

MICHEL FOUCAULT: POSTMODERN RESPONSE TO ART

1. Look up on the Internet René Magritte's original painting, *The Treachery [or Treason] of Images*, as it appears on the cover of Michel Foucault's book *This Is Not a Pipe*. What does the painting mean?
2. Now look up Magritte's painting *The Two Mysteries*, which shows two pipes: one is a painting of a pipe that sits on an easel, and the other is a pipe above and to the left of the painting on the easel. What does this painting mean?

French philosopher Michel Foucault approaches this question in his 1968 essay "This is Not a Pipe" by asking, literally: What does the pipe say? In answering, Foucault interprets the painting by animating its components, speaking on their behalf the way a storyteller makes puppets come alive through different voices. The story shows multiple perspectives (seven) and "word play" in interpreting a single object. This approach is a hallmark of postmodernism in that it celebrates uncertainty over certainty, irony over morality, and multiplicity instead of universality in its viewpoints. Read this excerpt from Foucault's essay "This Is Not a Pipe":

"First the pipe itself: 'What you see here, the lines I form or that form me, is not a pipe as you doubtless believe; but a drawing in a relation of vertical similitude to the other pipe (real or not, true or false, I do not know) that you see over there—just above the painting where I am, a simple and solitary similitude.' To which the higher pipe responds in the same words: 'What you see floating before your eyes, beyond space and without fixed foundation, this mist that settles neither on canvas nor on a page, how could it really be a pipe? Don't be misled: I am mere similarity—not something similar to a pipe, but the cloudy similitude that, referring to nothing, traverses and brings together texts such as the one you can read and drawings such as the one below.'"

Continue reading Foucault's essay where this excerpt leaves off. Look it up within the book *Aesthetics, Method, And Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, which is available to search on Google Books.

Questions:

1. At the end of his essay, Foucault remarks on the Andy Warhol paintings of Campbell's[®] Soup cans. How does this possibly relate to Magritte's paintings of pipes, and does it put Magritte's painting into the class of institutional art? As Foucault writes in "This Is Not a Pipe":

"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."
2. How does Foucault's story of the painting confront the aesthetic traditions of formalism and representationalism? Explain your ideas.
3. Foucault's philosophy was heavily influenced by Heidegger and Nietzsche. Can you see evidence of either of these thinkers' ideas in Foucault's aesthetic response to Magritte's painting? Explain.
4. Foucault's epistemology refers to an "order of things" that holds together the literature and knowledge of an historical period (its *epistemes* and *games of truth*; see pages 285-288 of your textbook). In what way does Magritte's painting challenge what Foucault would call the *regime of art* or, as Jacques Rancière calls it, a *distribution of the sensible*, making art into a political act?

