

SIMILITUDE THROUGH METONYMY: FOUCAULT, MAGRITTE AND THAT PIPE

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Abstract

This article explores our understanding of visual imagery through an analysis of Foucault's examination of Magritte's famous painting *Les deux Mystères*. Foucault details how the interplay between word and image are firstly perceived and then understood by the viewer. This analysis of Foucault's text, serves to illuminate and hopefully clarify the often ambiguous relationship between image and text, whilst at the same time demonstrate that the vary same ambiguity is revelled in by those creating and those words and images.

Keywords: metonymy, similitude

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Similitude Through Metonymy...

Using Magritte's painting *Les deux Mystères* and Michel Foucault's accompanying text, *This is not a Pipe*, the nature of the visual image can be examined. It can be demonstrated that the distance created by critical theory, between the object and the image and resemblance is replaced by similitude in a world where "truth" is a concept beyond the reach of human visual representation. Foucault's text introduces us to a complex interpretation of the text uncovering labyrinthine paths of interconnectedness between the languages of the visual image and written word. His aim, it seems, is to uncover how, as he said "a whole complex network of uncertainties, exchanges and feints" (Foucault, 1970, p. 4), that allow us to revel in a potential multiplicity of meanings.

Magritte's picture comprises a framed drawing of a pipe, together with its rebellious subscripted caption, resting upon an easel. This appears to be located within a classroom, although there are no substantive clues to authenticate this, other than the well-worn floor of a possible schoolroom.¹ Above the easel, floating, is the form of another pipe, apparently, the same pipe as in the framed picture. The picture appears to invite the philosopher to unravel the riddle located deep within it (Shapiro, 1997, pp. 69-76). It attracted Foucault to the extent that he produced an accompanying text, which shed light on his personal view of Magritte's provocative painting. The supposed directive of the schoolmaster is at the heart of the riddle. What is it that he is indicating? Pointing to the framed drawing he pronounces, "This is a pipe", instantly realising the falsity of those words. The image of the pipe and the sentence uttered refer to the concept of an original pipe. What was present was no original. No sooner than the schoolmaster utters the words, does the reality of what is before him manifest itself in the now clear caption, "This is not a Pipe". In addition, there appeared, in almost ethereal form, a pipe floating over the easel and his head; out of reach, perhaps signifying the elusiveness of true knowledge.

¹ Foucault suggests the location of a schoolroom in his accompanying text (Foucault, 1983, p. 16)

Both Magritte's image and Foucault's text explore the nature of what is depicted. Two contrasting concepts emerge from the examination: resemblance and similitude. Both Foucault and Magritte recognise that resemblance and similitude are different entities (Levy, 1990, pp. 50-56). For Foucault, resemblance makes reference to, and is a derivation from, an original which is simulated but never equalled. As Harkness (1983) notes in his introductory text, for Foucault, resemblance presumes a primary reference that prescribes and classes (p. 9). As such we have a mimetic process of hierarchy, the resemblance being a derivative of an original. Thus, a portrait would be said to be a resemblance of its model by virtue of the fact that it relates back to that model (Levy, 1990, p. 51). By contrast, similitude conforms to no hierarchical order. Never derived from an original, similitude is described as a process of equation, a recurrence of autonomous phenomena, which are not linked by a hierarchical dependency (Levy, 1990, p. 51). What is produced is a reversible series of images with no origin and no end. Thus, we are invited to interpret the two pipes as a series of similitude, neither originates, neither is a derivative.

Levy (1990) expounds upon this notion (p. 51) by reiterating that for Foucault the image is one of similitude, drawn from the lateral relationship between the two pipes, which oscillate within the painting alone, multiplying different affirmations, which dance together, tilting and tumbling over one another (Foucault, 1983, p. 46). Foucault (1983) asserts that through similitude, resemblance is hounded from the space of the painting (p. 46). This point is illustrated by Levy (1990) with reference to Magritte's twined image of Paul Nougé, which being a portrait originated as a resemblance, being derived from the original model. However, it is the twinned images that now reciprocated within the space of the picture, forming a relationship of similitude to the exclusion of the original model; resemblance is superseded by similitude (p. 51).

We have replaced the reference to a possible original with similitude

in the form of a series of two pipes. Foucault invites us to consider the consequences: Magritte has provided us with a drawing of two pipes which bear striking resemblance to a real pipe, together with a written text which, similarly, bears strong resemblance to the drawing of written text. Resemblance is initially inherent in the composition. However, it is this composition and juxtaposition that opens up a network of similitudes to the eventual exclusion of resemblance. The real pipe is now absent from both words and drawing, we are left with copies without an original: simulacrum (Foucault, 1983, p. 47).

Durham (1993) explains that Foucault's schoolmaster has unwittingly taught us that the indefinite and reversible movement, in sequential similitude, which subverts the hierarchical relation of model to copy and suspends the identity of the original within and between its repetitions, constitutes the formation of a simulacrum. Shapiro draws attention to Foucault's closing words: "A day will come when, by means of similitude relayed indefinitely along the length of a series, the image itself, along with the name it bears, will lose its identity. Campbell, Campbell, Campbell, Campbell" (Foucault, 1983, p. 54) In so doing, he reminds us of the Nietzschean resonance of the *Seven Seals of Affirmation*, and that themes of similitude, simulacrum, eternal recurrence and affirmation are constant within the works of Nietzsche.

Magritte's image has been transformed; through the process of examination it no longer resides in the solely visual. Foucault's ekphrasis is testament to the fact that imagery belongs to and is part of language. As such, it too, along with all forms of language, written or spoken, is mistrusted by Nietzsche. With the removal of resemblance and subsequently the removal of the presence of an original form, we remove ourselves from the original truth. This assumes that there *was* a representable truth, a view challenged by Jean Baudrillard. This is illustrated by his idea that the image is composed of four successive phases:

This would be the successive phases of the image:

- it is the reflection of basic reality
- it masks and perverts a basic reality
- it masks absence of a basic reality
- it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum (Baudrillard as cited in Boulter, 2001, p. 356).

Boulter (2001) explains how Baudrillard's idea of the simulacrum ultimately confuses the distinction between the real and its illusion, its representation (pp. 356-357). However, the inference remains that there is a reality that can be accessed and in some form represented. Nietzsche's mistrust of language precludes the attainment of any such truth, prior to any attempt to represent it. Our attempts to represent it are rendered futile by the inadequacy and insidious nature of language. Nietzsche argued that language was like an umbrella: we hold it up to shield ourselves from awareness that the universe is at best indifferent and at worst hostile (Hayman, 1997, p. 20). He saw language as an artifice created to provide us with palatable truths. As such it could not be relied upon to provide us with an understanding or representation of the truth. For Nietzsche words can never be transparent:

for between two utterly different spheres, as between, subject and object, there is no causality, no accuracy, no expression, but at the utmost an aesthetical relation, I mean a suggestive metamorphosis, a stammering translation into quite a distinct foreign language, for which purpose however there is needed at any rate an intermediate sphere, an intermediate force, freely composing and freely inventing. (Levy, 1911, p. 184)

Furthermore, Nietzsche expounds that *The Thing In Itself* (it is just this which would be the pure ineffective truth) is seen first as nerve stimulus, then as percept, then as sound (Levy, 1991, p. 179), at which time it is constructed in terms of language, firstly audible, and then written. These transitions are referred to as metaphors, each one forming a link in a chain

of metonymy, removing the perceiver further from the thing in itself. A similar chain would be required for communication of this *truth*. By the formation of these metaphors, Nietzsche claims that man stands alone. Our concept of the world is shaped around our acceptance of these linkages. He submits his actions to the sway of abstractions. Initial sensations or impressions are disregarded in favour of attaching a considered rational to that which surrounds him.²

Nietzsche defines truth as:

a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seem to a nation fixed, canonic and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions; worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses. (Levy, 1911, p. 180)

The stronghold for such mediated truths is, for Nietzsche, to be found in the world of art. Here we find the continual construction of metaphors and metonymies, shaping the world into a conglomeration of images made palatable by the use of language. Art survives on the precept that mankind, even if aware of its misrepresentation, still allows itself to be deceived. Artist and viewer are both active participants in these acts of deception. Nietzsche attacks the mimetic arts, and in the midst of the discourse of modern art there is created an opening for the Nietzschean project, for "to reverse Platonism" means to make the simulacra rise and to affirm their rights amongst icons and copies (Shapiro, 1997, p. 70).

As the schoolmaster stands before the drawing, he expounds "This is a pipe." Durham makes reference to the chain of metonymy that has just taken place: from painting to image, from image to text, from text to voice. A sort of imaginary pointer indicates, shows, fixes, locates, imposes a system of references, tries to stabilize a single space. The unravelled calligram that forms Magritte's picture represents the chain of linguistic

² Phenomenology espouses a return to the initial state of receptive impression.

metonymy, which removes the viewer from the truth. The recognition that what is present is a simulacrum acknowledges the fact that no original is present. The referential relationship between the two pipes removes the need for an original, which is thus removed from the space of the picture. In accepting this, one is removing one link in the chain of metonymy. The assumption that we had perceptive access to the *Thing In Itself* is removed.

Magritte's picture, one form of language, invites interpretation from another form of language. The infinite variety of metaphorical interplay is at its most active. Yet through this analysis comes the realisation that the search for truth is futile. To suggest we have access to it is overly optimistic. To suggest we can then represent it is unreasonable. Foucault's text does not search for truth. Consistent with his previous line of thinking Foucault merely examines the possibilities inherent within the image. He espouses the adoption of *grey anonymous language* (Foucault, 1970, p. 10) for such analysis.

Magritte's picture can be seen as an exercise in forgetting or deprogramming a set of habits, which have become second nature. As a result, the picture is not aimed at the overtly ignorant but at the fundamental issue of the relation between pictures and texts and those who believe they know what the relation is (Mitchell, 1994, pp. 66-67). However, what is achieved is the subversion of preconceived ideas. We are not to read things at face value. What is being represented may take many forms, resemblance, similitude or simulacrum, but their claim to represent the truth is a very tenuous one.

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