

Jos de Mul  
*Disavowal and Representation  
in Magritte's »La trahison des images«*



*Nothing is true about psycho-analysis  
except its exaggeration.*  
Theodor Adorno

*Perhaps psycho-analysis itself is the most  
suitable case for treatment by psycho-analysis.*  
René Magritte

The work of the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte takes us to the boundaries of the aesthetics' domain. It forces the observer to abandon his attitude of passive viewing and invites him to reflect upon those questions which, precisely because of their everyday-ness and banality, generally escape our observation. Among such questions is that of visual representation and the relationship between the visual signifier (*signifiant*) and the signified (*signifié*). This epistemological connotation of Magritte's work has not escaped philosophical interest. Most especially, the painting *La trahison des images* from 1929 has elicited a large number of commentaries, of which Foucault's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (Foucault, 1973) is perhaps the most well known.

That which strikes the reader in the various interpretations is that the title of *La trahison des images* rarely enters into the discussion. This is remarkable because the titles of Magritte's works deliver a valuable contribution to the question at issue and for precisely this reason they demand their share in the interpretation. However, because of their puzzling character the titles conjure up considerable resistance against their inclusion in the philosophical discussion. Magritte, commenting about this, said: »The titles of the paintings are not explanations and the paintings themselves are not mere illustrations of the titles. The relationship is poetic, that is, it merely illuminates a number of the characteristics of the objects involved, characteristics which are generally ignored by consciousness« (Magritte, 1979, 259). For an analysis which is directed at the reception accorded to Magritte's work, the titles offer a tempting starting-point precisely because they reveal something about that which remains unconscious in perception. This is especially relevant for

*La trahison des images* because the title points to a problem which appears to be closely connected to that of representation. The title of the painting of a pipe which appears not to be a pipe brings us onto the terrain of disavowal: a disavowal of the images is pointed at.<sup>1</sup>

The close connection between representation and disavowal, and the fact that these activities extend themselves to the boundaries of our thinking, makes them exceptionally difficult to 'master'. We exist in the fortunate circumstances, however, of being able to make an appeal to psychoanalytic theory, in which the entanglement of disavowal and representation have a privileged position, for our studies of the relationship. The texts in which Freud, and in his footsteps the French psychoanalyst Mannoni, dealt with disavowal (*Verleugnung*) in the context of fetishism especially deserve our attention.<sup>2</sup> These texts will function as a guiding thread in the following study of the expressive commentary which *La trahison des images* provides of the relationship between disavowal and representation in the experience of mimetic fine arts.<sup>3</sup> Further, an inverse movement will be initiated from the beginning of my argument by my use of Magritte's commentary to interrogate the psychoanalytic conception of this relationship from within. My interpretation of *La trahison des images* also bears traces of texts by Derrida, Barthes, and Irigaray concerning the question of representation. And, just as *La trahison des images* has unavoidably inserted itself into the ordering of language, these spores have carved themselves into the effective history of the painting, the never drying veneer of the aesthetic image which the painting embodies.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *La trahison des images*, sometimes referred to by Magritte as *L'usage de la parole*, is usually translated as *The treachery of images*. In the original, however, the French verb *trahir* also has the meaning of *disavowal*. Given that, in my subsequent argument, Freud's theory of disavowal is central, I have chosen to use the second translation.

<sup>2</sup> Those texts of Freud to which I refer here are *Fetishism* (SE XXI, 147-57), *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* (SE XXIII, 139-207), and *Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence* (SE XXIII, 271-8). Those works of Mannoni which are especially important are *Je sais bien, mais quand même ...* and *L'illusion comique ou le théâtre du point de vue de l'imaginaire*, both published in Mannoni, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> Used here the word 'mimetic' is taken in its broadest meaning as the representation of material and immaterial objects. In this sense, a part of abstract art (Mondriaan and Kandinsky, for example) also exhibits a mimetic character to the extent that it points to some kind of reality outside the painted surface.

<sup>4</sup> The interpretation nonetheless remains incomplete and imperfect. Imperfect because the context from within which the interpretation occurs constantly remains in movement; incomplete because aesthetic ideas which are representations of the power of imagination give much food for thought without being able to be fully expressed and capable of providing insights by our concepts (Kant, 1968, 193).

1. *Magritte's pipe: Yes, I know, but still ...*

In their texts both Freud and Mannoni stand still for a moment when considering the remarkable feelings they experienced when, for the first time, they were confronted in their psychoanalytic practice with the phenomenon of disavowal. Freud begins one of the articles he wrote about this phenomenon with the words: »I find myself for a moment in the interesting position of not knowing whether what I have to say should be regarded as something long familiar and obvious or as something entirely new and puzzling« (SE XXIII, 275). Mannoni expresses the same mood when, in *Je sais bien, mais quand même ...*, he maintains that, confronted with the phenomenon of disavowal, one »feels oneself catapulted between a feeling of banality and a feeling of extreme surprise« (Mannoni, 1969, 11). It is precisely this feeling we experience when we are confronted with *La trahison des images* for the first time. The naive style shows us an unmistakable representation of a pipe, with a text underneath it reading »This is not a pipe«. The shock occasioned when we perceive this similarity carries us into the remarkable borders of extreme banality and alienation.<sup>5</sup> The shock, namely, resides not only in the first banal amazement concerning the apparent contradiction (that is, that a painted pipe is actually not a pipe), but it also concerns the fact that we were amazed, that, despite our knowledge of the fact that a painted pipe is not actually a pipe, we were nonetheless shocked at the moment that the painting made us aware of this knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Without the annotation, we realize in surprise, we would believe that what we observe really is a pipe.

The experience of *La trahison des images* makes us conscious of a characteristic which we must assume is inherent to every aesthetic observation of a mimetic work of art, namely, the simultaneous existence of two mutually exclusive mental attitudes. In the aesthetic observation of these objects we

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<sup>5</sup> The term 'shocking' might appear too emotionally laden in relation to the observation of a painting. However, I use it with the special meaning with which Kaulingfreks accredited it in his book about Magritte: »That which is unexpected about the shock is its quality as a Trojan Horse within the fortress of intellect. The intellect becomes unsettled but recovers and adjusts itself to the disturbance. Thereby, it forgets that the violence of the shift and the events, from their existing character, are gradually and repeatedly set into an hierarchy ... However, the shock as a means of consciousness requires the intellect in order that it remains both unknown and new. It is only shocking in relation to a situation wherein it does not fit, and can only be shocking if there is a rational hierarchy« (Kaulingfreks, 1984, 133-4).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the following comment from Magritte: »It isn't about amazing someone, but, rather, about the fact, for example, that one is amazed by one's amazement« (Magritte, 1979, 435).

know that what we are seeing is unreal, that it is a fiction: simultaneously, we deny this knowledge and abandon ourselves to the reality of that which we are observing. This disavowal of the images (in favour of the real object they signify) brings us to the *sine qua non* of the mimetic experience. Without the mechanism of the simultaneous existence of a quantum of knowledge and a belief which is irreconcilable with that knowledge (that is: a particular form of not-knowing), the mimetic experience appears to be impossible. If the knowledge component is lacking, then we find ourselves in the legendary situation of the observers of the first film performance in Paris' *Grand Café* who ran in panic from the approaching train which they saw on the screen. The knowledge component appears in this instance to have been completely absorbed in the affective component. If the affective component is lacking, then we can equally not speak of an aesthetic experience. In Mannoni's words: »Anyone who, unprepared, attends a Chinese performance runs the risk of seeing the play as it is and the actors as they are. Viewed objectively, it is certainly theatre, but it is without the theatrical effect« (Mannoni, 1969, 161).

An important part of 20th Century fine arts, especially that part such as abstract non-figurative art which reject the mimetic, appears to unconsciously remove itself from the boundaries of the hybrid relationship of believing and knowing. The strength of *La trahison des images* resides in the fact that it makes us conscious of this simultaneous existence of the knowledge and faith components, and, what is perhaps an even more important effect, it saturates us with the complete not-self-evidentness of this relationship. After all, we are confronted with the question as to how it is possible that two mutually exclusive attitudes can be simultaneously present in our minds.

*La trahison des images* does not provide an answer to this question. The pleasure which the painting affords us cannot really be described as anything other than an especially perverse and subversive pleasure. It is a shocking pleasure which does not intend to please and to explain, but, rather, to disturb (a pleasure that may be called characteristic for the entire tradition of the no-longer-fine-arts). Magritte's painting is directed at a *Verwindung* of the mimetic tradition. It is a deconstructivist practice which, in a shocking manner, makes us conscious of that which must remain partially unconscious in the mimetic experience: the very process of representation. The unreflected continuity of presenting the presence of an absent object by means of a sign forms the condition of the possibility for every mimetic experience. The subversive character of Magritte's deconstructivist labour lies in becoming conscious of this disavowal of representation which is so necessary for the mimetic experience. In this becoming conscious, wherein the two mutually exclusive attitudes are brought together in one movement of thought, the repre-

sentative appearance of the mimetic experience is withdrawn.<sup>7</sup> The mimetic experience becomes – and this differentiates Magritte's work from non-figurative art wherein the mimesis were 'simply' abandoned – enervated from within.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that *La trahison des images* provides the observer with a certain desire, despite this *Verwindung* of mimetic experience, constitutes its perverse character. This pleasure forms an indication of the existence of another aesthetic 'space' on both sides of traditional representation. It is this space, revealed by desire, which intrigues me.

## 2. *Sexual and aesthetic disavowal*

Is it pure coincidence that Freud, when speaking about perversion, also bumps up against the entanglement of disavowal and representation? He worked out several aspects of this relationship more closely in his analysis of fetishism. Fetishism, in Freud's view, is based upon the fact that the analysand, almost always male, »does not acknowledge that a woman does not have a penis, something which, as proof of the possibility of being himself castrated, is most unwelcome« (SE XXIII, 203). The analysand, for this reason, denies his sensory perception that the female does not possess a phallus and maintains a firm grip on the contrary conviction. According to Freud, however, the denied perception continues to be influential and, for this reason, the fetishist attributes the role of the phallus to something else, another bodily part or an article of clothing. We could express it as follows: the fetish presents the phallus as being present. In this connection, Freud speaks about the formation of a compromise between two contradictory attitudes which is related to dream labour. The fetish forms a compromise between the sensory

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<sup>7</sup> Here, the word 'representative' is conceived in a double meaning: not only is the mechanism of visual representation enervated from within, but, in addition, it thereby simultaneously loses its exemplary character within the aesthetic domain. Concerning the relationship of these different connotations of the term 'representation', see Derrida, 1982.

<sup>8</sup> The subversive character of this assault on representation is even more shocking because in *La trahison des images* »commonsense is raped in broad daylight« (Thrall-Soby, 1965, 15). Magritte's preference carrying out his subversive activities in »broad daylight« distinguishes him from the French Surrealists who demonstrated a preference for the night and the occult. In this connection it speaks volumes that Magritte gave the title *Le surréalisme en plein soleil* to the manifestos he published in 1946. Cf. how this imagery of light and darkness also appears in Mannoni when he speaks of denial.

perception which establishes the female's absence of a phallus and the wish to preserve this phallus for perception. The fetish makes it possible that the belief in the presence of a female phallus is »maintained, but also given up« (SE XXI, 154).

Octave Mannoni offered the assumption that this fetishization of the absent female (mother) phallus stands »for all forms of belief which, despite falsification by reality, remain intact« (Mannoni, 1969, 12). The structural agreement between sexual and aesthetic disavowal is indeed remarkable. After all, in aesthetic perception, one of the forms of belief to which Mannoni refers, an object is by a sign equally posited as present on the grounds of its absence. A painted object (for example the pipe in *La trahison des images*) forms an aesthetic 'fetish', a compromise form between knowledge of an object's absence and the disavowal of this knowledge, and thereby makes it possible to preserve the absent object for perception. In the case of both sexual and aesthetic disavowal we travel – the term 'fetish' does not appear to have been arbitrarily chosen – in the terrain of the magical (or, more rigorously: that of the 'magic of belief' which precedes the 'belief in magic' – Mannoni, 1969, 29). What is remarkable is that in both instances disavowal, despite its irrational character, plays itself out »in full daylight« (Mannoni, 1969, 30). Neither the sexual fetish nor the painted object possess anything mysterious; at the same time, they are able to carry us into a magical experience.

In the foregoing comments I remarked, and this appears to call a halt to the specified analogy between sexual and aesthetic disavowal, that, in aesthetic perception and simultaneously with the experience of disavowal (the magical compromise between knowing and wishing), we have access to knowledge of the object's absence. In the case of *La trahison des images* this is the absence of the real pipe. This knowledge, as I also remarked, does not in any way effect aesthetic disavowal. This appears to distinguish aesthetic disavowal from sexual disavowal wherein this knowledge-component is absent. In *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, however, Freud points to a simultaneous existence of disavowal and knowledge in sexual fetishism: »The creation of the fetish emerged from the intention to destroy the evidence of possible castration so that one could avoid the fear of castration. When the woman, just as other living beings, possesses a penis, then one does not have to fear the further possession of one's own penis. Now, we encounter fetishists who have developed the same fear of castration as non-fetishists and who thus react in the same manner. In their behaviour they thus express two mutually exclusive attitudes: on the one hand they deny the reality of their perception of no penis being present with female genitals, and, on the other hand, they ac-

knowledge a woman's lack of a penis and draw the correct conclusion from this acknowledgement. Both attitudes exist side-by-side for an entire life without their influencing each other« (SE XXIII, 203).

The phenomenon of the mutual existence of two mutually exclusive attitudes is presented by Freud with the term 'Ego-splitting' (*Ich-spaltung*). The emergence of Ego-splitting shows that the disavowal of perception by the fetishist is not complete; the acknowledgement is, after all, present in consciousness. In this case, the fetish(ism) is only partially developed: »It does not control the object-choice with exclusion of everything else, but, rather, leaves room for a more or less normal behaviour and sometimes even reduces itself to a modest role or a simple announcement of its presence. The distinction between the Ego and reality is, accordingly, never completely successful for the fetishist« (SE XXIII, 203). Aesthetic perception is capable of a similar description. The observer of *La trahison des images* surrenders to the imaginary presence of the object but, simultaneously, he realizes this surrender and precisely thereby elevates the experience to an aesthetic one. Just as, according to Freud, sexual fetishism mostly reduces itself to a modest role or simple announcement of itself (and the sexual goal of genital reproduction is preserved), so does the observer who is captured by the aesthetic experience leave open a path for a complete reproduction of knowledge. In this manner, both forms of fetishism remain under the domination of instrumental representation which is in the service of the reality-principle (see SE XII, 213-226). The shock which *La trahison des images* engenders is only abrupt: the trusted frameworks of perception quickly recover. Awakened from his aesthetic 'dream' the hand faultlessly goes to the ash-tray and the observer smokes his pipe with satisfaction.

When fetishism becomes acute, sexual activity removes itself from reproduction. The fetishist pulls himself free from the dominance of the sexual goal. In analogous fashion, the aesthetic observer, when he finds himself in the same situation of acute fetishism, retreats into his 'unselfish pleasure' and thereby escapes from the domination of instrumental representation. In both cases, *fore-play* overmasters *after-play* and the perception becomes *perverse* (for the italicized terms, see Freud, SE VII, 209 ff; in relation to the aesthetic *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, SE VIII). In both cases we can therefore speak of an acute *aestheticism*. That is: that the pleasure of looking becomes a goal in itself, cut off from the everyday practice of looking which is guided by the demands of sexual reproduction and utilitarian representation.

A description of these forms of fetishism which, as in the case of Freud, finds its ultimate criterion in the demands of the reality-principle, cannot veil its pejorative tone. However, the pleasure which the fetishist experiences in

the sexual and aesthetic game can equally not be hidden. But it is a pleasure that cannot be represented in an order wherein sexual reproduction and utilitarian representation are the central terms. It is, in the different meanings of the word, a non-representative pleasure. A theoretical approach – assuming, that is, just as Nietzsche argued, that it always finds its origin in the ‘factories of use’ (KSA 1, 299) – can situate this pleasure at best in an a-topos. The theory is here made into a detour, perverted by its object it can only evoke the pleasure at the moment that it stumbles and sets its understanding teeth into its own tail. Is it only irony that *La trahison des images* hereby indicates its own tail to theory?

### 3. *The perversion of aestheticism*

The subversive character of *La trahison des images* is formed by the fact that the painting breaks through mimetic pleasure. Starting from the order of the representation, it is shown that that order is empty. By no longer permitting word and image to support each other, the naive-realistic conceptualization of the representation is raped from within and »in broad daylight«. The signifiers (the image of the pipe, the painted text) only point in a negative manner to each other, and, thereby, they become, as it were, meaningless. The painted sentence does not only make us realize that the image of the pipe is not really a pipe, but, at the same time, it makes us realize that the sentence refers to itself: the painted sentence, too, is not a real pipe. The signified (the ‘real’ pipe) disappears completely from the field of view. Foucault, in his essay concerning Magritte, formulates this as follows: »Magritte permits the old space of the exhibition dominate, but only on the surface because it is no more than a flat surface which bears words and images; there is nothing underneath it« (Foucault, 1973, 25).

*La trahison des images* shows us a remarkable characteristic of the sign, about which in structuralist semiology after Saussure, too, there has been substantial speculation. The language-sign was conceived by Saussure as a relation between sound (the signifier) and concept (the signified): the meaning-content of a sound is determined by the relation which it maintains with the other sounds which belong to the same system. The definition which Saussure gives can be called differential because he conceives of the sign as an internal and external difference: internally, the sign is determined by the difference between the signifier (*signifiant*) and the signified (*signifié*); externally, it is determined by the difference between the signifiers and the signifieds themselves. Radicalizing this differential language-definition from Saussure,



post-structuralists such as Derrida, Lacan, and Barthes postulate that the signifier and the signified do not form a fundamental unity of sign, but, rather, that the signified emerged from the articulation (that is: combination and substitution) of the signifiers. A signified, it is maintained, always points to other elements and thereby also always finds itself in the position of signifier. A consequence of this point is that the signified always postpones itself: every signified is part of a referential game which never comes to rest. In contrast to what the traditional 'metaphysics of the sign' argues, the signifier, according to post-structuralists, does not represent a signified which already contains meaning within itself, but, rather, it is a derived phenomenon, an effect of the systemic play of signifiers.<sup>9</sup>

In *La trahison des images* one could express this by saying that this referential game becomes frantic, as it were. In the negative reference the referential function of the representation, which, following Saussure, is placed in parentheses by the post-structuralists, is completely removed.<sup>10</sup> The referential game becomes an endless repetition without originality, a simulacrum. The observer is involved in a domain from which it is impossible to escape. On a psychic level, this is expressed in the simultaneous experience of the attitudes, necessarily separated for the aesthetic experience, of knowing and believing. The observer becomes conscious of his Ego-splitting. Nonetheless, and this is precisely that which is remarkable about the experience, this becoming conscious is not, as one would expect, combined with pain or fear. The 'threat of castration' which, in this instance, concerns the object of our experience (the 'real' pipe), is, after all, acute in the experience of the short-circuit of the signifiers in *La trahison des images*. In contrast to this, the deconstruction delivers a certain desire, a form of desire with which perhaps only perversion can provide us.

Derrida maintains: »At the moment a signifier stops imitating the danger of perversion is immediately acute« (1968, 291). When the signifiers no longer represent the signified, but, rather, only and purely signify each other (that is, are prisoners in a pure inter-textuality), then they become self-lovers, a fetish. Magritte, in *La trahison des images*, completes the transition from a

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<sup>9</sup> See for a critical evaluation of this poststructuralist credo: J. de Mul, 1997b, chapter 8.

<sup>10</sup> Because structuralist linguistics directs itself at the linguistic system (*langue*) and abstracts from concrete speech (*parole*) Saussure can, on methodological grounds, leave the referential function of language out of consideration. Among the post-structuralists, the referential function of language as such appears sometimes to be called into question. This is combined with the ambiguity of the term *signifié*: on the one hand, this term refers to a (mental) concept; on the other hand, it can also refer to the signified object to which the sign as a totality (sound + concept) refers.

partial fetishism of the aesthetic experience to a total fetishism of aestheticism. The belief-component is eliminated in favour of a special desire for knowledge of »the slippage (glissement) of meaning under the signifier« (Lacan, E 502). The dominance of the signified, which is intrinsic to naive realism, is here forsaken in favour of a desire for the dominance of the signifiers. Speaking in the context of a literary text concerning pleasure (the sexual *jouissance*) of a game wherein the ultimate meaning continuously retreats, Barthes in *De l'œuvre au texte* says: »The Text, on the contrary, practices the infinite deferment of the signified, is delatory; its field is that of the signifier and the signifier must not be conceived of as 'the first stage of meaning', its material vestibule, but, in complete opposition to this, as its *deferred action*. Similarly, the *infinity* of the signifiers refers not to some idea of the ineffable (the unnameable signified) but to that of a *playing*« (Barthes, 1982, 158)

On the terrain of visual signifiers, *La trahison des images* refers to the extreme limits of this game, this *jouissance*: the imaginary turning-point wherein that which is signified (*signifiante*) becomes submerged in showing the senselessness of the representation. The mimetic-aesthetic experience, which necessarily involves a belief-component, is here abandoned in order that the path be made free for the knowledge of an aestheticism which concerns itself with all signifiers. Not only the signifiers which are traditionally presented as imaginary or artistic are dragged into this aestheticism: the pipe in the ash-tray, too, is made into an element of a referential game without any basis.

#### 4. The phallus as transcendental signifier

In the foregoing I have been guided by the analogy Mannoni noted between sexual and aesthetic disavowal. Through this reasoning, I came upon the trail of a mysterious relationship between sexual and epistemological representation. This relationship, which continues to emerge in unexpected places in modern philosophy,<sup>11</sup> is also argued by Lacan, with a reference to the

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<sup>11</sup> In the first place I am thinking here of the in every way bizarre *Geschlecht und Charakter* by Otto Weininger (1980; first published in 1903). But with Nietzsche, too, sexual metaphors play a constant role (cf., for example, KSA 5, 11; cf. the occasionally dizzying commentary which Derrida (1978) makes of this work). Derrida, incidentally, points to the fact that in Heidegger's painstaking interpretation of Nietzsche's *Wie die Wahre Welt endlich zur Fabel wurde* the passages dealing with the feminine character of the Christian metaphysics belong to the few to which he does not address himself. In his Nietzschean-inspired deconstruction of Heidegger's *Verwindung*, Derrida makes this unconsidered metaphor one of his entry-points.

post-structuralist reading of Freud, on more theoretical grounds. We should briefly follow this detour because it makes it possible to approach *La trahison des images* from a rather different perspective, in the hope that a combination of these perspectives will provide more 'depth' to the image with which we are concerned.

Lacan's return to Freud is strongly influenced by Saussure's structuralist linguistics. This led Lacan to interpret the problematics of castration as a complex which marks the entrance of the individual into the symbolic order. In Lacan's view, the individual, who initially exists in an imaginary order of immediate experience, only receives the status of subject when he enters into the symbolic order. In this chain of terms, the individual and the objects of his experience are represented, proposed as present in their absence. The narcissistic identification with the mirror-image (which ensures that in an imaginary manner one continues to coincide with the Other) is thereby relieved by the acknowledgement of the other-ness of the (symbolically articulated) Other. The reality (*réalité*) of the subject is thus already a symbolically marked reality. From this, the post-structuralist character of Lacan's position is apparent: the meaning of an experience is not given in advance, but, rather, it is an effect, a 'precipitation' of the chain of signifiers. The meaning slips, as we have already seen, into the *jeu de signifiants*, the infinite game of the signifiers.

Just like Freud, Lacan, too, puts a strong emphasis on the role which the phallus plays in the transition from the imaginary to the symbolic stage. However, he thereby firmly resists a possibly naturalistic interpretation of the castration complex. For Lacan, the phallus is »not a phantasy ... equally not an object ... and even less the organ which it symbolizes« (Lacan, E 690). For him, the phallus is actually the signifier which pre-eminently marks the transition from the imaginary to the symbolic stage. According to him, this is also the reason that Freud chose a term for this signifier which points to the simulacrum which, in Antiquity, was the phallus: »After all, it is the signifier, to the extent that it constitutes their possibility-conditions, which is destined to indicate the effects of the signified in their totality« (E 690).

The phallus forms the third term which transforms the combatitive relationship of the mirror-stage, which is characteristic of the imaginary order, into the triangular relationship which is characteristic of the symbolic order. It is 'the tiniest difference' which indicates »that which the child is not, what the mother does not have and the father (presumably) does have« (Mooij, 1975, 142). In Mooij's words, a double distancing emerges: »In the first place, there arises a separation from the initial two-in-one whereby a chasm (*une béance*) appears between what are now two relations, two terms, and whereby a void (*un vide*) emerges in the place where originally the two-in-one existed

(*une place vide*). Hereby, the lack (*le manque*) emerges which is introduced by the insatiability of desire. In the second place, a separation emerges between what is now a relationship between two terms and that which names this relationship. The third term therefore creates a double distinction, internally between the two relations, and externally between the relation and its symbolic representation. We can summarize this function as: differentiating representation« (Mooij, 1975, 142).

Thus, with Lacan, the phallus functions as a transcendental signifier, that is, as the necessary possibility-condition for every production of meaning. It is the signifier which unlocks the entrance to the (symbolic) order of representation and thereby introduces a desire which cannot be satisfied. But, simultaneously, for Lacan the phallus also remains the specific symbolic signifier which indicates the penis (cf. Weber, 1978). This explains why Freud – and Lacan with him – gives a privileged role to the castration complex in relation to entering into the symbolic order. Moreover, it explains why, in psychoanalytic theory, the representation of both sexes and the representation of meaning in general cannot be separated from one another.

### 5. *Postmodern schizizophrenia*

Now we return to the pleasure of fetishizing the signifiers. This has become clear: it is a paradoxical pleasure. The insight that the signifiers only cherish themselves, that every access to the signified is cut off ('castrated'), really makes us suspect the opposite: a cutting pain. To place this pleasure we should first actually – a new detour – more closely delineate the distinction between aesthetic belief and aesthetic knowledge.

Here, too, it is Mannoni who suggests the direction we should take. He maintains, associating himself with Lacanian topology, that belief continuously assumes »the support of the Other« (Mannoni, 1969, 33). In *L'illusion comique ou le théâtre du point de vue de l'imaginaire* he explicates this through an analysis of the 'primitive' belief in masks and theatrical illusion. In the theatre, he argues, everything is done to maintain the theatrical illusion while everyone knows that it is an illusion. Here, the issue is thus one of 'classic' aesthetic disavowal: an 'imaginary credulity' is always present.

Concerning this point, Mannoni remarks: »Even though we are not ourselves the victim of a theatrical illusion or of the illusion of masks, it nonetheless appears that we gladly see someone who believes in such illusion. Everything appears to be done to produce this illusion, but it must be by someone else. As if we should conspire with the actors. Here, we see who the 'you' was

in 'you could say' whereby the playful illusion is expressed. After all: formerly, 'one believed in the masks' ... 'Formerly' means, as we could suspect, 'as a child'. An explanation, perhaps rather simplistic but not therefore completely inaccurate, now imposes itself as it were. Something, something from that child that we once were, still lives on in us, somewhere hidden within the Ego, perhaps in that place which Freud, following Fechner, correctly calls the theatre of the dream (and why precisely this metaphor?). This hidden part of our Self could thus be the place of the illusion, that which we actually do not yet really know what it is« (Mannoni, 1969, 164).

Although Mannoni here explicitly speaks of the theatre, his description can, without too many problems, be applied to the illusion which appears in the perception of mimetic fine arts. Belief in representation, that is, in the possibility to immediately perceive reality itself through the transparent window of the painting, rests equally upon the credulity of an Other. Of course we know that a painting constitutes an imaginary representation of reality, but we conspire with the painter, as it were, to lead this Other up the garden path, or better: to lead him behind the window. Once again, an irrational process which occurs in broad daylight.

If this explanation is correct, then it offers us the opportunity to more closely present the transition from the hybrid coincidence of belief and knowledge in aesthetic perception to the 'absolute' knowledge of aestheticism. This transition would occur at the moment that the observer himself takes the place of the Other. Mannoni describes this transition by reference to a passage from Casanova's biography. It is the story of a person who believes in his own fabrications, someone who no longer possesses the phallus by magic but, rather, by deception. According to Mannoni it is precisely here that the transition to complete fetishism occurs and knowledge is completely abandoned: »We can actually see that the place of the Other is now occupied by the fetish. If this is missing it creates unrest, as occurred with Casanova, when credulity goes by default. But Casanova imagines that he knows who believes and who does not believe. Even if he actually makes a mistake, the problem can still be posed in terms of belief. After the fetish has been established, belief disappears. We then no longer know how the question sounds and we could say that it is precisely the goal of the fetishist to escape from every question. While everyone enters the terrain of belief with the *Verleugnung*, it is precisely this terrain which those who become fetishists, at least insofar as it involves their fetish, leave« (Mannoni, 1969, 32).

We may assume that the perverse power now rests upon the fact that the painting brings the observer into the position wherein he realizes that he is himself credulous. He coincides in an imaginary manner, as it were, with the

Other to whom he originally ascribed belief and thereby causes the implementation of the fetishism of the signifiers. The signifiers cease to mean the Other. If we remain within Freudian terminology then we cannot fail to conclude that psychosis is hereby quite close. We surrender ourselves to an unverifiable and uncontrollable process of meaning which must lack an ultimate signified (*signifié transcendantal*). We are confronted with that which Moyaert presented as a schizophrenic discourse: »The schizophrenic discourse cruelly teaches us that our discourse does not derive its support or its meaning from the presence of a final signified or an ideal semantic form which can unite all discourse. In a confrontation with schizophrenia our discourse, too, is in its turn pulled along with and written into a game of signifiers without any ultimate basis or sense. In this manner, each of his discourses loses every foundation or point of reference. Knowing my discourse collides with a radical not-knowing which ridicules my certainties: the schizophrenic 'futilizes' my knowledge to a game of signifiers« (Moyaert, 1982, 151).

In an analogous manner, Magritte's *La trahison des images* could be called a schizophrenic metaphor. In the circular play of the signifiers (the words and the image), every access to the Other of the signifiers (the signified, the 'real' pipe) is cut off. To use another of Moyaert's terms, a *de-metaphoricization* occurs (Moyaert, 1982, 142). The circular play of the signifiers, the purely negative reference to the words and the image, creates a vacuum where previously belief pointed the Other to 'his' place. Where first a metaphorical leap to the other side of the signifiers stood, there now only exists the endless metonymy of signifiers. In other words, *La trahison des images* surprises us with the realization that the painting (and mimetic art in general) is not a window through which we can gaze at the Other, but, rather, a glass stained by signifiers which betrays nothing except its one-dimensional surface.

With the help of what we have learned so far, let us approach more closely the pleasure of complete fetishism, the aestheticism wherein the observer of *La trahison des images* finds himself. The aestheticism, which permits us once again to coincide with the imaginary Other, removes the fear of castration because thereby the signified disappears completely from view and thereby can no longer be experienced as a loss. In this context, with respect to the analogous position wherein schizophrenia finds itself, Moyaert remarks: »Every possible vulnerability occasioned by the indestructible presence of the Other (or the other) disappears given that his discourse is just as much a code of the message as a message of the code; and this has as consequence the fact that the subject of the psychosis himself takes the place of the Other and thus himself becomes the Other. The schizophrenic can peacefully maintain himself in a world of signifiers which, in his narcissistically inflated om-

nipotence, he can manipulate freely and without any risk (Moyaert, 1982, 151).<sup>12</sup>

Complete fetishism appears in this manner to be characterized by a double pleasure. In the first place, fetishism has the freedom of the metaphorical leap in the dark: it remains on the surface, escaping from the fear of the loss, the defect (*le manque*). Here, pleasure is essentially negative, based upon the absence of fear. But, at the same time, there is the other pleasure of manipulation. It coincides with the Other, dominates the game from within because the fetishist has himself become part of it. Expressed in a classic Freudian image: he experiences an oceanic relation with the Other. A return to 'the paradise of pure immediacy' takes place.

The observer of *La trahison des images* finds himself equally, even if only temporarily, in this circular play of the signifiers. He becomes, as it were, absorbed into the surface of the canvass. His belief in the signified makes way for an absorption in the process of meaning (*signifiance*). The knowledge-component takes the place of believing, but it is a knowledge of a special sort wherein the negation (the not-knowing of belief) is eliminated. This lack of the negation constitutes the radical being-Other of pleasure which reveals *La trahison des images*. In Barthes' words, it is »a pleasure without separation« (Barthes, 1982, 164). However, in terms of psychoanalysis, it is also therefore continuously an imaginary pleasure. For the same reason, it is a pleasure that can never be adequately contained within the schemas of representation, just as ultimately the pleasure of sexual fetishism can never be adequately understood from within the schemata of sexual reproduction. Although postmodern experience is a parasite upon modern experience, it reveals a pleasure which is never completely understandable from within the perspective of the reality-principle.

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<sup>12</sup> One could refer to this schizophrenic discourse as the post-modern variant of passive nihilism. In my opinion, it is pre-eminently expressed in the writings of Baudrillard. At a theoretical level irony receives here the complete dominance over what, in this context, I would like to call 'the enthusiasm of the signified'. In a recent reading, the American psychiatrist-philosopher Sass has made an interesting attempt to show schizophrenia, from within Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, as a radicalized 'theoretical' assessment of Being whereby everything (including persons) can be conceived as merely manipulable, immediately available objects. One way of summarizing Sass's argument is to say that the schizophrenic suffers from an extremely deficient mode of understanding Being. Baudrillard's thesis of the obscene transparency of objects appears to me to be an affirmation of that which is criticized with regard to Heidegger: the technical articulation of Being (Heidegger, 1962, 14).

6. *Superficiality from depth*

With this last remark we have returned to a place where the detours had already brought me, something which makes clear the circular character of these paths. We have to confirm that, in our attempts to bring it under the dominance of our theoretical *Bemächtigungstrieb*, we have constantly and repetitively pushed the pleasure from the other – postulated – aesthetic order out in front of us. Examining it from the order of the representation, that which falls outside is literally non-representative.<sup>13</sup> The image which *La trahison des images* presents to us appears at this point to converge with the imaginary constructs of the post-structuralists who have crossed our paths. After all, the post-structuralists postulate that an immediate experience – and must it not be admitted that this experience is the imaginary travel-goal of my wanderings? – is impossible within the symbolic order. Hereby, in the last analysis, the fetishistic pleasure is only comprehensible as a regression to an imaginary past. Lacan does speak, perhaps, about a third order, that of the real (*le réel*), but it is conceived by him as the impossible: it is impossible to reach or take on and is ultimately inaccessible. Does not Magritte appear to say the same when he magically removes the ‘real pipe’ right in front of our eyes?

Nonetheless, this ‘psychoanalytic’ interpretation does not appear to agree with the light-footed pleasure which *La trahison des images* awakens in me. Does not the pipe appear predominantly to succumb under the weight of these sombre theories concerning the Defect? It is a charged interpretation. For this reason it is tempting, having arrived at this point, to continue the reverse movement – with Magritte towards psychoanalysis –, to ensconce ourselves in the experience which *La trahison des images* offers us, and from this position to question theory. In the foregoing I called *La trahison des images* the embodiment of the limit of the game of signifiers. This limit forms the boundary between the three-dimensional space of the *signifiance* (which is constantly characterized by the metaphorical leap towards the other of the signifiers) and the flat surface of the circular (metonymical) dominance of the signifiers. Magritte shows us, where post-structuralism criticizes the dominance of the transcendental signified, that the ‘chain of signifiers’ is the rattling herald of a new dominance: that of the transcendental signifier and the Eternal Defect. The legitimate question which *La trahison des images* presents

<sup>13</sup> This is what Friedrich Schlegel presents as a ‘cyclical progression’. We return to the place from whence we came, but we now see this place from an ironic distance (see De Mul, 1997a).



to us is whether making the signifier absolute is not a new prison, a new columbarium built with the rubble of the old dungeon?<sup>14</sup>

The paths of the different post-structuralists (whom I have previously too simplistically summarized under one heading) appear here to separate. If Magritte here stands opposite Lacan, then Derrida and Barthes find themselves on his side. Samuel Weber, in his commentary concerning the meaning of the phallus in Lacan's work, points, following Derrida, to the danger of making the signifier absolute: »Making the signifier absolute ... removes at the same time, however, its specific and determining difference, and thereby makes it a signified« (Weber, 1978, 124). The phallus, the Eternal Defect, moreover emerges as a signified to which every signifier ultimately refers. One way of putting this is to say that at this point Lacan's sexual metaphor fossilizes and access to every space outside the phallic representation is made theoretically impossible. Put another way: when the phallus disappears as a specific signifier because it is made absolute, then the other of the phallus also disappears: desire. And it is precisely this desire around which the circular movement of Magritte's *La trahison des images* 'revolves'.

But how should this desire be evoked? In any case, Magritte does not have the destruction of representation as his goal. In *La trahison des images* it remains demonstratively present – after all, does the naive-realistically presented pipe not always remain a pipe? It appears that Magritte here tries to support Derrida's comment that it is not possible »to articulate a deconstructivist proposition which has not already secretly taken over the form, the logic, and the implicit postulates of precisely that which is being attacked« (Derrida, 1981, 280-1). Magritte's strategy is different: he permits the instrumentalist representation to stumble in favour of the acute shock which momentarily isolates the image from the differentiating chain of signifiers.<sup>15</sup> At those moments the thing, as Kaulingfreks expresses it in his

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<sup>14</sup> Owens, in an article concerning the relation between feminism and post-modernism, comes to the same conclusion when he maintains that: »post-modernism unveils the tyranny of the signifier and the violent character of its law« (1983, 59). Given the phallogocentric character of Lacan's theory, it is not surprising that this critique is primarily expressed by feminist theorists.

<sup>15</sup> There is a remarkable parallel here with the tactics which a feminist such as Irigaray uses against Lacan phallogocentrism. She, too, in Derrida's line, maintains that every critique absorbs the postulates of that which is criticized: »If it was only her intention to inverse the order of things – if, indeed, that were possible – then ultimately history would arrive at the same point: phallogocentrism. Neither her gender, nor her imaginary desires, nor her language would therein (re-)find there place« (Irigaray, 1977, 32). A similar tactic would result in »a new dungeon, a new monastery which she would build for herself« (32). The alternative is to sabotage the phallic order from

study of Magritte, is »undifferentiatedly present, without determination. It just is there, and hereby, as it were, it is no longer a thing. In its conveyed isolation, in the presence, it emerges as a mystery« (Kaulingfreks, 1984, 111). Shocked by the negative references of image and caption in *La trahison des images* (cf. note 5, above), we learn during a moment the mystery of »the experiential grounds of pure presence« of the pipe (Kaulingfreks, 1984, 45). This mystery forms, to use Heidegger's notions, the »miracle of miracles: that Being exists« (Heidegger, 1955, 47).<sup>16</sup> Magritte himself commented about this mystery: »The mystery is not *one* of the possibilities of reality. The mystery is that which is absolutely necessary if reality is to exist« (quoted by Kaulingfreks, 1984, 46).

Hereby, if I may permit myself such an expression, representation momentarily 'gets wasted'. Or, as one can express it in French, »*la représentation casse sa pipe*«. Although it is pre-eminently art which provides us with this mysterious experience, it is not restricted to art: »... the thought whereof a pipe and the caption 'this is not a pipe' are the terms ... Such thoughts evoke 'de iure' the mystery, while 'de facto' the mystery is evoked by a pipe in an ash-tray« (Magritte, 1979, 530). The pipe is at that moment Lacan's *objet petit a*, the first lost partial-object, the – according to Lacan – 'forbidden' last link in the chain of desire. Against this, in the experience of the mystery there is no question of a Lack, but, rather, of an abundance (*a plus-de-jour*). The desire is not primarily the result of an unremovable Lack, but, rather, the transcendent openness or quality of being resolved (*Entschlossenheit*) wherein the world, the Being of being, appears to us. This desire constitutes the possibility-conditions of the neighbourliness of things wherever Nietzsche speaks (KSA 8, 588). Breton, at least with respect to this point, was correct: Magritte gives *lessons in things*.

All of this appears remarkably superficial and banal. But it is perhaps for precisely this reason that it escapes from 'depth-psychology'. The remarks concerning banality and alienation by Freud and Mannoni are an indication of this point. Magritte explicates far more explicitly his view that psychoanalysis is not able to explain the mystery: »Art, to the extent that I understand it, removes itself from psychoanalysis: it evokes that mystery without which the world would not be able to exist, that is, the mystery which one

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within, comparable with the manner whereby Magritte permits the order of representation to stumble.

<sup>16</sup> The connection which, following Kaulingfreks, I make here between Magritte's view of the mystery and Heidegger's hermeneutic is also discernible in Magritte's texts. Kaulingfreks points to the fact that Magritte knew Heidegger's work and corresponded with Heidegger-experts such as De Waelhens (Kaulingfreks, 1984, 47, note 26).

must not confuse with any problem, no matter how difficult. No sane person believes that psychoanalysis can explain the mystery of the world. The nature of the mystery destroys curiosity. Psychoanalysis has just as little to say about works of art which evoke the mystery of the world« (Magritte, 1979, 558).

If this analysis remains on the surface then this is because things show themselves precisely at this point. Perhaps we should also interpret the title of the painting from this thought. That which Magritte makes an issue of in *La trahison des image* is the disavowal of immediate experience, the disavowal of appearance as lustre, as the tempting appearance of being. But, and this too makes the painting clear: afterwards, when theory dominates this experience, the experience is denied and understood as a regression, as a return to an imaginary past. A similar wilful 'superficial' reading of *La trahison des images* reminds us of Nietzsche's hymn to the Greeks: »O, the Greeks! They knew how to live: therefore the issue is to remain by the superficial, to worship the appearance, to belief in the forms, the sounds, the words, the entire Olympus of appearance! The Greeks were superficial – from depth! And don't we come, daredevils of the spirit who have climbed the highest and most dangerous top of current thinking and, looking around from that height, have looked down, there from anything new? In this respect, are we not simply – Greeks? Worshippers of forms, of sounds, of words? Not just for this reason – artists?« (KSA 3, 352). Perhaps the greatest achievement of *La trahison des images* resides in its boundless superficiality – in depth.

*Translation from Dutch by Allen Reeve and Jos de Mul*

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