

Michel Foucault on René Magritte: Embracing the Treason of What We Teach

Charles Bingham, Jason Careiro, Antew Dejene, Alma Krilic, and Emily Sadowski
Simon Fraser University

In René Magritte's well-known painting, *The Treason of Images*, a pipe appears with handwritten words below, stating, "This is not a pipe." Obviously, the painting is meant to provoke. There *is* a pipe in this painting. But of course, it is only a *representation* of a pipe. So when the words state that "this is not a pipe," they remind us that the pipe in this painting is just that — a painted pipe. It is not a real pipe, not a pipe that one could smoke. They also remind us that the word "this" in the same sentence is no more than a pronoun. The word "this," too, is not a pipe.

Some thirty years after *The Treason of Images*, Magritte painted a second rendition of this tableau, entitled *The Two Mysteries*. In this second version, the pipe, and the words, are drawn on a blackboard standing on an easel. Suspended in air in front of the blackboard is another, larger pipe but without any words below it. The provocations multiply. Not only is the blackboard image "not a pipe," not only is the word "this" not a pipe, but now the whole ensemble on this blackboard is also "not a pipe" because it is simply an ensemble on a black board. And of course, even the larger, suspended pipe, even if it is more realistic than the blackboard image, is also not a *real* pipe, not one that can be smoked.

Perhaps the most famous commentary on Magritte's two pipe paintings is offered by Michel Foucault in his short book entitled, *This is Not a Pipe*.¹ Widely read and widely cited, Foucault's interpretation of these paintings can be squarely placed within his poststructuralist project of troubling what he calls "the sovereignty of the signifier."² Foucault, especially during the late 1960s, was trying to demonstrate that the relationship between signifier and signified is more complicated than generally accepted. That is to say, words are not related in some simple way to what they are supposed to represent. For Foucault, these paintings by Magritte do indeed trouble the sovereignty of the signifier. As he points out in his commentary, the word "pipe" does not have a simple relation to any actual pipe. The word "pipe" in these paintings illustrates that signifiers are by no means sovereign. These works of Magritte show treason toward the signifier's sovereignty.

Yet while Foucault's commentary on these paintings has been well recognized, especially among philosophers and art theorists, there has been little mention of the following fact: In this book, Foucault actually gives an *educational* interpretation of Magritte's work. He reminds us that these works have educational import. As he notes, there is an *instructor* implied in these paintings, especially in the second version.

In what follows, we will extend Foucault's educational interpretation of Magritte's work. First, we intend to show how Foucault's particular educational interpretation derives from his more extensive philosophical critique of representation.

Second, we will set this interpretation of Magritte's art in the context of recent educational theory, theory that critiques the representational nature of teaching and learning. We will use Gert Biesta's work as exemplary. But as we will argue, Biesta's position is usefully augmented by Foucault and Magritte. In the end, we contend that educators would do well to take heed of Foucault's analysis of Magritte's art. Educators would do well to embrace the critique of representation begun by Magritte and Foucault. As we will argue, it is important for educators to embrace the treason of what is taught.

THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT OF MAGRITTE'S PIPES

Writing about the second version of this painting, *The Two Mysteries*, Foucault offers the following observation:

Everything is solidly anchored within a pedagogic space. A painting "shows" a drawing that "shows" the form of a pipe; a text written by a zealous instructor "shows" that a pipe is really what is meant. We do not see the teacher's pointer, but it rules throughout — precisely like his voice, in the act of articulating very clearly, "This is a pipe." (NP, 29–30)

Here in the book's second chapter, Foucault first introduces the idea that Magritte has painted a pedagogical space, and for the next 750 words, right through to the end of the chapter, he takes it as a given that one should interpret this painting as if there is a teacher who is explaining to his or her students what one should see — or not see — in these paintings of pipes.

Foucault's teacherly interpretation of Magritte follows this logic: He imagines that in the second painting there is a teacher demonstrating something about a pipe. The teacher demonstrates his point by doing what all good teachers do. He draws a pipe on the blackboard. Then, satisfied that he has drawn a good pipe, the teacher says, "This is a pipe." "But why have we introduced the teacher's voice?," Foucault asks. "Because scarcely has he stated, 'This is a pipe,' before he must correct himself and stutter, 'This is not pipe, but a drawing of a pipe ...'" (NP, 30). The teacher then writes on the blackboard not the obvious, not what he had wanted initially to say, but the unobvious, just the opposite. On the blackboard he writes, "this is not a pipe." He *must* write the opposite because his demonstration does not create a real pipe; it rather creates the *representation* of a pipe.

However, no sooner has the teacher written these words on the blackboard than "a vapor has just risen, little by little taking shape and now creating, precisely and without doubt, a pipe. 'A pipe, a pipe,' cry the students" (NP, 30). The students will not listen to the teacher's disavowals. They refuse to believe that they do not see a pipe overhead, this, in spite of the teacher's continued obstinacy that no pipe is actually there. The teacher knows that the pipe created by a vapor "is itself merely a drawing. It is *not* a pipe. No more on the board than above it, the drawing of the pipe and the text presumed to name it find nowhere to meet and be superimposed," writes Foucault (NP, 30–31). And finally he reminds us that the blackboard upon which the teacher has mounted both his demonstration and his disavowal, this blackboard has "beveled and clearly rickety mounts" (NP, 31). "The easel has but to tilt, the frame to loosen, the painting to tumble down, the words to be scattered ... The common place — banal work of art or everyday lesson — has disappeared" (NP,

31). The whole ensemble of Magritte's painting, Foucault reminds us, is as susceptible to failure as the lecture of an instructor whose students simply refuse to listen to his continued disavowals.

MAGRITTE AND FOUCAULT'S CRITIQUE OF REPRESENTATION

In order to see why Foucault is so intrigued with Magritte's pipes — and with their relationship to education — it is helpful to recall a bit of a background about Foucault's more general critique of representation. This critique of representation is best articulated in his essay, "The Discourse on Language." In this essay he describes the way in which modern thought about language has been hamstrung by a misunderstanding of the signifier. To put it plainly, people have mistakenly assumed that words offer clear windows onto the world. This dominance of the word-as-clear-window is what Foucault calls "the sovereignty of the signifier." Foucault emphasizes that things are not so simple when it comes to language. Words do not serve as windows onto things, but are instead active participants in the world. Language contains contradictions and world-effects just as other material aspects of this world do. Language has bandwidth; it is not a thin glass pane. Contrary to what dominant theories of language would have us believe, language is *not* on a different ontological plane than other material objects. It is not ontologically distinct from other things — be these things trees, horses, or sticks and stones.

This is why Foucault calls language "discourse." Describing discourse, he notes that there are "barely imaginable powers and dangers behind this activity, however humdrum and gray it may seem." Within discourse, there are "conflicts, triumphs, injuries, dominations and enslavements that lie behind words, even when long use has chipped away their rough edges." Language-as-discourse does work that may include, but also far out-steps, the role of signifying. It is a site where ideology, power, *and* representation are contested. Discourse, as Foucault puts it, has "ponderous, awesome materiality" (*DL*, 216).

Foucault further points out that the "clear window" account of language tends to shore up major philosophical themes such as the notion of "the founding subject" (*DL*, 228–229). Discussing the relationship between "the founding subject" and the sovereignty of the signifier, Foucault explains:

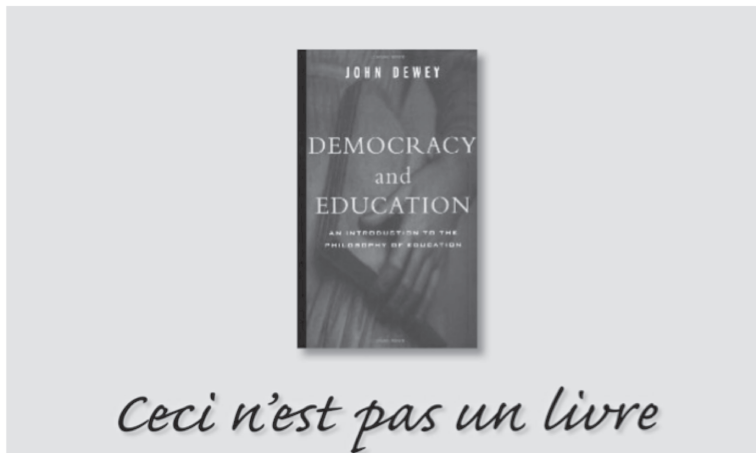
The task of the founding subject is to animate the empty forms of language with his objectives; through the thickness and inertia of empty things, he grasps intuitively the meanings lying within them ... In this relationship with meaning, the founding subject has signs, marks, tracks, letters at his disposal. But he does not need to demonstrate these passing through the singular instance of discourse. (*DL*, 277)

It is not difficult to see in Foucault's philosophy of language the basis for his appreciation of Magritte's paintings. In Magritte's paintings, we witness an artistic staging that undermines the sovereignty of the signifier. Magritte's pipes are particularly treasonous toward "the founding subject." The words in the phrase, "This is not a pipe," are disturbing precisely because they seem to come from a speaking subject. But if they *do* come from a speaking subject, then they undercut the intentions of that very person. It would seem that someone has said, "This is not a pipe," yet the artifice of the painting prohibits the same person from being in

control of his or her utterance. If somebody has said, “This is not a pipe,” then that person is both dead wrong and dead right. There is a pipe in the picture, so the person is dead wrong. But the pipe in the picture is not an actual pipe, so the person is dead right. In Foucault’s terms, the utterance, “This is not a pipe,” is indeed complicated by the “ponderous, awesome materiality” of Magritte’s painting (*DL*, 216). If, as Foucault writes, “the task of the founding subject is to animate the empty forms of language with his objectives,” then the founding subject has faltered in Magritte’s pipes (*DL*, 277). There has been treason committed against the signifier’s sovereignty.

THE PIPE AND THE CLASSROOM

Now let us put Foucault’s more general critique of representation into classroom terms. As a teacher, I point to something. Maybe not a pipe but a book, say *Democracy and Education* by John Dewey. This educational situation is illustrated in the following image:



It is the first day of class. I am excited to study Dewey’s book with my students. The first thing I do is distribute a course syllabus. Pointing to the syllabus, I say, “This semester we will be reading this book, *Democracy and Education*, by John Dewey.” I have written the name of the book on my course syllabus. The book’s name rests on the syllabus like a pipe that is something different from a pipe. “Please look at the syllabus and you will see that we will be discussing this book in the third week of class,” I say. Then I stammer and recant. “No . . . What I mean is not that we will be discussing *this* book. This book is of course just a book’s title on a piece of paper.”

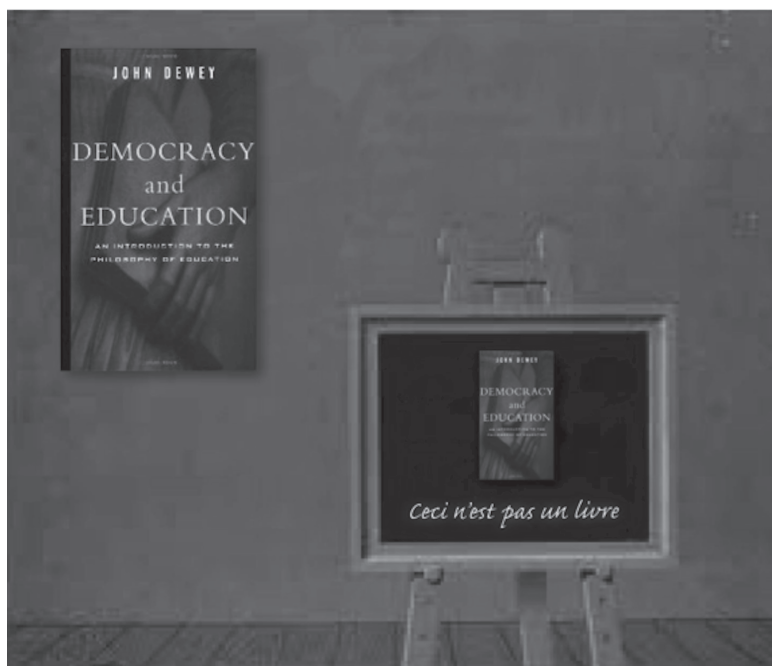
One of my student’s intervenes: “Please don’t worry. We know what you mean. Of course we will be reading this book.”

“No,” I argue, “I am very serious. We cannot read this book. My syllabus is not the book itself!”

“Yes,” says the student intervening again, “we know what you mean to say. Can you please go on now and explain the rest of what we will be doing this semester?”

If “the task of the founding subject is to animate the empty forms of language with his objectives,” then I have, like the instructor in Magritte’s paintings, proven that the founding subject almost always prevails — in spite of the intentions of the teacher (*DL*, 277). As a teacher, I have failed to get my point across. I cannot convince my students that there is a crucial difference between, on the one hand, the words on my syllabus representing *Democracy and Education*, and, on the other, the book itself. The founding subject has prevailed insofar as I have failed. My words have animated a belief in my students that there is indeed a book to be read, and that, in spite of my quibbling, they will read the book that I have introduced. In fact, my personal intentions have been undermined precisely because my students are convinced that my intentions cannot be undermined! The individual cannot, him or herself, wish away the clear-window presumptions of the founding subject. My students have reminded me of the fact that my intentions are one thing, but the sovereignty of the signifier is another.

And then in week three of the course, we read the actual book, *Democracy and Education*. We experience the educational equivalent of Magritte’s second pipe painting entitled “The Two Mysteries.” The first mystery was the syllabus’s words describing — or rather not describing — the book to be read. The second mystery is the book itself, the one we actually read in week three. It is like the “real” pipe suspended in air, and is not unlike the following image:



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I can hear my students saying: “There, you see? We were right! We are now reading the book you said we would not read. We are reading the book that you described in the syllabus. We now have an experience of the book itself.”

“But this is not the ‘book itself,’” I reply. There is only us — you the students and me the instructor — reading the book in this particular classroom on this particular day.

“Please,” my students reply, “don’t try to deny that we are reading this book. This is Dewey’s book. It’s the real thing.”

I shrug my shoulders and give up. Like the words on Magritte’s easel, my words are not convincing. What Foucault teaches us in his analysis of Magritte is that the object under study in a classroom is always indebted to the sovereignty of the signifier. As a teacher, the words used during my instruction of some object under study will most likely be taken as clear windows onto the object itself. Furthermore, the teacher is normally bound to the position of founding subject. Even if the teacher disavows the sovereignty of the signifier, such a disavowal will fall flat. Saying “this is not our object of study” doesn’t fly. One cannot commit treason against words *by means of* words.

HOW CAN A TEACHER BE TREASONOUS?

So Foucault’s analysis offers little hope for the teacher who wants to use words to disavow his or her content. Indeed, it is Magritte’s paintings themselves — and not the teacher with the words “this is” or “this is not” — that are treasonous. So an obvious question remains: How can one be treasonous toward an object of study? We suggest looking for an answer to this question within Magritte’s work itself. Magritte troubles words and pipes. How can a teacher do the same? How can a teacher be as treasonous as Magritte?

First of all, one must depart from the words of Magritte’s teacher. One must leave the words of avowal and disavowal. On one hand, the teacher says, “This is John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*.” This statement affirms the sovereignty of the signifier. It is a statement supremely confident in its ability to depict an object of study, and thus not treacherous in the least. On the other, the teacher says, “This is *not* John Dewey’s book.” Here is a disavowal of the signifier: a statement so sure in its *inability* to depict an object that it has the circumspect self-consciousness of being “merely” words on a page. Somewhere between “this is John Dewey’s book” and “this is *not* John Dewey’s book” lies the treason of what we teach.

Next, one might do well by following Magritte’s artistic lead. Importantly, Magritte creates an aesthetic staging of the teacher’s lesson. It is this *artifice* that commits the treason. His pipes will never be pipes because they are elements in two works of art. Similarly, one can be treasonous toward a book if one can put the book itself in a position where it troubles the signifier’s reign in the same way that Magritte’s two paintings trouble this reign. As a teacher, one might present a book at the same time that one challenges the status of the relationship between the book and our words. One might present a book as something *different* than a book that one can smoke. This means intentionally presenting the book as part of a school

experience that is saturated with discourse. It means highlighting the artifice of the classroom just as much as Magritte highlights the aesthetic staging of his pipe painting. In a sense, Magritte's pipes paintings are successful precisely because they highlight the artifice of their own presentation. What we are suggesting is that Magritte helps to highlight the artifice of the very process of teaching a book. We are suggesting that one demonstrates, through classroom staging, that Dewey's book will never be exactly what we say it is. We are suggesting that we demonstrate how Dewey's book will always be indebted to educational staging. We suggest that one demonstrate how the artifice of teaching and learning have already removed the possibility that the book will be itself.

How might this be done? A few examples come to mind. In order to emphasize the artifice of teaching, one can imagine teaching John Dewey's book as if whatever interpretation arrived at is "our class's" interpretation only. This means teaching Dewey as if an educational interpretation is bounded rather than universal. It means teaching Dewey's book as if the book will — and must — take on a new life when it is read in situations beyond the classroom. Or, one can imagine teaching Dewey's book as if its interpretation, its content, must never be shared with anyone outside of class. This means teaching the book as if it must be our secret, and ours alone. It means treating Dewey's book as one often treats a novel: as a private experience. Alternatively, one can imagine teaching Dewey's book as if its words must never be quoted or said aloud as long as the class is still in session. This would mean treating the classroom as a place where the actual words of a given book are taboo. It means refusing to ground a classroom reading in the text itself.

Or if the preceding examples sound extreme, one can imagine teaching a book with the following instructions on how to read: "Please read this book as poetry. Do not worry if you do not understand it. Treat it like a poem inasmuch as one never really claims to understand a poem completely. Do not try to understand all of this book. Simply choose your favorite parts."³ All of the above suggestions enable the artifice of the classroom to stand in relief. It is not suggested that one *deny* Dewey's text, but rather that one stage a reading of the text in a way that is treasonous to the signifier. And when we recommend this sort of treason, we mean to imply that it might be accomplished in any classroom, with any object of study. We use Dewey's book as just one example.

ANOTHER EDUCATIONAL CRITIQUE OF REPRESENTATION:

FROM COMMUNICATION TO THE TREASON OF WHAT WE TEACH

At this point, it is helpful to look at the work of another contemporary educational theorist who has, like Michel Foucault, used a critique of representational language to question educational communication. Gert Biesta has done so eloquently. In fact, we consider this essay not as a refutation of the prior work done on pedagogical representation — or on pedagogical anti-representation — but as an extension of it. So after summarizing the work of Biesta, we will show how his anti-representational insights are augmented — and complexified — by Foucault and Magritte.

Gert Biesta has drawn on Alphonso Lingis and Zygmunt Bauman, among others, to distinguish representational communication from other sorts of communication. Biesta claims — and we are in complete agreement — that the most crucial moments in education come not when one conforms to representational communication, but when one moves beyond such language. A “language of responsibility” is, for Biesta, one such non-representational form of language.⁴ A language of responsibility takes into account not the content of what we say, but the fact *that we say something*. As an example, one can think of a parent communicating with a child before the child has attained language. While we usually think of communication in terms of saying *something*, there are of course many times — and communicating with an infant is one such time — when we are called upon to communicate even if meaning is absent. For Biesta, this is an incredibly important type of communication because it “implies that the voice with which you speak to the one with whom you have nothing in common is not a borrowed or representative voice, but has to be your *own* voice and no one else’s.”⁵ That is to say, when we say *something*, we most often speak of some content that has been spoken of before by others. However, when we speak without saying anything in particular, then we do not use the words or voice of another, but must use our own, unique voice.

Biesta connects his critique of representation to education by noting that a language of responsibility is most often disregarded in school settings precisely because teachers and students are usually supposed to talk about *something*. They are supposed to talk about curriculum. And the curriculum they are supposed to talk about is usually decided in advance, before the talking ever begins. Students and teachers are generally called upon to represent curriculum that has already been represented. They are generally called upon to borrow words that represent something in particular, something prior. They are called upon to borrow words that are not their own. In the face of such a representational mindset, what “we can do [should do] is to make sure there are at least opportunities within education to meet and encounter what is different, strange, and other; and also that there are opportunities for our students to really respond, to find their own way of speaking.”⁶ Biesta suggests that we create chances for non-representational communication to occur in educational spaces dominated by representation.

THAT THE CLASSROOM MIGHT BE TREASONOUS

Returning to Foucault for a moment, some might argue that Foucault’s analysis of the pipes happens by way of analogy — by saying that the paintings are *like* an educational situation. Some might say that putting Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* in place of Magritte’s pipe is a fun analogy, but hardly convincing, or, that such a substitution is sufficient but not necessary. But we take Foucault’s educational interpretation in a much stronger sense. We would say that Foucault had no choice but to interpret these paintings in an educational way. Why? Because the educational institution is a bastion for the sovereignty of the signifier. If one is to take Magritte’s critique of representation to a place where it can be the most critical, then the most logical place to take it is to school. School is the one place *most* likely to

shore up the very sorts of representational practices that Foucault and Magritte aim to problematize.

And if this is so, if it is the case that educational spaces are so rigidly governed by the reign of the signifier, then something — something perhaps unexpected — follows. Namely, that educational spaces are also ripe for enacting treason on what we teach. Because the school is highly saturated with representational practices, there is all the more possibility that one can teach things in such a way that the founding subject can be put into question! If Magritte's work must be taken to school — and we agree with Foucault that it must — it should also be remembered that the school serves a significant role in Magritte's art. The school provides a compelling scene where representation can — and we would say should — be questioned.

The above conclusions suggest a different educational strategy than the one offered by Biesta. Different not in the sense that it is contradictory, but in the sense that it is an addition. It is different insofar as it offers a bit more hope even for models of education that “think of learning as the acquisition of something that already exists.”⁷ Why more hope? Because, while educational spaces are indeed a bastion for the signifier, this very fact also means that such spaces are also ripe for the subversion of representation. This means that there is more to speaking uniquely — or treasonously — than carving non-representational spaces out of representational spaces. While Biesta is correct in calling for non-representational communication in education, in calling for the unique — rather than borrowed — voices of students to emerge, it is *additionally* important to advocate the treasonous dimension of speaking uniquely *about* something. This is what we have described above as an accentuation of classroom artifice.

To conclude, we have argued in this essay that Michel Foucault and René Magritte provide a lesson for educators. Please be treasonous, they teach. Why is treason necessary? Because education has too much allegiance to the reign of the signifier. Communication between teacher and student too often ignores what Foucault calls the “ponderous, awesome materiality” of discourse. In the face of such allegiance, there are various ways to try to communicate otherwise. One way is to encourage our students to communicate without reiterating the content of others. In this essay, we have outlined another way, the way of treason. Treason is unique in that it embraces, rather than eschews, the artifice inherent in education. It causes one to remember that the classroom is itself our easel, and that our content — like Magritte's pipe — neither is, nor is not, content that one might smoke.

1. Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983). This work will be cited in the text as *NP* for all subsequent references.

2. Michel Foucault, “The Discourse on Language,” in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 229. This work will be cited in the text as *DL* for all subsequent references.

3. In fact, the authors of this essay have taught books this way and have found it to be very powerful.

4. Gert Biesta, “The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common: Education and the Language of Responsibility,” *Interchange* 35, no. 3 (2004): 307–324.

5. Ibid., 316.

6. Ibid., 321.

7. Ibid., 320.