Cayley, John. "The Gravity of the Leaf: Phenomenologies of Literary Inscription in Media-constituted Diegetic Worlds." *Grammalepsy: Essays on Digital Language Art*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 115–132. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501335792.ch-009>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 07:33 UTC.

Copyright © John Cayley 2018. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

8

The Gravity of the Leaf: Phenomenologies of Literary Inscription in Media-constituted Diegetic Worlds

Particular arts, especially when regarded as “cultural practices,” are constituted in terms of the media with which they engage. Quite clearly, with a nod to Clement Greenberg, in many realms of practice, “painting” is constituted by “paint.” Hence, I take “literary” in the phrase “literary arts” to characterize a manifold, culturally instituted system of media within which arts of language may be represented and embodied. However, the relationship of language, let alone language art, to its media is inherently and profoundly problematic. This problematic is frequently engaged by theoretical discourses of many kinds, and hinges, I believe, on the necessarily problematic interplay between ideality and contingent representation that is a *sine qua non* of symbolic practice.¹ In this chapter, I approach this problematic primarily in terms of such practice but in a manner that has significant implications for theory, specifically for any theory that relates language and media or, in particular, speaks of language as media. I argue that aspects of the problematic become literally visible to us when we are able to see that language always comes to us from a world that is distinct from the *media-constituted diegetic world* within which it is represented. Whenever we practice language, to give and receive its objects of poesis, we must always also enact what I theorize as a diegetic break. This phenomenon does not always obtain in the practice and reception of arts associated with other media, with architecture providing, arguably, the example of an artistic practice that has a human currency commensurate with that of language and yet instantiates the starkest contrast, relative to

language, in terms of how we may live with and within a particular aesthetic practice. We live in architecture without departing from a world in which we live. We live in (aesthetic) language only in so far as we leave the world in which the language is embodied.² If this is the case, then it has always been the case, and I believe that poetry and poetic practice has been one of the sites of greatest awareness of the phenomena associated with these relations—perhaps, paradoxically, precisely because of its long-standing attention to form and presentation—both traditional form such as rhythmic structure, and rhyme and experimental, innovative, indeed, disjunctive form—as a function of materiality—which term I take to refer to media in the broadest possible sense. However, as poetry moves “beyond text” we are re-confronted with the problem of giving a home to the other-worldly in the new media-constituted diegetic worlds within which, all-too-suddenly, we find ourselves living, albeit, to some extent, artificially.³ Because language has been constrained to the mind, the voice, and latterly to the “surface of the leaf,” we have internalized its being-in-all-possible-worlds as such. When it appears in “new media” we are re-sensitized to the experience of its never-having-belonged-here.

The world within which I am writing

In this chapter, I put forward formulations of certain relations between language and media, and these I consider to have general applicability, regardless of the actual media with which we are concerned. Nonetheless, I am making use of media-specific practice and experience, and I refer to prior critical engagements with the issues and problems addressed and these are also media-specific. In both cases the media which concern us are visual. The thoughts and arguments which follow are prompted by my work in Brown University’s Cave, where my students and I continue to address the problem of creating work that pretends to a literary aesthetic in audiovisually immersive programmable media. Although the Brown Cave is, as stated, an *audiovisual* device—the systems we use are equipped with 5.1 surround sound—I do not, in this chapter, speak directly to the relationship between literal art and media that are constituted by sound. The discussion is constrained to Cave work as immersive 3D graphics, as visual media.

There is a useful conceptual and lexical rhyme between the technical vocabulary of 3D graphics and the theory of media-constituted diegetic worlds that I formulate. In 3D graphics, the gestalt of a graphics system’s various projected images is, together, referred to as a “world.” In the case of Brown’s Cave, a four-walled device, this “world” is constituted by two times four projections: one for each eye (left and right) times four for each wall (left, front, right, and floor in the case of Brown’s Cave). Shuttering

glasses are worn by the Cave user and these glasses synchronize with the otherwise imperceptibly alternating left-eye, right-eye images, filtering the corresponding projections into the corresponding eye in order to achieve a simulation of stereo vision. The (two times) four wall-projected images are generated, and, as necessary, corrected—in terms of perspective and the deformations required to compensate for the flat projection surfaces of a cube-shaped room—in order to provide a coherent graphic “world” for one particular pair of glasses-wearing human eyes, whose position in the artificial space is tracked such that the system can respond to its movement through the “world” in “real time” (or rather in the “time” of the graphic world). This brief description of the Cave introduces the specific visual world within which we write, and into which we are asked to bring literal art, literary aesthetics (Figure 8.1). We are, in this artificial visual space, writing digital media, and our focus will be on the way that language appears in this visual world and how it functions.

When we write for the Cave, we write—bracketing any audio component within the scope of the present arguments—for a world of images. As we

FIGURE 8.1 Photographs taken during a showing of *Glitch*, 2008, by Jason Lee, Ben Nicholson, and Jinaabah Showa: writing for the Cave immersive 3D audiovisual environment, Brown University, Center for Computation and Visualization. Photographs courtesy of Francisco J. Ricardo.

have seen above, this suggestive impression is borne out by a technological analysis underlying the constitution of the device—of its particular system of media—and rhyming on the word “world.”⁴ The predominant material support for writing, conventionally understood, is, of course, graphics. This is just one of many reasons for a host of perennial inquiries—both theoretical and pragmatic—into the relationship between word and image, language and visuality. In a sense, this chapter takes yet another tilt at this intractable problem. Apart from our arguments’ engagement with actual poesis in the graphics world of the Cave itself, we will work with a number of theoretical statements on word and image, in particular W. J. T. Mitchell on metapictures and Michel Foucault’s *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*.⁵ However, the statements of this chapter have a different trajectory, not in the direction of a “pictorial turn,” to evoke Mitchell’s phrase, but an address to writing in visual digital media that is focused on language, its aesthetic potential, and on questions of how language dwells with us in “new,” or in a designation that I prefer, “breaking” media. I claim that the relations between language and media that are revealed in our work and the discussions here are backwardly compatible with those in conventional literary media and require us both to reformulate relations that have become subliminal or culturally internalized, and to reconsider or reframe precisely the kind of discussion of articulated, linguistically implicated visuality that is undertaken by Foucault and Mitchell.

Working in the Cave finds us within a relatively rarefied and extreme, test-case environment. Although the technology has been available to scientists for some time, it is rarely accessible to aesthetic practitioners, still more rarely accessible to those who self-identify as literary artists. In the midst of a culture where we are ever-increasingly obliged to confront and explore the relationship between art in digital and new media and art as conventionally understood, attempting to make literary art in the Cave sets many issues and problems of mediated aesthetic practice, including but not only those discussed here, into high relief—as I aim to demonstrate. The spirit of the age seems to demand that we attempt to bring all art into those new forms of practice that programmable systems of intermedial representation offer us, to explore, indeed, the *language of new media*.⁶ Confusions arise when so-called “new” media are configured to represent “old” media, a cultural trope now widely recognized as remediation.⁷ Happily, writing or even just “placing” linguist “material” in an immersive 3D artificial world is something that is less ambiguously novel. Phenomenologically, language, as graphic inscription, does not appear or dwell in our world of lived experience in the mode of objects having position, volume, structure, and so on, except in a manner that is highly constrained and fundamentally two-dimensional.⁸ My title, “the gravity of the leaf,” evokes an underlying cultural force that draws graphic linguistic materiality to the two-dimensional surface and holds it there still. This force is phenomenological and accumulative, a

function of the exigencies of graphically embodied symbolic practice that is addressed to humans. This force is strong and its strength is, I believe, borne out by the various ways in which we continue to read our now ubiquitous screens as page- or leaf-like surfaces rather than, for example, as spatial affordances, as symbolic architecture, shifting the shapes within which we live. Obviously, culture is changing, and this very aspect of writing to which I refer, somewhat polemically, is at the breaking edge of a wave. Finally exposed, “the gravity of the leaf” may nonetheless break down and may do so for some of the reasons that I set out below, because our understanding of the relationship of language and media must be reformulated, recast. Even the gravity of the leaf is relative to certain paradigms, especially the literary paradigms, of culture and history. In the first place, it can only have gathered its strength in a world where the graphical inscription of symbolic practice had been discovered and developed, and thence prevailed, proliferated, and become internalized as the familiar (leafy) world of print culture, now, perhaps already evolved to *printable* culture in the developed world.⁹ In the Cave the gravity of the leaf breaks down before our eyes and language is cut loose. It may still be rendered as, itself, lacking a third dimension but in so far as it is visible at all in the Cave’s graphics world it will be positioned in space, a strange object, perhaps floating in front of a pair of position-tracked, glasses-wearing eyes, legible as usual but situated, in terms of culture and aesthetics, *where* and in *what world*?

Imagine a letter floating before our eyes in the immersive visual space of the Cave, the representation of an atom of language, but presented to us in a new world, in a world of what I will call “breaking media.” This is a novel experience, a new phenomenology of language, and thus it would allow the proper application of the word “new” as in “new media.” The letter floating in space is not *remediation*; it is a novel mediation of language because it represents graphically embodied language in a way that is entirely unfamiliar, cut loose, as I put it, from the gravity of the leaf. Nonetheless I prefer to put forward “breaking media” as a term for the manifold systems of representation that such programmable devices offer both because it is less likely to be inaccurate (so-called new media often represents/remediates old media) and because the epithet is suggestive. Programmable and networked media break into public discourse, as does breaking news, and often in the same contemporary mode, occasionally itself breaking the news of its own advent. Digital media accelerate cultural changes and roll them into an ever-growing, breaking wave where we surf just beneath its spumy crest on an edge that is breaking but not necessarily leading or bleeding. Moreover, breaking media do often just break, in the programmer’s sense. They break themselves and they break legacy processes. It is both the case that familiar things that used to function no longer function in breaking media and that breaking media often breaks down in fits of innovation. But finally, these various breaks also contribute to what we discuss below and

what are proposed as media-constituted diegetic breaks, breaks in the world or worlds that, for one thing, allow language into the world itself and into the worlds that we make.

The representation of writing

Questions concerning materiality and embodiment have been very much to the fore in contemporary analyses and theories of artistic and critical practice. In so far as the trope of *immateriality* is associated with the realm of computation—along with the cultural production which computation has appropriated through remediation or has, itself, generated—there is a proportional effort to restate and critically reinstate its necessary materiality, an effort that is presumed to have aesthetic traction in critical discourse and is sometimes implicitly or explicitly heralded as part of a return of the repressed.¹⁰ By accepting that the digitization of a painting is not the painting we grow sensitive to these two speculative objects' distinct materialities, but we are left with the problem of accounting for their close notional or indeed visual relationships, the latter of which might be instantiated such that any and all differences between the objects are materially imperceptible to human and therefore human cultural vision. But the situation of (mediated) figurative painting does not directly address the sharper and arguably more fundamental problem of any materiality of language itself. What is the culturally perceptible ontological difference between this text digitized and this text printed? I want us to remain conscious that the question of the “materiality of language” and especially that of literary language underlies the discussion. However, I will wager that it proves more fruitful, in terms of both theory and practice, to examine the relationship between language and its instantiation in or as media.

*We may consider painting as media.*¹¹ Painting—focusing on non-conceptual painting—is, for the purposes of my argument, a media system addressed to the visible world and constituted by practices engaged primarily with the way the world is seen and made to be seen, both with those aspects of the materiality of things that makes them visible and with the material from which images of things can be made, including, among other things, paint. Especially given our critical texts of reference—Foucault, Mitchell concerned with a painting in this mode—we do well to establish a correspondence between painting as media and the more current understanding of media per se, in particular the new digital media within which we write. Painting is a media-constituted world within which discourses of various kinds may be played out and made visible for human interpretation and aesthetic engagement. These discourses are predominantly and naturally visual—the discourses of an image world—since they are realized in visual material

(typically and for the type of painting that concerns us here in solely visual material), but they may also be or become linguistic or symbolic in one of at least two ways: by way of special cases—as in much of Magritte’s work—where language is inscribed or represented, but also, arguably, in terms of the very “pictorial turn” posited by Mitchell, by means of which practices of visibility are so prevalent and articulated in the culture that they literalize this articulation and “speak” with the clarity and force of conventional linguistic discourse.¹²

It is more difficult to consider writing as media in an analogous sense. To unravel certain aspects of this difficulty is precisely our aim, and so to make any direct attempt now would risk tightening the knot we are attempting to loosen and describe. Suffice it to say that the material supports for writing are severely constrained in the worlds of human material culture—graphic inscription, oral practices, articulate thought. Whereas, for example, the diverse materialities of the media available to visual representation are commensurate with those of the visual world—infinite means to represent infinite images—the infinite subjects of linguistic representation obviously and infinitely exceed the materialities of the constrained media which bear this world-making language.

New digital media are not just to be considered as media; they are media. The existence of media that are able to represent other media or to represent artifacts that were made in a traditional medium as (new) media (remediation) is, in a sense, the phenomenon that allows us to see older conventional media as such; to see that painting, for example, is media, not just a medium. Subsequently, we struggle to distinguish, materially and critically, between conventional media(tion) and any corresponding new (re)media(tion): the painting and its digitization, as a specific exemplary instance. In the case of literary art, as indicated above, such struggles are, typically, futile. It is pointless to insist on a materially significant difference between these words as they might appear to you on paper and as they might appear to you on screen.¹³ Thus, whenever we do consider differences in writing and mediated writing to be critically or materially significant, we tend to speak of writing *in* new digital media, as if writing were not undergoing remediation, but as if it were being *newly* mediated by removal from an unmediated condition and translation *into* media.

I am going to write about René Magritte’s famous painting, *La trahison des images*, 1929 (*The Treachery of Images*, or simply (*The*) *Treachery*) in what follows. Some of my remarks may not seem to display a comprehensive sense of the art historical and art philosophical context in which this much-discussed work has been situated. In part this is a matter of my professional experience and inclination, but it is chiefly the result of my treating this painting as *a specific instance of media device* within the overall media-constituted world of painting. Certain properties and methods of this device manifest remarkable correspondences with those of the Cave, to an

instance, that is, of new, breaking media within which we also write and produce images. To extend the analogy from object-oriented programming, Magritte's painting and the Cave may both be seen to be derived from an abstract "class" of media devices.

The Treachery is an oil painting, unambiguously a work of visual art, although one that directly addresses the relationship between image and word. As a media device, it is indeed unambiguous; it belongs in the world of the visual. Apart from its evident materiality as an oil painting on canvas, the work will be viewed in an art museum, itself an architecturally (spatially/visually) constituted world where painting and other fine art are typically displayed. Setting to one side for the moment the products of such groups as Art & Language or conceptual work (and all the discussion here), we don't go to a gallery to read (a book) or smoke (a pipe). As you look around the museum—the painting is now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—you will see it hung within a visually coherent world where it will not be out of place. Granted, it is a metapicture and it does, as we will reaffirm, disrupt diegesis, but not in its material form as an aspect of the media system of painting set within the visual/architectural media of the museum's gallery space. You don't look around the gallery and say to yourself, "That is not a painting. That is language, commentary, metastatement, graffiti, an acousmatic stain." Moreover, in terms of the first instance of critical response, the artist's own, we have the painting's title, *La trahison des images* (the treachery of images), not, notably, "la trahison des mots," not "the treachery of language." The title sums up an inclination of critical response to the painting as it is exemplified both by Foucault's essay and by Mitchell's commentary. For both these commentators—despite the fact that their primary interest is the pursuit of language, discourse, the way that statements are made—this strange, simple, and strangely simple assemblage of graphic elements, including language, is still, obviously, a picture.¹⁴

Nonetheless, Magritte's *Treachery* does include, depict, address, and concern language. More than this, the painting is also, at least in part, writing. Perhaps, in fact, the work *is* writing? Initially, it is very easy and natural for us to say that, for example, the line of text—"Ceci n'est pas une pipe"—at the bottom of the painting is writing *in* visual media, writing *within* the media of painting. Why isn't it writing itself? Why couldn't we claim, for example, that the painting is dominated by this address to language and by its own actual instance of writing and that therefore, as a whole, *it is writing*, predominantly or in terms of a "deeper" interpretative or semiological reading, it is writing as media, and that, in fact, the image content of the picture is *in* written media, it is, in fact, imagery *within* the media of writing?

Of course, Magritte willfully, pointedly, if perhaps unconsciously, sets up this flip-flop, apparently symmetrical structure of complementary interpretations. In fact, he's already answered the question and so have

we. He *painted* the picture and we either see it in an art museum or see it reproduced as a painting that exists as such in the museum. Magritte's paintings are, very definitely, in a particular register, one that is not the usual register of painting, not even the usual register of surrealist painting if you think, for example, of Max Ernst or even of the de Chirico that Magritte revered. Neither Ernst nor de Chirico can be as immediately "read," catastrophically, in linguistic terms, the way we read Magritte. I believe, for instance, that Magritte's painting can be seen as the visual complement of concrete poetry, where my definition of concrete poetry is not simply an aesthetic linguistic work the specifics of whose visual (or non-linguistic) manifestation are significant and affective (that would be true of all writing in so far as it is represented graphically), but a linguistic work that engages materially with the rhetoric and aesthetics of the visual world and/or the world of (concrete) objects. Concrete poetry is language rendered in such a way as to appear as visual images or to behave like objects and, in a complementary manner, Magritte's paintings are images and objects rendered in such a way as to perform language acts or to appear to be language. Both practices, arguably, are culturally marginal, minority practices; exemplary perhaps, but neither typical nor central. The point I want to make here is that the apparent symmetry of the implied relationship between language and media is an illusion. Both Magritte's writing *in* the media of painting and the kind of writing *in* new digital media that underlies our own inquiry, ultimately, help us see this, and do this in part, I believe, by the very fact of spanning all the intervening critical, linguistic, and artistic exploration and practice which has continually addressed the same or related problematics.

In a sense, I am recasting and reworking the kind of semiological analyses of image and text that was undertaken by Roland Barthes and implicit in both Foucault and Mitchell.¹⁵ Here I will, through Barthes, anchor my use of the elaborate term "media-constituted diegetic world" before applying such thinking first to Magritte's *Treachery* and then to writing in immersive 3D graphics, to writing in new digital media. In the two essays that most concern me and which open Stephen Heath's translated selection *Image Music Text*, Barthes is mainly concerned with photography, "a continuous message," as he says, or "*a message without a code*."¹⁶ Barthes understands as well as anyone that "the image—grasped immediately by an inner metalanguage, language itself—in actual fact has no denoted state, is immersed for its very social existence in at least an initial layer of connotation, that of the categories of language."¹⁷ Nonetheless, for him, photography has a special relation to the world which he describes as being "continuous," syntagmatic with the world of (natural, phenomenological, human) experience.¹⁸ Photographs are both (actually and virtually) *in* our world, and appear to be (in a special, privileged sense) contiguous with its constitutive objects. For Barthes (one thinks also of Benjamin), "the photograph is not the last

(improved) term of the great family of images; it corresponds to a decisive mutation of informational economies.”¹⁹

But this isn’t exactly so. Barthes writes before the existence of sophisticated media history/archaeology, and before the prevalence of media constructed from abstract symbolic manipulation—programmable and networked media. He understands certain aspects of a special relationship between the media-constituted diegesis of photography and the diegesis of the world *per se* (although strictly, in my terms, the latter is always already composed from a manifold of media-constituted diegetic worlds), but Barthes considers that it is naturalized by syntagmatic “flow”—enabling a continuous diegesis—between photography and the world.²⁰ What Barthes proposes could not be the case even if photography were, in any sense, “perfect” or “natural.” Whatever photography is, it is always constituted by its media and not by a privileged relationship with the world, a relationship that is, in any case, necessarily interpretable, as Barthes demonstrates with great critical and ideological traction. However, in material terms and apart from any logic of argument, we can easily see that the representational world of what we ironically call “photographic naturalism” is, among other things, determined by characteristics of the type of focus that can be reproduced by the optics of lenses—depth of field—and that these clearly distinguish photographs, in terms of human optical experience, from the objects in the world that they are held to represent. Photography does not see the world as we do; we just agree that it does (for a relatively long historical period, admittedly crucial). As media change, however, we become ever less sure of photography’s “special (uncoded) relationship” with our visual world.

My sense of “media” in the phrase through which I am rethinking the practice of writing in or with new digital media is an entirely contingent, if persistent, historical, and material embodiment of what Barthes, also within his analysis of photography, says “is commonly called the *style* of the reproduction.”²¹ Barthes brings style into the discussion while asking, “Are there other messages [that is: apart from *photography* in Barthes’s view] without code?” He answers: no, because even all analogical visual reproductions have style, “whose signifier is a certain ‘treatment’ of the image (result of the action of the creator) and whose signified, whether aesthetic or ideological, refers to a certain ‘culture’ of the society receiving the message.”²² Analogical reproductions are coded with these connotations; they are not simply or even initially denotive objects in the world. He goes on to say, “for all these imitative arts—when common—the code of the connoted system is very likely constituted either by a universal symbolic order or by a period rhetoric, in short by a stock of stereotypes (schemes, colors, graphisms, gestures, expressions, arrangements of elements).”²³ In my view, all that is missing from Barthes’s “style” in order to render it as my conception of media is the admission of a necessary intimacy between technology, device, prosthesis, and coded, connotative practices in the cultures of both “the

creator” and “the society receiving the message.” Barthes would acquire a way of handling photography as a function of media specificity, his exceptional and highly valuable insights accessible—largely unchanged in their tenor—because there is a new device in the world, the properties and methods of which have new syntagmatic relationships with the world, allowing a media-constituted diegesis to arise. Barthes reminds me that all media are intimate with rhetoric, style being a word from its discourse that encapsulates shared connotations of cultural practices undertaken by both actual makers and others within those institutions to which they address their poesis.

Diegesis here is used in a manner that is related to the way it is used in narrative and film theory, but the usage is extended to refer to worlds of cultural practices, “diegetic worlds” within which syntagmatic “flows” can occur.²⁴ I say that these diegetic worlds are “media-constituted,” which, as outlined above, implies that they are a combination of technology, device, prosthesis on the one hand and what I’m content to call “style” on the other. As a serviceable sketch of what I mean by style, I am also content with Barthes’s far from exhaustive but suggestive listing: “schemes, colors, graphisms, gestures, expressions, arrangements of elements.”²⁵ When technology and style work together as media, they create a diegetic world.

Note that media-constituted diegetic worlds may be in any number of relationships, bordering one another, intersected, overlaid, and so on. Because, as media, they are themselves constituted by both technology and style; either of these medial aspects may provide points or areas of contiguity between such diegetic worlds. Photography can be considered as media constituting a diegetic world. Barthes, recast in these terms, believed (at least for the purpose of critical thinking) that the world of photography was continuous—syntagmatically connected—with nature as envisioned by humans. This was, and is a, function of both technology and style: photography’s recording technology—capturing a moment of two-dimensionally spatialized light—and a style of optical representation that is still, currently, accepted as “naturalism,” even though this manner of vision is quite distinct from how we see. Whether or not we reject any notion of an *essential*—permanent, non-contingent—contiguity between the media-constituted diegesis of photography and the diegesis of human culture/nature (which I take to be a manifold of all existing media-constituted diegetic worlds), nonetheless, the properties and methods of photography relate to the world in a media-specific manner that support most, if not all, of the interpretative insights that Barthes draws from his analysis.

What happens when a photographic image is altered, as in many of John Baldessari’s works?²⁶ I am thinking in particular of later series and pieces, from the 1980s onward where, often, the faces of human and occasionally animal figures are obscured by bright, flat monochromatic circular shapes.²⁷ Viewing and reading such composite images we

experience a clash of (at least) two media-constituted diegetic worlds, those of photography and an immediately recognizable, if difficult to designate, style of representation based on these flat monochromic regions of color, generated by geometry, silhouette, or gesture (when such regions are over-drawn or over-painted by hand). There is a perceptible, indeed, a sharp diegetic break between the two worlds. We perceive this as chiefly a matter of representational style but, on reflection, it is clear that this distinction of style is also supported by distinctions of technology and of cultural practices attributable to both medial aspects of the two worlds. Relationships of potential contiguity between the worlds will not be determined by the break, however. These are likely to be manifold. For a start, there are intersections of technologies between the two media, mark-making on paper for one. Thus, Baldessari's overlays on photographic reproductions are able, palpably, to bring the worlds into material contiguity. Syntagmatic flows both proceed via the paper and are visually arrested by the persistent break of style. Moreover, Baldessari's layered hybrid art practices and the diegesis of photography share, in the realm of style, an attention to the composition of visual elements. The colored circular regions are carefully positioned over faces, not at random. In other works by Baldessari, these monochromatic regions may substitute as representations of whatever directly underlies them in the world of the photograph,²⁸ or monochrome silhouettes may be carefully integrated, spatially, in the photographic diegesis.²⁹ These niceties represent further syntagmatic flows, of compositional style this time, nonetheless still arrested by the break, by the necessary tear that will inevitably show forth between distinct media-constituted diegetic worlds.

A cultural artifact, a work of art, will, simply, by dint of its existence and integrity as an object, present us with a coherent world, and it will also, of course, be a part of ours, a syntagm in the diegesis of our culture, potential or actual. But typically, it will itself, although less obviously than in the case of this work by Baldessari, subsist as a manifold of media-constituted diegetic worlds. When we refer to *multimedia* art—admittedly with quite distinct critical intentions—we implicitly highlight actual and often troubling diegetic breaks between the media-constituted worlds from which such art is made.

Now we return to Magritte's *Treachery* on the way to the Cave. As I have set out above, this work exists, first and foremost, in the media-constituted diegetic world of painting, more specifically oil painting, more specifically the style of mimetic figuration. Magritte's painting may hang happily in a gallery alongside other paintings that show us the world as—in oil-painted mimesis—it appears to be.³⁰ I am not going to enter the metapictorial abyss of *The Treachery* and related works in Magritte's oeuvre. This subject is more than adequately dealt with by Mitchell. I want, for the moment, to concentrate on the picture's painted "background."

Manifestly, materially, this background is part of the painting's media-constituted diegetic world and yet it is so nondescript as to appear to be what it is: inconsequential. We take no account of the background. It has no consequence, which I also take to mean that it leads to no sequence, that it is not a syntagm of any diegesis in any world.³¹ The background is a no thing, no place, no where, not in any world except that of the painting. It is the painted depiction of an indeterminate surface. The "pipe" is not fixed to this surface in any way, neither could its nondescript light beige color be read as an "atmosphere" in which the pipe is floating.³² Is the inscription painted or written on this surface? Common sense would answer, yes, but I believe that this is also and crucially indeterminate. I prefer the view that it is not. This inscription is a *painting of writing* and it is floating in front of the indeterminate surface and bears the same graphic, visual relation to this surface—in the diegetic world of *The Treachery*—as does the *painting of the pipe* in its more obvious oil-painted mimesis. However, relations between these objects and the surface differ, and they are neither complementary nor symmetrical. From these differences of relation further points concerning the relationship of language and media emerge.

In certain other discussions of *The Treachery*, its background is either ignored or referred to the structure of the caption, more precisely to the space between caption and image.³³ According to Foucault,

On the page of an illustrated book, we seldom pay attention to the small space running above the words and below the drawing, forever serving them as a common frontier. It is there, on these few millimeters of white, the calm sand of the page, that are established all the relations of designation, nomination, description, classification.³⁴

The existing English translation of Foucault by Harkness would have us see *The Treachery* as "the unraveled calligram," at best some kind of "(former) calligram undone" ("défait"), even though it was never a calligram in the first place. Foucault can be understood as thinking more clearly if we translate his view of *The Treachery* as the calligram's *undoing*, its nemesis. After all he calls the calligram a *trap* ("piège") that "absorbed" the (necessary) "interstice" between word (caption) and image. Magritte (who never fell into the trap), produced a painting in which the trap has been shattered ("a été fracturé") "on emptiness: image and text falling each to their own side, subject to their proper gravities. They have no space in common, no place where they might interact, where words might take figurative shape, or images enter the lexical order."³⁵ Which I also read to mean that *only* in or because of such a "no place" is it possible, as occurs in *The Treachery*, for images to *appear* to enter the lexical order, only to be (lexically, in terms of a direct linguistic address, "Ceci n'est pas ... ") immediately, simultaneously *denied* by words that have taken figurative shape in

the media-constituted world of (the) painting. As Foucault points out, these two highlighted worlds of “lexical order” and “figurative shape” have their own proper “gravities” (“la gravitation qui leur est propre”) and this brings us back to the gravity of the leaf, the gravity that is proper to language and which appears to draw even these figuratively shaped words to a surface that we know—because of its optical relationship to the image of the pipe—is *no* surface, *no* place.

For the commentators I’ve reviewed and even, to a significant extent, for Foucault this is “just” the no space *between* image and caption. My point is that this no space is, as Foucault also recognizes, the “calm sand of the page” (“le sable calme de la page”). It’s not thin or small at all. It’s the desert where we write. It is the very no place that everywhere—everywhere there is inscription of any kind—draws all language to its surface:

The slender, colorless, neutral strip, which in Magritte’s design separates the text and the figure, must be seen as a rift, an indeterminate and hazy region now separating the pipe afloat in its heaven of images from the earthly footfall of words proceeding along their single file. But it is going too far to say that this region is a blank or a lacuna: it is more of an absence of space, the effacement of any “common place” shared by the signifying marks of writing and the delineation of images.³⁶

There is indeed a relatively thin strip between words and image in *The Treachery* and also between the typical layout of image and caption. However, in the painting, it is, visibly, not really a “strip” at all—it is a part of the background that is no place, and, for all we know, *infinite*. Actually, circumstances are the same for any image and caption. The so-called white “strip” is simply one of the many places the infinite (no) surface of “leaf” shows through—the (third) dimension-less leaf, the no thing, no place, no where, with its strong gravity proper to language. It is also, as it happens, the no space of the Cave.

What happens if we translate the objects in the painting to the Cave? Arguably this is not a remediation. The pipe and its “caption” are already in the very no space that the Cave simply actualizes as an immersive illusion. But follow me in this thought experiment.³⁷ We are standing within the Cave, its four projective surfaces in front, to the left and right, and beneath our point of view. The no-color of *The Treachery*’s background has been projected on to these surfaces and we ignore or no longer see those places where the walls meet. The walls have disappeared for us and we are in, or rather, immersively *before* the surface of Magritte’s painting. The pipe and the inscription fade into view before our eyes, seemingly at the same distance from us as they would appear to be if we were comfortably viewing the painting in a gallery, although we see no frame. (The “frame” is beyond our field of vision, around the edges of the device, which we are inside.)

Both objects—the pipe, the inscription—look more or less exactly as they would in the painting. The pipe hangs in space. We sense intuitively that this can happen as a function of this media-constituted world. There's no gravity for image-objects here. However, the inscription is still “placed” in a more radically ambiguous manner. It must be on a surface, mustn't it? Is it inscribed *on* the background that *surrounds* us? If so, how could that be? How could a surface surround us? Can the “leaf” have that property?

Well manifestly, as it turns out, the inscription is not *on* the leaf or any surface, at least in that sense. We *see* this because the objects are moving, both of them together, and in the same manner. They are slowly rotating around a vertical, Y, axis that appears to run through the visual center of both pipe and inscription, between the *p* and the *a* of the word *pas* let's say. The pipe rotates and we continue to see a pipe, a pipe suspended in space and rotating slowly. But the inscription? Apparently, it has no thickness. We can still see what it is and, for the moment, we can still read it, but the effects of perspective—foreshortening and the subsequent distortion of the letter shapes—are making the letters and words look more and more unfamiliar and harder and harder to read until, suddenly, they're unreadable, merely a highly distorted representation of writing.³⁸ Once the objects have rotated 90 degrees in relation to our point of view, they stop and, at this point, the inscription is “edge on.” It's still “there,” but it's not only unreadable, it's invisible.³⁹

This is, of course, far from the end of the discussion. It is nonetheless, however, a striking, graphic demonstration of the different manner in which language as inscription (and, since Derrida, it is always already inscription) relates to its medial support. The no place no where of the “background” is an abstracted instantiation of what is, in other contexts and in all poiesis, manifested as the manifold site of diegetic breaks between media-constituted worlds. The acknowledgment of these breaks is precisely what allows us to treat an arbitrary object from an arbitrary media-constituted world—the “pipe” in this case—as an instantiated object within what Foucault calls the “lexical order”—for interpretative purposes, for the sake of making statements. But so long as the site of the break can be seen and read in any media-constituted diegetic world, its objects can also be read and treated, at least provisionally, as “lexical items” without their having to leave their particular diegetic world or disrupt its coherence. The image of the pipe rotates in space before the background and remains an image of the pipe—which we can and do nonetheless deny as a “pipe.” By contrast, the gravity of the leaf draws inscription to its no place no where no surface with far greater and necessary force. The inscription is always already *within* the media-constituted world of the “lexical order,” which placement is partly determined by the strange surface of the leaf. As the inscription rotates *against* this surface it breaks out of its world and becomes at first unreadable and then *invisible*, which it might as well have been when it was merely unreadable. If it keeps

rotating to 180 degrees from its initial position, in a brief continuation of our thought experiment, it becomes a mirror image, mirror writing, in terms of human optics, readable but now only by way of an internal process of decoding, of symbolic manipulation; not, be it noted, of graphic or optical transformation. The no surface of this leaf is not only geometrically strange, it must also be *programmable*, at least in the sense that—as in this case—it invites a human would-be reader to undertake an intrinsically algorithmic symbolic manipulation of a mirror-image inscription.

The thought experiment makes my points, bringing Magritte's *Treachery* together with the Cave by treating them both as media devices, where Magritte's painting can also be seen as a representation in two dimensions of an artificial 3D graphics world. I will conclude by going over some of the statements made in more general terms.

As in the world of *The Treachery*, the worlds of the Cave are not syntagmatic with the world in which we live, except by way of artifice—hence the epithet “artificial” in artificial immersive environment. The painting works exactly like the Cave except that materially, physically, the images of the Cave surround us and are doubled and offset to provide us with a simulation of human stereo optical experience. Relationships between represented objects and surfaces are remarkably similar, relationships, that is, between objects and inscriptions that are rendered in the 3D graphics world of the Cave, and surfaces, both depicted (the beige surface of *The Treachery* and the background “texture/color”—often textureless black—of the Cave) and actual (the projection surfaces of the Cave-as-device and the canvas of Magritte's painting). Objects in the Cave are able to hang suspended in the transparency of its graphic world, like the “pipe” in the painting, without support or connection to a surface or background-as-surface. They need not appear to be syntagms of the diegetic world that supports them. In the Cave, graphic marks of inscription are revealed, typically, as able to exist in exactly this same mode of suspension, unsupported by contiguity with any surface against which they are nonetheless visible. In the Cave, moreover—and this is not, of course, possible in relation to Magritte's painting—we may be able to place our point of view between (apparent) surface and object, to “get behind” it and to verify that it is unsupported.⁴⁰

My aim has been to establish and begin to delineate differences in the way that language is implicated with media (and, by extension, embodiment and materiality) as compared with other aesthetic or potentially aesthetic practices of poesis. What, again, are these differences? How does the picture of the pipe (which is not a pipe) differ from the inscription, “Ceci n'est pas une pipe.” These differences can, I believe, be expressed in a number of ways, including in terms of my title, the gravity of the leaf, where “the leaf” stands, in general, for all (non-)surfaces of inscription, including especially the countless materially familiar but notionally third-dimensionless leaves of “paper” on which we write or have written, and also, as in *The Treachery*,

those backgrounds of graphic worlds that are surfaces but are equally third-dimensionless no things, no where, in and of no place or space. The no surface in Magritte's painting draws the image and the (image of) the inscription toward itself with qualitatively differing strengths of cultural gravity and we can see this in the graphic representation. We see that the pipe hangs suspended in relation to the no surface, held by its gravity but not touching or fixed to it in terms of its media-constituted diegetic world, that of figurative painting. The position of the inscription, on the other hand, is radically ambiguous and contradictory: either its position is the same as that of the image or else it is not only held by the gravity of the no surface—the no thing no place no where—it is *on* that surface, co-defining it as such while deriving from it all of its own existence as inscription, precisely as linguistic-marks-on-a-surface, and thus become inseparable from it, in the very condition of linguistic inscription. For writing, the gravity of the leaf is the Strong Force itself. Either point of view leads to paradox. If the inscription hangs suspended, then it belongs to no coherent diegetic world of which we know, one where a pipe may also appear to be suspended in space. Handwriting cannot be suspended in space without a surface for it to be *on*. If, rather, the inscription is considered to be *on* the background surface, then it has gravitated to the no thing, no where, in and of no space, and so it is diegetically broken away from the media-constituted world of the pipe's image.

Of course, these contradictions arise because Magritte has, as I suggested before, made an untypical painting, one that behaves like language—a visual complement of concrete poetry. The “pipe” is able to appear like a word in the lexical order, and so it is also not a pipe in the same way that the word “pipe” is not a pipe. It does this very clearly and directly by, unusually, establishing the same sort of—radically ambiguous and contradictory—relation to the surface, to the gravity of the leaf, that is typical for words, for inscription. It does this by playing with the media-constituted world of painting, by depicting a paradox in that world, by graphically *illustrating* a diegetic break, the break that we see between the pipe and the surface against which it is suspended in no world that could ever exist. It cannot be a pipe. The difference is that the pipe looks like a pipe and the painting does have a coherence that is established within the media-constituted diegetic world of figurative painting. The pipe can be in that painted world and, without any change in point of view, it can appear to be in our own visual world, the one where paintings exist in galleries and where other pipes can be held in our hands and before our eyes and compared with the painted image. The inscription can't. It's either stuck on the surface of the painting's background, or it's in a no place where it couldn't otherwise exist. Even when made manifest in the artificial world of the Cave, it can only display a broken relationship to any world. It does *have* relationships with media-constituted worlds, but these are *severely, catastrophically* constrained.

Language in the Cave appears to normalize its relation to other media in the sense that graphic inscription can, in the Cave, be experienced as, apparently, suspended in space without being represented as *on* a surface. However, this is an artificial state of affairs, an illusion, an appearance. All of the light in the Cave is *on* some surface or other. Neither is there any other media-constituted world (or, more accurately, no such world yet) where humans live and to which we might retreat to hold up some surfaceless instance of graphic language so as to compare it, visually, with its representation in the Cave. Rather, when we experience language in the Cave, we are starkly, literally, confronted with the diegetic break on which language depends and by means of which we make it and it makes us as we write and read. We are brought face to—literal, spectral (sur)—face with the strange relationship between language and media, between language and its embodiment in the worlds that media provide. In order for it to be language, language cannot be a coherent part of any media-constituted world in which it is inscribed. Without both the irresistible gravity of the leaf and the break that frees it from all gravity, language cannot exist in this or any other world, let alone make art.