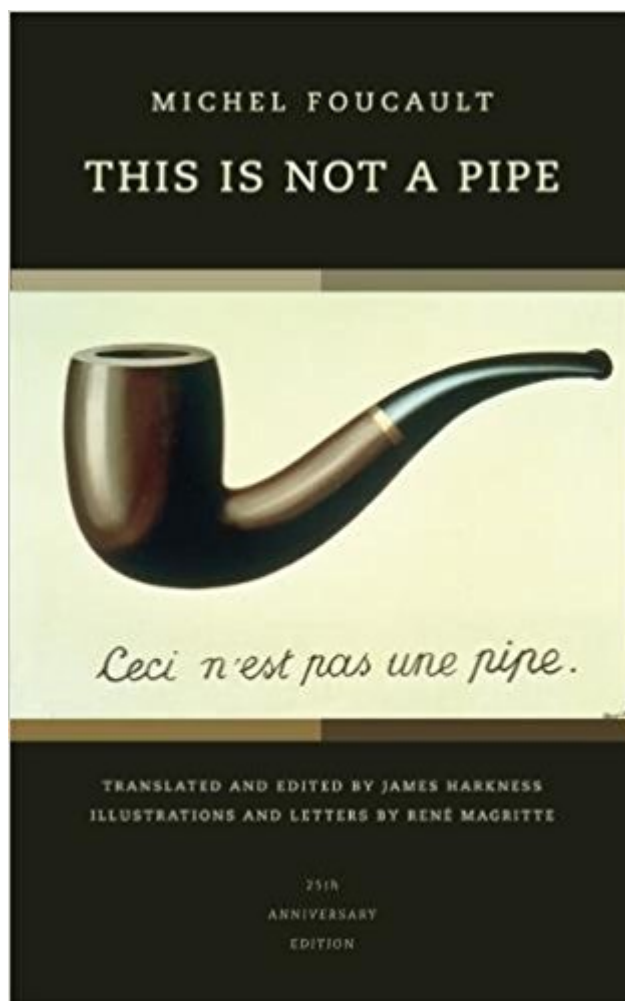


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This Is Not A Pipe (Quantum Books)



Synopsis

What does it mean to write "This is not a pipe" across a bluntly literal painting of a pipe? René Magritte's famous canvas provides the starting point for a delightful homage by French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. Much better known for his incisive and mordant explorations of power and social exclusion, Foucault here assumes a more playful stance. By exploring the nuances and ambiguities of Magritte's visual critique of language, he finds the painter less removed than previously thought from the pioneers of modern abstraction.

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Customer Reviews

"This essay not only proposes a new understanding of Magritte; it also constitutes a perfect illustration and introduction to the thought of the philosopher himself, France's great wizard of paradox."--"New York Times Book Review --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Text: English, French (translation) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Foucault's brilliant little text about the art of René Magritte is probably the closest to structuralism Foucault ever got. Looking at the two paintings of pipes by Magritte, Foucault interrogates the

formal nature of representation itself. As a good semiotician, Foucault is incisive in separating the image from the text, the resemblance from the copy. This is a play of simulacra-although not as decisive as Barthes, Foucault is able to re-associate resemblance and affirmation. This curious little text also includes reflections on Klee, Kandinsky, and Apollinaire.

if you consider this treatise then you certainly lack any real insight into philosophy or art criticism of the 20th century; either that, or you're carrying some kind of baggage or childish grudge. Foucault offers us just one interpretation of Magritte's *pipe*, and some thought in general about art, representation and the sign. It's really just part of an on-going discussion. It's a shame he's dead; he'd have loved Usenet. In any case, this book is one voice in a chorus of discussion on the matter; his is also an informed, intelligent, and original voice - albeit controversial (see review below for ruffled feathers). This book stands on its own, but is definitely not a good introduction to Foucault per se; I think it's best to start with a history of sexuality volume I, then read the introduction of history of sexuality volume II, and then you can pretty much read any Foucault from there.

This is an interesting little essay. The book really is just a short essay (about 40 pages) but I am glad they decided to publish it as its own stand alone book because it allowed them to include black and white prints of all the paintings discussed within the essay. It would have been very difficult to follow the essay without being able to easily reference the paintings that Foucault discusses. The theme of the essay, stated briefly, is representation, pursued through an analysis of the paintings of Rene Magritte. Like a great deal of Foucault's work it is essentially a detailed case study that carries a far more universal philosophical message. Those who are looking simply for a work of art criticism should probably look elsewhere. This is a work of philosophy disguised, so to speak, as a commentary on the work of a painter. The essay raises very general questions about the relation between language and reality, the dominance of representation in the history of Western philosophy, the status of art, and the nature of images. To be honest, I am not entirely sure I have grasped all the points that Foucault is attempting to make in this little essay. Like a lot of Continental philosophers Foucault is a good writer but he rarely ever comes out and says directly what he is trying to say. Foucault certainly raises problems relating to representation. There is a problem when we take a sign, or an image, as referring transparently to an object, or as standing in for that object. There is a gulf between seeing and saying. The question I still have about Foucault's text, and Foucault's work in general, is: does that produce an unbridgeable gulf between language and reality? Is language forever closed in on itself? Or, is Foucault contesting the very notion of reality?

Is there nothing but a chain of similitudes or simulacra, none of which can claim the title of "reality"? Is there no "original", so to speak? Does language no longer refer to anything other than itself? These are questions that seem to me to be raised by the essay, but I have not studied it closely enough, nor am I familiar enough with all of Foucault's work, to know what his answer to those questions would be. There are parts of this essay that reminded me of an essay in Bruno Latour's book *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* which I believe was called "Circulating Reference". Latour argues that there is no single divide between representation and reality. There is a chain that moves from the real forest, to the scientific paper, each step in the chain being a representation in relation to the previous link in the chain, and an object in relation to the next link in the chain. In this way it is possible to move from the real forest to the representation, and back again, through a series of reversible steps. This overcomes the supposedly unbridgeable ontological divide between subject and object. There are some similarities between Latour's analysis and Foucault's analysis in this book. There is a chain of similitudes rather than a single ontological divide separating representation and reality. But would Foucault admit the possibility of moving from words to the real forest or vice versa? Even if we insert a series of intermediate steps, is it possible to cross the divide between words and things? As Kierkegaard would no doubt say, even a very short leap is still a leap, and therefore, essentially infinite. It is clear to me that Foucault is dealing with this problem in this essay, it just is not entirely clear to me what his answer is. I get the feeling that Foucault is saying something like "A representation NEVER is the thing it is representing, the worlds do not touch", which seems to me to move in the direction of a fairly radical linguistic idealism; but it is certainly possible I am misreading Foucault on this. I would be curious to hear what other people's interpretations were of this book, or of Foucault's work in general. If you have an opinion, one way or the other, feel free to post a comment under my review. One thing is certain: Foucault has written a very interesting little essay that deals with some extremely important philosophical problems. Even if, at the end of reading it, you are a bit mystified about Foucault's answer (as I am), you will still be glad you read the essay, since it does such a good job raising the questions. I happen to think that most philosophy books do that. The best philosophy books are not books that provide answers to supposedly long standing problems. The best philosophy books are books that raise new (or old) problems in interesting ways. This little essay, and Foucault's work in general, certainly belongs in that category.

Foucault is a difficult read. His concepts and language require much of the reader, making re-readings and multiple contemplations frequent requirements. So why is he so intent to make us

read so much of it unnecessarily? That's not to say that This is Not a Pipe is not worthwhile. On the contrary, its reconsideration of the meaning of representation and originals is both thought-provoking and whimsical (in the best meaning of that word). However, the book (shall we say "long essay"?) is needlessly tedious and leads the reader too often to frustratingly conclude that this bit or that seems to have covered already. That said, what is covered (and re-covered) is a quite ingenious examination of the nature of art and its representation of the original. Foucault's assessment of René Magritte's work, which comprises the bulk of the discussion, is imminently interesting, especially when he strays from the titular Pipe paintings and goes toe to toe with a series of Magritte's works stressing the limitations of the perceptions of assumed representation. Where Foucault stumbles and drags is in his (thankfully limited) treatment of Kandinsky and Klee, whose work receives short shrift via a greatly underdeveloped evaluation of their integration of representations, essentially serving as rather weak counterpoints to Magritte. Nevertheless, this short and useless digression aside, Pipe is a challenging consideration of our concepts of reality, perceptions, images and the manner in which they are all represented in art and in the imagination.

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