

There are two mysteries, even three. The first is the painting itself, that amalgam of pigments and canvas. The second, most often unseen, is the frame.

The third, if we wish

to continue with and extend the metaphor

(or the trope), is the

picture-title beside it.

But the greatest of these is the frame.

The canvas

gives the painting its

unity, but it is the

frame that makes it

self-contained. It is

the frame that sets

the painting apart

from the rest of the

world around it. It is

the frame that

finishes the whole

picture, that makes it

complete, self-suf-

ficient, and ended. It

is the frame that

makes the painting a single, fully-comprehensible unit.

Magritte knew this, and yet knew this role to be far beyond a mere frame. In his two *La Condition*

The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao.

The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

—Lao Tzu¹

Disgusted by the inanity of my attempts at poetry

I drift into insanity (not all that far from vanity)

and make my home at Riverview,

watching the river flow and shift,

watching the flotsam float and drift,

watching all life just pass me by,

and I could leave it all with a sigh,

but one small thing then brings me back:

I wander the bank, wondering that

this river, made of rain and dew,

will never either reign or do,

but always, ever simply is.

I do not know what this life is...

Tao is forever flowing.

And yet it never overflows in effectiveness.

It is an abyss like the ancestor of all things.

—Lao Tzu¹

humaines (at least in the two in the Quantum English edition of Foucault's *This Is Not a Pipe*), two frameless

paintings stand on their stands, their subject-matter

...or how it slips between my words and runs from my paper, but I've heard

that all to nothingness will sink if I pin it down with pen and ink.

And so I sit and babble on, riveting rivers with jabs of my pencil.

—Ed Hewlett

In academia, involved as it is with the shuffling, re-arranging, re-sizing, revising, formulation, conflation, and evaluation of frames, quotes always come in handy.

This

Just as it is easier to re-size or bring up an existing window than to create a new one, so it is always easier to employ someone else's frame than to create one of one's own.

He who knows does not speak.

He who speaks does not know.

—Lao Tzu¹

To understand clearly the role of the associative and co-ordinating faculty, we must leave the individual act, which is only the embryo of speech, and approach the social fact.

Among all the individuals that are linked together by speech, some sort of average will be set up: all will reproduce—not exactly, of course, but approximately—the same signs united with the same concepts.

—Ferdinand de Saussure²

Individual Signifieds and Communication

points out (*Pipe*, 52), the frame is too big for the mirror it encloses and leaves a slight gap on every side.

Even the picture-title indicates that the frame

flowing into their

subjects, landscape

and seascape, which

lie (which have

escaped?) beyond.

In his *La Cascade*,

the subject of the

framed painting

surrounds and in-

vades the frame that

hemms it in as painted

subject-matter.

Moreover, the sub-

ject of *La Cascade*

seems to be a hedge:

What is the hedge

hemming in that we

can't see—or is the

hedge hemming us

in? And in *Les*

Liasons dangereuses,

as Foucault

cannot finish its job. In an art gallery, the title generally shows up on a small slip of paper on the wall beside (thus apart from) the picture, along with the artist's name and the artwork's date. The title and its accompanying information tell us that the framed picture is *not* self-contained: it was produced, it refers (usually) to something outside itself (such as to a pipe—or *not* to a pipe—or to *not* a pipe), it has a context. Even when the piece of art has not been given a title, our expectation of one (and of context) is so great that we call it *Untitled*, just as we label art from some unknown source *Anonymous*, or more precisely, *Artist unknown*.

What Saussure left I wish to return to. We communicate as individuals; we participate as individuals in the "social fact" of language. And language is limited, as Lao Tzu points out above: Language cannot represent exhaustively, only partially. Or, in Saussurian terms, *No one signifier can represent every part of the slice of reality being signified.*

This limit is perhaps not an inherent problem, but it forces upon us a choice that becomes problematic. Language cannot re-

present everything so we must choose what it will represent, and—and here is the source of the problem—as

a part of the frame. In the kitchen of the house I have lived in since I was five, there is—and has been for as far back as I remember—a large, popular painting hung

language-groups and as individuals we choose differently.

The problem of such different choices becomes more apparent when seen in Saussurian

Meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless.

—Jonathan Culler*

Is

We are all looking at the same big picture..

*From *On Deconstruction*, p.123.

terms. Saussure, dealing with language as a whole, assumed for each *signifier* fairly static and uniform *signifieds*. But such linguistic signs represent parts of Reality³, and, just as individual knowledge and experience of Reality varies widely and changes with time, so individuals' *signifieds* vary. And if two individuals employ the

same *signifier* to represent two different *signifieds*... at worst misunderstanding and at best disagree-

on the wall above and behind the kitchen table. Its title, *HORSE & BUGGY DAYS*, and artist, *PAUL DETLEFSEN*, are inscribed on a small brass plate and this plate is tacked into the wide wooden frame of the print.

There is no date given—perhaps it is meant to be timeless.

I know this print is popular because I have seen it in other places: in other people's houses, in doctor's offices, and—most

recently and most bizarrely—in Japan in the background of a photo of a former Buddhist priest

published in a Christian gospel tract/Christmas

pamphlet. But the strangest part about re-seeing this print is that each time it seems a different size and shows a different section of what must be a larger

picture. Our picture

is tall and thin and shows on one side a

boy standing under the spreading

boughs of a big, leafy tree—a chest-

nut, I think—before a blacksmith's barn,

watching a young man shoeing a

horse. On the other side of the painting

we can see the shafts of a buggy, and part

of a wheel is just visible. But other

versions of the painting that I have

seen (such as the one I saw in the ex-

Buddhist priest's pamphlet) are squatter, wider, show a part of the side

of the barn as well, with large wagon-wheels propped against it, and reveal behind the standing boy the trunk

of the huge tree and a pump, and, on the other side, (I think) a bit more of the buggy.

Frame plays a key role in Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, a role particularly difficult to detect: on an individual level we expect the same *signifier* will signify the same *signifieds*, on an inter-

linguistic level we expect the new language to have available *signifiers* that can represent our old *signifieds*. And exactly because these expectations are often met, they are reinforced, only to later mislead us.

As a linguist Saussure touched on this problem within language⁴, but failed to note its effect on inter-linguistic communication: things like translation and language-learning. The radically different divisions of Reality embodied in different languages multiply the difficulties already inherent in such communication.

The same problem manifests itself differently on an inter-linguistic level. As a linguist Saussure touched on this problem within language⁴, but failed to note its effect on inter-linguistic communication: things like translation and language-learning. The radically different divisions of Reality embodied in different languages multiply the difficulties already inherent in such communication.

...but each of us sees a different part of that picture.

The problem, then, is with how language slices up Reality: differently for different languages and individuals. It is a very similar concepts of things easily

For the simple, discrete, discontinuous objects that so often surround us usually do correspond more or less exactly to our neighbours' and neighbouring languages' *signifieds*. Most people, as well as most languages, have

A tree is a self-contained system, containing all the data and equipment necessary for sustaining and replicating itself and qualitatively different from the rest of its environment.

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one another. Were pipe and statement not united in the picture, the two would be much easier to dissect. With the statement out of the picture, we could look at the pipe, read the title,

see the frame separating the two, and go away saying,

"Yes, this picture is not a pipe, but just a picture of one," or, perhaps, "Yes, this slip of paper is not a pipe—it's just a

title," and then slip home for a relaxing smoke in our comfortable pipe-chair. But when

both statement and pipe are united by frame upon canvas,

when both share the same essence, the same degree of removal from that

which they refer to/represent, then they unravel each other in the thousand ways that Foucault begins to suggest to us. For the frame severs each element from

distinguished from their surroundings: apples, trees, and books come to mind—though "book" with its history meshing with "scroll" (and other forms of recording language) might turn out to be a poor example. And it is precisely because they are simple, discrete, and discontinuous that our concepts of these things are similar:

if a misunderstanding arises about what is signified it is easy to separate such things from their contexts and show clearly that they are signified.

Complex, abstract terms and non-discrete parts are most often the source of our problems. Words like "God", "good", and

But, isolate a tree from its environment, cut it off from its essential nutrients, soil, water, and air—frame it—and it dies: as a system, it ceases to function. Thus, a tree is not a self-contained system.

a

Concentric and overlapping frames focus our attention on what is common to both and redefine the "common place" by that which is not common to either.

its referent, and presents both to us as one single statement. It is not a pipe, but a representation of a pipe—the frame clearly shows us that fact. It is not a

"Reality" provoke endless debate because we do not agree on what they signify. Body parts like "upper lip" turn out to have unexpected (though

of course reasonable) counterparts in other languages (in Japanese not *kuchibiru no ue* "upper lip", but *hana no shita* "under the nose")⁵.

Verbs, which often slice up non-discontinuous actions or ad- here to certain classes of things, can also turn out to be unexpectedly different. The English verb "break" has as many as

twenty Japanese partial-counterparts, one of which, *oru*, vividly illustrates how different inter- linguistic signifieds can be:

inside the frame. And here is the catch: he cannot stay inside the frame: everything that he uses—images, statements, ideas—even colours and brush-

statement, but an artistic rendering of a statement—or is it?

For the frame cannot cut off either element completely from its larger context. For we, as viewers outside the

frame, view the picture and say

(thinking of what the graphic represents), "But it is a pipe!" in response to the subscript (thinking of what it refers to).

Inside the frame the artist may play at God, but only so long as he remains

inside the frame: everything that he uses—images, statements, ideas—even colours and brush-

strokes—come from *outside* the frame, and thus the frame remains ever, always permeable: we cannot create things *ex nihilo*, there is nothing new under the sun, every system

that we create must remain open. *Les Deux mystères*, with its pipe floating outside the frame, reveals this.

But though it is by definition impossible to create a truly closed system, it might be possible to frame one at least locked from outside. All that needs to be done in this case is to place the observer inside the frame to begin with. And this is what Diderot does, locks himself in (or at least locks himself as narrator in)—and then lures us to listen in at the key-hole.

But like all great illusionists, Diderot leaves

The Japanese verb *oru*, on the other hand, is similar to *break* in the sense of dividing an object into two sections by the application of external force, but it is different in that it does not necessarily require that the two resulting sections actually be separate from each other. Precisely for this reason, one can use *oru* for things such as wire and knees (where *bend* would be called for in English). Twigs and bones, for which *oru* is also used, separate in two simply because they happen to lack elasticity.⁶

A difference like this could conceivably lead a Japanese speaker of English to translate the word “origami” (*oru* ⇒ *ori*[in compounds] + *kami*(paper) ⇒ *gami*) as “the art of breaking paper”!

Actually, it is unexpected manifestations like this that alert us to the presence of differing *signifieds*,

God is the ultimate frame.

In Japanese, *kami* means god.

Frame

Frames, religious allusion, and metaphysics all derive much of their power from the impression they give of participation in the ultimate, all-encompassing frame(-work(er)).

himself a way of escape—a number of ways, in fact: ways which, when seen, show up the containing frame for the illusion it actually is. The first is the title, “This

which might otherwise escape undetected. When the same *signifier* is being used to represent different concepts or just different parts of the

signified, such unnatural language usage, statements that don't seem to mesh with Reality, and points of disagreement (such as a theist, in dialogue about Reality with an atheist, including in it the miraculous) are often our only indications of a difference in individual or inter-linguistic *signifieds*.

When such differences are detected, ap-

peal is generally made to one of two sources to make one or both *signifieds* more like the other. If the

Is Not a Story”, which shows up both in its traditional place at the beginning of the work and three paragraphs in to the work. Of what is it a title? Of the work as a whole or just of the rest after the first three paragraphs? Where is the line to be drawn? Then, of course, there is the title's affirmation, which is both qualified and contradicted within the work itself: “...in the story which you are about to read (which is not a story,

or if it is, then a bad one)...” (*Story*, 17), and, “I [the storyteller] heard my good friend mutter, ‘The story may be brief, but the preliminaries are certainly long.’”

(*Story*, 18) Is the work a story or isn't it? If not, what is it? If so, why is it called "Not a Story" and not just "A Bad Story"? The frame is blurred.

Third, according to the translator's introduction, Diderot "deliberately mixes up real-life persons ... with invented ones" (*Story*, 10-11). Is this work story or history? Is the story-teller (non-story-teller?) Diderot or a persona? What kind of frame are we dealing with here? And second, as also noted in the translator's introduction, Diderot "is continually concerned with the margins

source of the difference is seen as an incomplete knowledge of language (as in the case of a child or a language-learner), the appeal is generally made to the "social fact" of language. In such a case, the determining factors appealed to will be the key differences that distinguish the concept in question from other concepts in the language, for, as Saussure puts it, "In language, as in any semiological system, whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it."⁷ Suzuki provides us with a good picture of this very process in action:

Suppose we show an infant a ball and say, "This is a ball." The little child might assume that *ball*

For lunch today, my mother made me a grilled cheese sandwich. "Here," she said, handing me a knife with which to cut it.

I didn't use it. I subscribe to Linus Van Pelt's view that cutting food "makes all the flavor leak out."

Maturity involves knowing when—and when not to cut.

concerned with unsettling any comfortable sense that his stories *are* safely 'framed.'" In fact, we might say they are "windowed", for through the main frame of

means "anything spherical." As a result he might start producing the word *ball* at the sight of any spherical object, even watermelons and peas. His parents will probably laugh and correct him. The child learns that the word *ball* cannot be used for peas or watermelons. As he continues using the word *ball* with different objects, sometimes eliciting praise, sometimes laughter, he gradually realizes that *ball* may be applied only to a certain type of object which satisfies certain conditions.⁸

If the two different *signifieds* stem instead from a difference in individual knowledge, ideas, or experience, the difference will be perceived either as ignorance or as disagreement, and appeal—if it is made at all—will be made to Reality. For appeal is not always made in such cases, especially

"This Is Not a Story", we can glimpse world as well as work.

But if Diderot "windows", Foucault, much more modernly, "Windows". By framing and re-framing questions, by re-sizing, repositioning frames, Foucault gives the illusion of, in the end, scrolling through the whole picture, much like the many prints of Paul Detlefsen's *Horse & Buggy Days*.

or 'frames' of his stories. For instance, at the beginning of 'This Is Not a Story,' we come in at the tail end of someone else's piece of storytelling. ... [H]e is and, "The other version—the last I assume..." (*Pipe*,

He starts with

"Two Pipes", the two versions of Magritte's *Not a Pipe* paintings: "The first version, that of 1926 I believe...", and, "The other version—the last I assume..." (*Pipe*,

15). First and last, one and other, alpha and omega—but it is illusion: “Actually, Magritte’s pipe and its wry subscript appear in a whole series of paintings and drawings.”

(endnote: *Pipe*, 60)

He expands the frame to take in and consider the caligram as well (“The Unraveled Caligram”). He expands it wider, to three artists (“Klee, Kandinsky, Magritte”), and then wider still in his opening sentence to “Western painting” (*Pipe*, 33), and then draws all language into the picture with “Burrowing Words”. Then completion, “Seven Seals”, and he ends

with a reference back to the beginning (“To Paint is Not to Affirm”), a summary, and, finally, last of all, a prophecy (“A day will come...”—*Pipe*, 54).

in cases perceived as disagreement—whether or not an appeal is made will depend heavily both on the characters of the two individuals involved and on their circumstances. Of course the appeal to Reality will almost certainly be made through language, but it will usually be made with some reference to whatever the one perceives the other’s concept of Reality to be. Thus, in dialogue about what *signifiers* actually (or should actually) signify, our concept of the *signified* exists in a state of

at least four-fold dynamic tension between (1) itself, (2) our concept of the other’s concept of the *signified*,

Scattered throughout Foucault’s *Pipe* are further framing moves. *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*’s graphic portrayed textually and text portrayed graphically

(3) our concept of the other’s concept of Reality, and (4) our own concept of Reality. One might even add Reality itself as a fifth fold in the cloth (particularly if some form of investigation and/or experimentation is introduced into the dialogue). If one convinces the other that his concept (or, less likely, that his concept of Reality) meshes less perfectly with Reality than his own, the other will often (but not always) alter his concept to make it more in accord with the first person’s.

To know a word’s meaning, know the phrase it is in. And to know a phrase’s meaning, know the sentence it’s in. And a sentence, the paragraph. And a paragraph, the work.

And

a work, the language. And a language, its speakers. And a speaker, his neighbours. And a people, their culture. And a culture, its environment. And an environment, Reality.

So it is that our limited *signifieds* expand and shift constantly, towards each other, within and towards the

all of these frames. That is beyond the pale of my discourse. The target framed in my cross-hairs has been to show the ubiquity of such framing. Framing is

(thrice) in “The Unraveled Caligram” (*Pipe*, 22-28). The trinity of artists in which Magritte’s art balances that of the alliterative pair, Klee and Kandinsky (*Pipe*, 35). The “complete” consideration of *Les Deux mystères*’s seven statements (*Pipe*, 48-49). The five-point summary of Magritte’s method (*Pipe*, 54).

This is not to say anything about the validity or the invalidity of any or

essential to the art of communication. Words are frames. But, implicit in all this has been the crux of the matter: *our* frames are limited and, thus, in some sense, illusory.

Frames conceal the essential interconnectedness of all things and draw our attention to limited, finite, and thus apparently comprehensible sections of the Whole. But, not being God, not being infinite, this is all any of us can ever comprehend. And this very act of limited selection forces us to consider the interconnectedness of the things so selected and thus gives some minute picture of part of the interconnectedness of the Whole. This is what Foucault does by solidly and repeatedly framing and re-framing in *This Is Not a Pipe*. Diderot,

“social fact” of our language, and, ultimately (we hope), towards Reality and a more complete understanding of it. The more complex the *signified*, the more it will shift. We can handle this ambiguity (and learn other languages) because, while we cannot see our differing *signifieds* directly, the accidents of their accidents (pardon the pun) make us aware of their differences, which we then can explore together in other (usually simpler) terms. So our individual language, if jotted in pencil, can slowly bring us together into a much-greater Reality, or, if penned in ink, can enclose and keep us apart.

conversely, by blurring, eliding, and off-centering his own frame-work thus reveals the limitations of framing, and Magritte likewise, but by Foucault’s

method.

I, of course, have employed the same methods —what else is there left to employ? —and have knit all the substance of this frame-work together in such a way as to make framing appear as the only and greatest technique. It is, of course, illusion —and not so, simultaneously.

¹Tao Te Ching, fr. sections 1, 4, and 56.

²Course in General Linguistics, p.13.

³By “Reality” I mean the Everything (/Tao) that we only partially

experience and call “life”, which is independent of us, yet in which we participate and even, to some small extent, shape.

⁴See his discussion of linguistic value and difference. *Linguistics*, pp.114-117.

⁵Suzuki, *Japanese and the Japanese*, p.58.

⁶Ibid, p.20.

⁷*Linguistics*, p.121.

⁸*Japanese*, pp.39-40.

Note: Full bibliography available upon request.

And Reality, God.

To know God, know Reality. And to know Reality... know the Word.

To know text, know context.

The Word

Is

The Frame.

To know context, know text.

The pun is the lowest form of humour because it foundational to all humour: it shows us the essential un-framability of the most basic unit of language: the frame.

Picture-title, Etc.
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