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Excerpt from 'The Last Five Paintings I Made: Language and Painting'
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Column 1 - Reading

In *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, the protagonist and narrator is Death, literally. Despite any preconceived notions of Death, even he is sensitive to the convention of an introduction. He begins:

“Of course, an introduction. A beginning.

Where are my manners?

I could introduce myself properly, but it's not really necessary. You will know me well enough and soon enough, depending on a diverse range of variables.”

Conscious that he only exists within his own description, Death challenges our role in his story. Throughout non-fiction, writers use their characters to reveal an awareness of their context, and attempt to subvert it. In *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D Salinger, the main character Holden Caulfield makes a similarly evasive introduction:

“If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me...”

Holden exposes the reader's expectation to know about every stark detail in his life. He accuses us of invading his privacy by expecting his story to be so revealing and suggests that he is not interested in divulging it. Holden, like Death, is aware of my appetite to empathize; to know a history or a setting before being lead through a story. Despite the threat to withhold information, I can feel the weight of the book in my hands and I know that Death and Holden will continue their stories. But my attention has been drawn to my own part in the performance; only when I have read the book, will the work be complete and only then will I have the tools that I need to *understand* it. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault describes the self-contained ability of

non-fiction through another well-known character, Don Quixote, Foucault says, “His whole being is nothing but language, text, printed pages, stories that have already been written down. He is made up of interwoven words; he is writing itself, wandering through the world among the resemblances of things”.

Foucault’s theory can be applied to Jasper Johns’ painting. Just as I do not consider Death outside of the reality of *The Book Thief* or contemplate Holden beyond the pages of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Jasper wants his work to exist solely on the surface of the canvas. Without uncertainty, his deadpan images state ‘WE HAVE NOTHING TO SAY’. Jasper wants to bind the content of his work to his own marks, and their simplicity and directness implies that any secondary understanding, beyond seeing, is redundant. When first laying eyes on his paintings, I feel as though I have just read Holden or Death’s elusive introduction. But I am not holding the rest of the story in my hands, and seeing the work seems initially inadequate. While the intention of J.D. Salinger, Markus Zusak and Jasper Johns contain notable similarities, to *read* and to *see* are inherently different acts. While reading a book is a self-contained, measurable task, seeing has fewer limitations. We tend to rely on language in order to *understand* what we see, but can we describe a painting without language?

In Jasper John’s case, his infamous lack of verbal explanation for his work is his own attempt to avoid language controlling or changing his work. Jasper takes no ownership over any language surrounding his work. He precludes an interview with John Yao in *Brooklyn Rail* by stating that he cannot answer questions about philosophy of his most recent exhibition, he continues “ I was not involved in the determination of the title. Maybe Jeffrey Weiss’s text will explain the meaning. Despite mimicking popular images, such as an American flag, he argues that a painting of an American flag is not an American flag, but a painting. His intention is to remove it from our reality, away from representation. In the same interview he reveals the battle with representation in his painting, “I knew that my work was different but, even so, I was often able to notice resemblances. Some people were probably put off by the difference. I was put off by the resemblance”. However, without the knowledge of his intentions, I attach popular images to his paintings. In order to see his painting as an independent language, I have still considered his intention (or lack of intention) in order to control my perspective of the work. I have not approached the work in order to just ‘see’ it, but I also know how I am meant to see it through a form of instruction.

To 'understand' infers that I have come to a conclusion about something. Its denotation indicates that the act of understanding has been achieved in verbal or written language. On the other hand, a conclusion made in visual language would be considered an interpretation or a reinterpretation. As a result, it is thought that in order to *understand* a painting we must make a conclusion within verbal or written language. I can see this in the endless literature written around important pieces of work and within my own daily life, in discussions, 'crits' or lectures at the art colleges that I have attended. Furthermore, the use of language to describe painting is idiomatic; it is not used in normal conversation and is often based on entirely separate definitions, not widely understood outside of a very specific setting. It is clear that we try to overlap language and painting as though they are interchangeable, but I have found that they do not adequately narrate each other. This gap between seeing and reading is where Rene Magritte situates his work.

Ceci n'est pas une pipe (This is not a pipe) by Rene Magritte draws our attention to the incorrect denotation of language in reference to visual images. The painting is a representation of a pipe and below it are the painted words, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe". It calls in to question our own definition of representation and reality. My own response rests on the fact that painted words "une pipe" are also, not a pipe. In this case language cannot adequately describe the image, and the painting cannot contain literal language. Acknowledging these inadequacies, Magritte, like Jasper Johns, wants his work to be to be understood solely through the act of *seeing* it, he argues, "Seeing...is what matters. Seeing must suffice. But what kind of seeing must it be? Of what quality? A form of understanding is possible beyond the confines of any verbal explanation, which, if it is of any use at all, must be authenticated by a way of seeing". However, despite Magritte's own distrust of the viewer's method of understanding or describing, he did not abandon representation in his paintings. His paintings flirt with representation and abstraction. While they become their own reality that does not mimic our own, it does reference it. We are called to understand his work through labelling, and description but then become aware of our inability to do this accurately. There is an arbitrary relationship between the actual real objects, the painted image of the objects, and the abstraction of the things. The bits that get lost between these translations are what make Magritte's work so haunting and so puzzling.

In response to Magritte's work, Michel Foucault suggests that if an artist attempts *resemblance* in his work, then the work will be considered a form of representation. Representation, Foucault argues, has a symbiotic relationship with language and therefore, an image bearing resemblance is understood in terms of language. On the other hand *similitude* is not representation and is free to exist on its own without language. It is a complex theory that I can only fully understand in a very controlled environment, but to summarize Foucault uses similitude to describe a non-representational image. Foucault's theory can be reconsidered through examining the methods that we use to understand paintings.

We can understand a painting through the act of retrieving significance that we presume is already there, or we can construct understanding by assigning meaning to what we have in front of us, through labelling or literally describing it. I appreciate that there are exceptions to the rule, but in general we can understand representational painting by retrieving significance that is already there because we relate it to things in our own reality with names and classifications and literal significance. Non-representational painting (which Foucault calls similitude), cannot be described literally, but has to be described in reference to yourself, how it makes you feel. Therefore, you describe the act of seeing the painting, not the painting itself. When I apply language to non-representational painting, it is constructing significance in order to come to an understanding. While language is always used to understand painting, it is either used in reference to yourself and your experience or to describe the actual artwork.