relations: “similitude circulates the simulacrum as the indefinite and reversible relation of the similar to the similar.” Painting becomes an endless series of repetitions, variations set free from a theme.⁷

To date, Foucault has been inconsistently served by his several translators, save Alan Sheridan. I hope to have avoided at least the worst failures of the past. Readers who compare the present version to the French text may notice that I have made some unconventional choices. In most cases the reasons will be evident, I think, if not universally convincing. Here I shall mention only a few general rules. Since the indicative function of articles and demonstratives varies considerably between French and English, I have tried to avoid what would sound like a stilted academicism by often rendering *ce* as *the* rather than *this*. Likewise, *qui* at times appears as *that* rather than *which*, following English usage for restrictive versus nonrestrictive modifying clauses.

Readers will find numerous references to particular words painted by Magritte into the fields of various works. In such cases, the words' material and figurative aspects are as important as their significations; consequently I have left them untranslated in the text and have given the English meanings in footnotes. I have done the same for the titles of paintings, largely as a matter of personal taste.

One problem in translating Foucault is that of preserving a sense of the author's wit.⁸ Foucaultian laughter is present even in his most serious works, albeit usually in rather mordant tones. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* introduces a less familiar humor, a playful, punning voice narrating a kind of analytical cartoon. It is a cornucopia of wordplays, wisecracks, and slapstick repetitions, many of which are either untranslatable or else require so much explanation as to be tedious. I have footnoted one or two instances where getting the joke is necessary for following the argument; elsewhere I have allowed the humor to escape rather than belabor it—not a happy solution, perhaps no solution at all. In most of Foucault's work word games are ubiquitous; in *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* they are what leaven the abstractions, prevent the minutiae from becoming oppressive, and guarantee the essay's fidelity to the insouciance of Magritte's own art.

All of which poses a final question: To what degree does Foucault's pipe remain faithful to Magritte's? For the modern art critic or historian, I strongly suspect that much of Foucault's investigation will appear suspect. Did classical painting, for example, really attempt to establish itself "entirely outside language"? Is Paul Klee's work truly rooted in breaking down the separation between linguistic signs and graphic shapes? Or Kandinsky's in rupturing the equivalence between resemblance and affirmation? Can Magritte's work be understood as continuing the same subversion?

Surely many readers will choose to disagree. But traditional hermeneutics are neither Foucault's aim

nor his interest. Indeed, the offhandedness with which he discards accepted ideas in favor of new, provisional, often highly provoking ones is the basis for what some people find most compelling in his work, as well as for what others find most infuriating.

Yet it is also true that to disregard the letter of the law is sometimes to preserve its spirit. As this little book so amusingly demonstrates, the effacement of bonds and the celebration of difference are certainly near the center of Magritte's art. Ultimately, thus, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* both escapes from and yet returns to its "subject" by a willful self-liberation from anything upon which it might be obliged slavishly to "comment." Or as Foucault notes elsewhere, "The death of interpretation is to believe that there are signs, signs that exist primally, originally, really, as coherent, pertinent, and systematic marks. . . . The life of interpretation, on the contrary, is to believe that there are only interpretations."

James Harkness
Watervliet, New York
July 1981

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