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ESSAYS

Floating Cities: Xi Xi, Magritte, and the Insouciance of Allegory

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Abstract

This article examines the ekphrastic relation of text and image with respect to the operations of analogy, the proportions of which have cracked, and allegory as an insouciant genre. Xi Xi's short story *Marvels of a Floating City* is clearly linked to a reflection on Hong Kong's handover from London to Beijing in 1997, but it also moves beyond that fixed date to explore how such an image-text might operate along different registers as we pass from Aristotle toward Benjamin and Deleuze. As Magritte suggests, painting (like writing) is thinking, and ekphrastic allegory opens up not only mourning for the passing of all things but also an enigmatic joy that such fractured passaging occurs at all, especially in those marvellous moments when cities hover as if suspended between the sea and the sky.

Keywords

Xi Xi; Magritte; Cities; Hong Kong; Allegory

Une image (parole, peinture, musique, etc.) n'est pas une expression de la pensée. Elle est la pensée, elle s'identifie à ce qui est pensé. (Magritte 2009)

Many, many years ago, on a fine, clear day, the floating city appeared in the air in full public gaze, hanging like a hydrogen balloon. Above it were the fluctuating layers of clouds, below it the turbulent sea. (Xi Xi 1997: 3)

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In the opening lines of Xi Xi's 1986 'Marvels of a Floating City' we begin to practice an expansive bifocal vision as we shift back and forth from a reproduced image of René Magritte's *Castle in the Pyrenees* of 1959 to the written narrative of the speculative fiction. The space of the visual image is accompanied by an interwoven discourse just as the (quasi)simultaneity of looking is complemented by the time it takes to read sequentially. The complexities of translation, the publishing industry, geopolitics translatability, and the entirety of cosmic history are (quasi)invisibly carrying Xi Xi's story along to its most recent readers.

This is a movement of *ekphrasis*: an ecstatic saying that crisscrosses visuality and textuality, assuming for the sake of the argument that these are at least provisionally separable. Such a crisscrossing depends on a logical structure of analogy which enables A to be compared with B or for anything-at-all to be compared with anything-other. (The Surrealists' forced analogies are, after all, still analogies and perhaps the example *par excellence* of such a logic.) The combinatorial activity that enables such a comparison to occur provokes fundamental metaphysical questions about language, visuality, relationality in general, and meaning-making.

As soon as we write something is *like something else*, we are inside a certain historical, artistic, scientific, and philosophical trajectory, a logical structure of analogy. But logic, structure, and analogy are always intersecting *relationalities* and types of *orientations*. How do they function, both in general and in the specific exemplar of 'Marvels of a Floating City'? For the process of allegorization to be put-into-place there must be such an *a priori* logical structure which enables such an operation to occur in the first place. The 'first'—which might well become a cause of other exemplars—is first of all the *effect* of a host of variables that, necessarily, appears as a blurry middle of these differential forces.

This is the comparative logic of analogy which then, in this context of 'Marvels of a Floating City,' becomes narrativized through the genre of allegory. Analogy compares A to B; allegory extends this into a narrative, which requires an ideal reader to know something about both poles of interpretation that are operative, as well as about the forms of narrative that mediate these poles. This, of course, is not always the case. Allegory, with these magnetic 'poles' fixed rather loosely in place, provides an orientation for understanding of the contents of the narrative. It is quite possible, of course, for the story to be read without this knowledge and such a putative misreading might well also be a fruitful reading. History and narrative referents are often forgotten or obscured, sometimes as a device of political power wanting to stay in power and sometimes just because all things erode, abrade, dissipate.

Analogy emerges as a concept of proportionality from the Greek *analogia* 'proportion,' from *ana* 'upon, according to' + *logos* 'ratio,' also 'word, speech, reckoning,' from the Proto-Indo-European root **leg-* (1) 'to collect, gather,' with derivatives meaning 'to speak, to pick out words.' The fundamental mathematical definition is expanded by Plato and many others, with analogy coming to designate 'partial agreement, likeness or proportion between things' from the 1540s and, c. 1600, a logical 'argument from the similarity of things in some ways inferring their similarity in others' (etymologyonline). Analogy, like everything else, has a history and there is always an inferential leap, a spark arcing from pole to pole that exists as an oscillation of forces. Reading, looking, and understanding are all necessarily dynamic.

David Tracy has given a succinct definition of the classical theologico-philosophical concept of analogy as a 'language of ordered relationships whereby the order is informed by some paradigmatic focal meaning' (1979: 34) and this definition is picked up by Barbara Stafford in her explication of *visual* analogy:

Most fundamentally, analogy is the vision of ordered relationships articulated as similarity-in-difference... This transport of predicates involves a mutual sharing in, or partaking of, certain determinable quantitative and qualitative attributes through a mediating image ...' (2001: 9)

A ‘paradigmatic focal meaning’ or a ‘mediating image’—one form focuses on words and the other on image, but each of these re-sounds across the other.

Most people believed that the floating city would continue hanging steadily in the air, neither rising nor sinking, forever. (Xi Xi 1997: 3)

Xi Xi’s ‘Marvels’ writes its way both through and alongside thirteen Magritte paintings, which act as triggers to shape an allegory about the Floating City. Magritte’s ‘Castle in the Pyrenees’ is the initial orientation point for Xi Xi’s construction of an analogy between the painting, the text, and the state-of-affairs of a fictional city, and Hong Kong during the period of the turnover from the British back to the Chinese. As Yee (2024) explains: ‘The advent of this trend [of focusing on urban life] coincided with the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984. The destiny of the city was decided without the participation of its inhabitants, who were left with an urgent need to redefine their home ...’ As always analogy, allegory, history, and identity-formation are inter-meshed.

The handover from London to Beijing in 1997 created difficult questions for how to live a life in the liminal space that was Hong Kong hovering *between* ‘East’ and ‘West,’ a strange and imbalanced twinship which is also analogical and allegorical, with all of the conundrums of these operations at work. Xi Xi’s allegory questions how best to re-imagine the concept of home for the Hong Kongers of that period, moves from a historical state-of-affairs through a series of surrealist paintings, and gives contours to the question of belonging through the exemplar of a speculative fiction. This is a text about a painterly city hovering between sky and sea, but read toward and away from the ‘real’ historical situation of the city of Hong Kong. The real requires the fictive, the unreal, the virtual, the phantasmatic—take your pick of genealogies—in order to be constituted, presented, transmitted, and understood. Allegory, in other words, always carries implicit reading instructions within its structure.

The majority of the floating city’s inhabitants are men with hats—a symbol of the petty bourgeoisie. They want a society that is stable and prosperous, a home that is warm and quiet, and so they work as hard as bees and ants; for work is the best antidote to sadness. (Xi Xi 1997: 15)

Magritte, who died on the Rue des Mimosas in 1967, obviously had no earthly idea that these paintings would be read through the experience of Hong Kong during the transition from London to Beijing that occurred long after his death. This is one of the delights of dissemination, but Xi Xi’s choice of these paintings for this task does indicate different aspects of how an allegorical writing and reading operates. First, such a decision might initially choose anything-at-all to be interpreted-toward a more or less clear historical situation, a religious narrative, or different cultural scenarios. Every allegory has both a targeted object of referential attention and a rhetoric of a particular stylistic texture: paintings, the language of animals on a farm, a journey down to hell and back to paradise, or the stages on life’s way.

Xi Xi’s choice of Magritte, and of these paintings in particular, is from one perspective quite arbitrary and from another quite over-determined, both for the author and for us as belated readers. I, too, am obsessed with both Hong Kong and with Magritte; I, too, am using his paintings as triggers to spur additional philosophically speculative fabulations.¹ I come after Magritte and after Xi Xi and can therefore make yet another use of their material, can write an allegory about allegory to pass on to those yet to come. This is what reading and writing arrange: a passing-through and a passing-along.

This type of obsessive fascination is one of the conditions for allegorical or analogical experience. There is a drive toward unexpected connectivities and we have to know something about both terms of

¹ This essay is part of *After Magritte*, a larger writing experiment in progress. See, to date, ‘After Magritte #2: The Art of the Assassins’ (March 2023), *Stand: An International Literary Magazine* 236/20.4; and, ‘After Magritte #5: Hegel at the Beach,’ *Epoché Magazine* #57 (November 2022).

the relationship that is being interwoven if we are to understand the author's allegorical intent. (Again, there are always other ways to read.) Magritte and Hong Kong, which have no natural iconic or indexical relationship to one another, are mediated by Xi Xi's speculative fiction to create a new field of meaning. This is the function of the cutting-edge of all writing, which unfurls like wood-shaving before a chisel, but it is accentuated in some areas of writing more than others.

A second principle of constructing an allegorical reading-writing is that there must be a perceived *fit* between the material of one interpretive pole (the paintings) and the other interpretive pole (Hong Kong) that is then enacted and enchained by a reading-writing that is opened toward potential readers in different historical contexts. This fit is imagined as a series of third terms that participates in, or orients, the other two series of the allegory. These are the specific contact-points between text, image, and the focalizing scaffolding.

It is not, after all, as if every quality of a Magritte painting serves as a hook for every quality of the city of Hong Kong. As Tracy once again observes: 'analogy, by means of establishing ordered relationships controlled by a focal meaning, can develop a harmony without the loss of either intensity or variety' (1979: 32). The links in the chain form an analogical alignment, a sorting of contact-points that create a sense of harmonious fullness.

Allegory is a narrative based on the magnetizing power of a focalized fit that *orders* the confused swarming of chaos, contingency, and a fragmented lack into a simulacrum of a harmony (of significance, not of fact). This does not imply a one-to-one belocked structure that exhausts the potentialities of the interpretive poles—that would be the Borgesian fantasy of a conflation of the map and the territory—but it does require a complex set of *touch-points* through which we construct the narrative-type called 'allegory.'

There will, though, always be additional possibilities of reading that take a different route than the planned itinerary of the 'focalized' allegory. An allegory drives a swarm of murmuring words towards a matching-up of the pieces on each side of the allegory, but one can always disrupt the murmuration, push things off of the pre-established tracks, and read in different directions. Words, after all, are wily tricksters. Allegory itself is finally contingent, a gamble with a particular form of the structuring of language that holds the lattice of meaning in place for only so long.

Stafford, in *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting*, deploys a differently inflected concept of allegory than I am developing here. She is opposed to the 'monism of allegory,' is disturbed by postmodernism's 'annihilation of resemblance,' and understands the Jena Romantics as capsizing a 'good' analogical order with '*disanalogy*, a massive cultural implosion into insurmountable and unrepresentable contradictions—separated by an uncommunicative emptiness or clogged with conflicting distinctions—*allegory*, to indicate its literary origins within a negative hermeneutics' (2001: 3). She deeply desires a 'dialectics of reconciliation' (2001:14) or an 'analogical quest of retrieval' (2001: 155).

As she argues, from the 'iconophilic perspective, the earthly or natural image establishes a temporary resemblance with a hidden mystery that one cannot otherwise see. All of analogy's simile-generating figures are thus *incarnational*. They materialize, displace, and disseminate the enigma that escapes words' (2001: 23, my emphasis). She is in favor, as am I, of the 'metamorphic and metaphoric practice for weaving discordant particulars into a partial concordance that spurs the imagination to discover similarities in dissimilarities (as in Leibniz's *ars combinatoria*)' (2001: 3), but she stresses the similarities that are most brightly illuminated by these conjunctions, with an incarnational theology in the near background.

Allegory continues, of course, to operate in similar ways to analogy along these axes of invention, but what happens when the theological assumptions are chipped away? Perhaps these differences of interpretive gravity come down to how Deleuze distinguishes Leibniz from Spinoza and Nietzsche, with a backdrop of transcendence still operating in the former and a pure immanence in the latter pair. As a series of interlinked fragments that are ordered through a narrative-machine, allegory can never be completely

fastened-down to a stabilized meaning. (But what can, or should, be fastened-down in this manner? That would be tantamount to the absolute stasis of death.) I do not want to become lost in the thickets of Walter Benjamin's 1928 *Origin of the Tragic German Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*), but I do want to acknowledge its gravitational presence as it sits slightly off-stage, always casting its shadows of melancholy on the entire contemporary commentary on allegory. The characteristic of allegory as a back-and-forth oscillation between magnetized poles of meaning is one that Benjamin analyzes in detail, especially in relation to the question of *origin* as part of his metaphysical critique of the Baroque, its fissuring of transcendence, and thus its connections to the advent of the secularization of modernity.

As Samuel Weber summarizes Benjamin's famously difficult text: 'It is in the allegorical revelation that the most complete immanence is at the same time the most radical alterity that the Mystery returns to plague and to delight the audience of the mourning play' (1991: 492). Allegory, in this context, is this doubleness of a simultaneity of a plague and a delight that unfolds as the movement of return, the break of finitude, and an establishment of a complete immanence. For if the origin has been put in its proper place, its situation turns out to be a kind of perpetual, but *tracked*, motion. And moreover, it is one that develops considerable power: as a vortex or maelstrom, it draws (literally tears, rips: *reiBt*) the raw materials of emergence (*Entstehung*) into its force-field. Or, as Benjamin puts it: into its 'rhythm' (1991: 470). This is the precisely necessary language of forces and rhythms shaped into a literary and cultural allegory.

Allegory develops a rhythm out of chaos. Edgar Allan Poe had taken up another version of this allegory in his 'Descent into the Maelstrom' (1841), in which this swirling vortex is analogous to the site of the *polemos* where, in 'The Origin of the Work of Art,' Heidegger develops his reflections, through the famous example of Van Gogh's painting of a pair of shoes, about how the truth of the artwork emerges in the strife between what he calls 'Earth' and 'World.' Art pries open, and then keeps available, this dynamic fissuring that enables an encounter with truth to occur. What happens, here, to harmony? It becomes not a goal, but a kind of contingent and provisional side-product of the work of art. Death, in the Baroque, is the mark of the fissure of finitude and therefore the Baroque drama is a form of mourning. This is the 17th century opening toward modernity that Benjamin identifies as the fundamental fracture of secularization.

Erika Fischer-Licht has also taken up the task of analyzing his critical armature of allegorization, which Benjamin shows can only exist in the world after Paradise has vanished, in which God had originally called all things by their fully adequate and shining names. This post-lapsarian world—not only 'in general,' but in the historical moment of the emergence of capitalist modernity with its collapse of a transcendent focal point—is one of radical finitude, transience, and death. Returning us to the aspects of the *bricolage* of allegory, she concludes that 'we can state that the allegorical process consists, essentially, of two processes: the process of *deconstruction* performed as decontextualization and desemantization; the process of *construction and reconstruction* performed as contextualization and semantization...' (1986: 162). This is to reiterate the process that Xi Xi is undertaking in 'Marvels' as she constructs the parallel links between Magritte's 'insouciant art' (1983: 11)—as James Harkness has so evocatively named it—and Xi Xi's speculative fiction of Hong Kong during the transition from one historical configuration of identity to the next.

Buildings shoot up from the ground, each one taller than the next. Flyovers circle the air space above road junctions... There are several art festivals a year, and the bookstores stock books from all over the world. Those who choose to remain silent have absolute freedom to do so. (Xi Xi 1997: 5)

This is a description of the sociology, the technical proficiency, the politics, and the urban geography of the Hong Kong of the handover period, complete with its flyovers, the Planetarium, and Ocean Park. We are able, as we take note of recognizable reference points in the text and know enough about the political transition and Xi Xi's own history, to make the connections, to go along with her construction of an allegory that takes shape through a fiction that draws from Magritte's delightfully puzzling paintings.

If the reading, however, is to remain active across time, that is if it is to have the opening of a future in a very different context than that of the original writing, then it must also continue to resonate for those other times (such as ours) when the historical situation has shifted into a different state-of-affairs. The focal points will not hold forever. And Magritte, through the painterly constructions of his ‘visual non-sequiturs’ (Harkness 1983: 4), radically undoes theories of resemblance, representation, and fit that are traditionally entailed by allegory. The objects of which his paintings apparently consist initially look *as-if* they fit what we think we know, but that apparent match is always undone, throwing us into fits of puzzlement, frustration, or laughter.

As an artistic trickster, he lures us into reading the paintings as allegories, as representations of the familiar, but through undermining the expected play of visibility he refuses access to a ‘successful’ allegory that creates harmony and order out of a focal point of significance. Images, after all, are treacherous. Pipes might be pipes, but paintings are not pipes. Perhaps, though, it is not so simple and both Xi Xi and Magritte help us remember, and invent, an experience of the more-than-simple, that surplus that makes us think.

As Rodolphe Gasché has written as he tries to untangle the knots of Jacques Derrida’s articulation of the neologisms and quasi-concepts of his many ‘infrastructures’:

The possibility of being affected by analogy must, then, come to being from the inside. Indeed, it is the very idea of a unity of being, the idea of being as such, of being as thought, that requires the inner doubling of being in order to appear as such. The space of this inner doubling within being is the original space of analogy or metaphor in general... This irreducible metaphoricity of the *as-such* cannot be sublated in a gesture of idealization, because the space of doubling and repetition that it opens, within which being can be related to itself, is the very condition of idealization. (1986: 206)

Every philosophy of a univocal expressivity must develop a theory of differential repetition, idealization within immanence, and a sense of how the new emerges. The *as-if* doubles, both before and after—if these terms have any meaning at all—the *as-such* through the movements of these doublings-foldings.

These movements of the original space of analogy or metaphor in general cannot be reduced to a ‘real’ or ‘literal’ meaning, although very often in specific instances this is exactly what needs to happen since we often need to act in response to a meaning. Such a designation, however, necessarily occurs within the space of an already established metaphoricity that *cannot* be so reduced. This metaphoricity, however, does not generate analogies of beings with its hierarchies and focal points of a paradigm, but, instead, always speaks out of a one-voiced multiplicity of being that never ceases becoming: dissolving-manifesting.

Magritte’s are painterly sleights-of-hand that, like all magic tricks, illuminate our habits and assumptions of perception and understanding. Yes, it is a castle in the Pyrenees, but it is floating on a rock in the air. Yes, that is a clock on the mantel, but what are we to make of the train coming out of the fireplace? Neither Xi Xi nor my own response to Hong Kong and Magritte are able to fundamentally stabilize the allegorical into an adequate form of our habitual representations, which is of course fortunate because now we can continue to read, write, and attempt to understand. This is the necessary and delightful *insouciance of allegory*, which enables allegory, but only in an oscillatory and perpetually unfinished play of word, image, and all of their possible re-combinations.

Distinguishing the calligrams of Magritte (via Apollinaire) from the traditions of rhetoric, Michel Foucault remarks that the latter ‘toys with the fullness of language. It uses the possibility of repeating the same thing in different words, and profits from the extra richness of a language that allows us to say different things with a single word. The essence of rhetoric is allegory’ (1983: 21). Allegory, putting the logic of analogy into motion, *binds across differences*, acting to provide a provisional stopping point for the vortices, doldrums, and cataracts of languaging, but the putative focal point of this binding is, itself, drifting along unbound from its presumable function as a master-image or a master-text.

Allegory and analogy look to be organizations around focal points, which they to some extent are, but they are also *multipliers*. Anything might, after all, happen; everything is connected to everything. This is a chaosmosis that takes the given genre of allegory, and its accompanying logic of analogy, and invents an unexpected combinatorics of a floating city, paintings, a speculative fiction, a history of nation-states and their negotiations, and, vibrating throughout, of the universe itself.

Only a handful of intellectuals are struck by an idea: the floating city, despite its absolute steadfastness, is also an illusion. (Xi Xi 1997: 9)

There are always disequilibriums stirring, eddies of an approaching breeze that will disrupt the precarious balance that keeps the Floating City, and its many analogues, provisionally in place suspended between the ocean and the clouds. As Shuang Shen articulates the status of the question of Hong Kong's identity along a spectrum of literary history, she notes:

Literary history can confer cultural legitimacy and authority on a nation or a group. For much of the twentieth century, Hong Kong's status as a colonial city and a diasporic place was not conducive to local identification. But the Handover energized local culture and so influenced literary criticism that one can say that proper criticism of Hong Kong literature commenced with the rise of new localism. Yet the discourse of Hong Kong identity has also elevated presentist and singular understandings of the local over historical and multiple understandings. (2012: 575).

This new localism has, since 1997, once again been radically shifted, with Hong Kong now in a very different historical configuration marked by the Umbrella Revolution in 2014, the social protests of 2019, COVID in 2020-22, and the National Security Laws promulgated in 2020 and 2024. Its *liminality*, the ambiguous signifying space in which Xi Xi was composing the allegory between Magritte and Hong Kong, has subsequently been radically diminished, although a renewal of allegorization through different analogies is always possible.

Magritte's paintings always force us, impishly but with great conceptual force, into the attentive labour of reading framed-visibility and then translating that visibility into language with which it has, of course, no resemblance. *Ekphrasis* is always another instance of speculative fabulation. Language, a form of sonorous or silent visibility, nonetheless in general tends to push toward the conceptuality of the lines of words (in alphabetical languages) that seem like a series of still lives to trend toward *meaning*.

This is the doubleness of the mirage of the city and of all of the attempts across media and instrumentation—through the *micro-* and the *tele-*—to *see clearly, distinctly and transparently* the essence of an image, a narrative, a scenario. But fictivity, necessarily included in the essence, resonates through all discursive forms and suspends the floating city and its infinite analogues. It suspends the resemblances between A and B that allegory establishes and it suspends the intersection between the space of the painting and the space of saying. Floating, we become disoriented, and yet we are not thrown into complete nonsense of illegibility since this floating is the *sotto voce* movement of signs.

'When scholars approach Hong Kong as a productive site of literary history, they may not find a Hong Kong literary history. Indeed, imagining Hong Kong literary history as a history without a core only allows us to materialize the rich potential of writing histories from this location. But this proliferation of history does not mean that one can circumvent situatedness vis-à-vis the local' (Shen 2012: 578). Situated knowledge and knowledge within infinitely twisting contexts—those 'without a core'—are inseparable except in the abstracting analytics of a purposive discourse that needs to bring the drifting to a temporary halt.

Magritte triggers a similar sense of disorientation in an extremely meticulous manner that may feel like clouds or bowler hats or evenings or lovers or pipes or it may be felt as an intense dizziness of one simulacra

cascading before, into, and after another. Fantasy, which is a cascade of phantasms and illuminating trickery, opens both our written and our visual text.

Fantasy is a powerful tool that allows Xi Xi to become other, to destabilize Hong Kong's economic miracle, and reterritorialize it through imagination and creativity ... This vitality and liveliness described in 'Marvels of a Floating City' reflect the true essence of Hong Kong. Xi Xi's fantastical portrayal rejects the conventional depiction of Hong Kong and offers a new alternative understanding. (Yee 2024)

This situation of Hong Kong depicted in Xi Xi's work invites us to write the next sentence, to reallocate with a different but related set of analogies, and to cast the next line spinning out toward futurity. Looking and saying are establishing different configurations than in the classical period of painting, in the classical period of representational and realist fiction, or even in the political transition between presumably stable regimes of nation-state. What will such insouciance offer for us today and for others tomorrow?

A teacher takes a group of students to City Hall to see an exhibition of Magritte's paintings... They ask: this umbrella with a glass of water on it, what does it mean/? And why is it called 'Hegel's Holiday'? They try to find an answer in the exhibition catalogue. (Xi Xi 1997: 13)

Allegory is the logic of analogy-in-motion, whether linguistically or visually. After the Baroque, however, and the many versions of the 'death of God' and the concomitant secularization entailed by modernity, both the order of language as well as the 'paradigmatic focal meaning' will be constrained to specific communities of faith (or similar communities of typologies of readers). Elsewhere, the 'paradigmatic' will necessarily shift and drift along, evaporating like clouds over Tai Mo Shan.

This motion can be to some extent be specified and made determinate, but at all such determinate scales or the matching of resemblance are provisional and eventually shattered. For the things the allegorist uses do not have any meaning of their own. They are, as such, insignificant. Any meaning that may be attributed to them follows from a subjectively established connection the allegorist has invented` (Fischer-Lichte 1986: 157). Through syncopations, gaps, and rhythms, such a movement activates a 'plurality of centers, superposition of perspective, a tangle of points of view, a coexistence of moments which essentially distort representation: painting or sculpture are already such "distorters," forcing us to create movement—that combine a superficial and a penetrating view, or to ascend and descend within the space as we move through it' (Deleuze 1994: 56).

In the floating city you cannot find the answer or predict the future by looking in a mirror. (Xi Xi 1987: 19)

Painting, fiction, and philosophy distort the dreamed of clarity of the linguistic-visual correspondences of representation, accomplishing this task through recombinations of elements that provide new possibilities for a more unexpected analogies to appear across thresholds of the continuous variation of experience. Foucault remarks that a 'statement of discourse "slips into" the pure play of painting':

It is like an infinite murmur—haunting, enclosing the silence of the figures, investing it, mastering it, extricating the silence from itself, and finally reversing it within the domain of things that can be named (1983: 34) ... [M]ore than any other, [Magritte's] painting seems wedded to exact resemblances, to the point where they willfully multiply as if to assert themselves... The ship at sea will not resemble merely a ship, but also the sea itself, even to its hull and sails being composed of waves. [*Le séducteur*] And the exact representation of a pair of shoes, moreover, will try to resemble the bare feet the shoes ought to cover (*Philosophy in the Boudoir*) (1983: 34).

The sea is a ship is a wave is a blade of grass, but this is the *is* of a feigned identity, the *is* of the movement of metaphor and analogy.

Xi Xi concludes her marvelous allegory in Section XIII, *Windows*, but these windows are no longer the image of the windows of classical perspectivism or of representationalism more broadly speaking. Nothing is any longer seen transparently through a window, itself become invisible, and these are certainly not windows to the soul. (Or, are they? Perhaps the window and the soul have both morphed together?) Something has now *fractured* the illusion of the windows and mirrors of representation—and the theological underpinnings of traditional allegory—and thereby gravitationally warped the scenography of the spacetime around Magritte’s paintings, including the Floating City in the Pyrenees. The Baroque, modernity, secularity, the death of God, and the simulacra of the simulacrum that seeks to dispense with Platonism. It’s a tangle, but, meanwhile, Xi Xi prepares to compose another allegory and Magritte sets up his easel and tacks down another canvas.

The observers at the window--what do they see now? They see a teacher taking a group of students to an exhibition of Magritte’s paintings at City Hall...At the other end of the room, workers are putting up a Mona Lisa poster on the notice board announcing forthcoming events. (Xi Xi 1997: 27)

Da Vinci meets Magritte in a Cantonese and an English text. Everything is incessantly in-translation. As Magritte reminds us with perfect clarity: painting, sculpture, music, and writing are themselves *thinking* and there is no thinking without these media being put to work and parsed through a series of supports, materialities, landing-sites, and surfaces. With Xi Xi’s fabulation as an exemplar—and all exemplars are analogically embedded with allegorical possibilities—we are putting allegory to work in a different tone.

Language and experience remain, perhaps, always tinged with the *lacrimae rerum* and its edge of mourning, but, once unlatched from the hierarchies of a lapsarian or apocalyptic ontology, they are then free to run in their own wild and unexpected directions through the everyday marvelous, the delirium of perception, and the modes and moods of thought. Painting, too, thinks. The insouciance of allegory opens up not only the bass-note of mourning for the passing of all things, but also toward an enigmatic joy that such a fractured passaging occurs at all, especially in those moments when cities are hovering as if suspended between the sea and the sky.

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