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INTRODUCING ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET

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All literati know that Alain Robbe-Grillet is one of France's leading New Novelists and avant-garde cinematographers, that his works have redefined the novel and the cinema as genres, and that his art has left an indelible imprint on the twentieth-century. Less well known, perhaps, is the fact that he likes to work with other artists and that he has collaborated with painters, photographers, and musicians such as Paul Delvaux, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, David Hamilton, Irina Ionesco, and Michel Fano. In 1961, before he himself became a film director, his association with Alain Resnais produced *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, an international film success. After the death of René Magritte, Robbe-Grillet illustrated one of his novels, *La Belle captive* (1975), with seventy-seven paintings by the Belgian surrealist painter—paintings from the collection of Georgette Magritte, his widow. It is most appropriate, therefore, that Robbe-Grillet be the keynote speaker for an interdisciplinary conference on literature and the arts entitled “*Caméra ou Stylo: A Problematic Dialogue?*”.

One critic, when speaking of Robbe-Grillet's style in *La Jalousie*, alluded to the descriptions of things and people in this 1957 novel as *le stylo-caméra*. Already, there is a clear and direct relationship between image and writing even before Robbe-Grillet became a film director and began collaborating with other artists.

Because space and time preclude a detailed presentation of Robbe-Grillet's oeuvre, I will use *La Belle captive* to illustrate his ongoing dialogue using the written text and its visible counterparts. Moreover, the coming together of Magritte and Robbe-Grillet is arguably not problematic because both men oppose the natural by highlighting the artificial. They both believe that art exists, not to mirror nature, but to mirror itself. For them, art functions as a specular system, and its emphasis is not on the writing or painting of a story, but on the story of writing or painting. Furthermore, the opposition between nature and art engenders a theatricalization of language, be it verbal or pictorial. In *Ecrits complets* (686), Magritte notes aptly that painting is the visible description of thought and, in literature, with reference to Robbe-Grillet, the dramatization of language privileges the signifier over the signified. Such art, insofar as it speaks primarily of itself, devalues mimesis as a representational system. However, unlike the nonobjective art of Kandinsky or Mondrian, Magritte's paintings are both mimetic and anti-mimetic. Similarly, Robbe-Grillet's fiction is both referential and self-reflexive.

In 1985, *La Belle captive* (the pictonovel, not the film by the same name) had been remaindered and you could buy it in a Left Bank bookstore for fifty francs. I bought one copy, but after leaving the store, and while walking toward the Luxembourg Gardens, I decided that I needed another one. The salesperson looked at me with a smile of complicity on her lips and said: “Ah, vous voulez une deuxième belle captive!” And so I did, which raises the question: what or who is the beautiful captive? Obviously, it's the title of the book, and the title derives from six pictures of seascapes and landscapes painted by Magritte, all of them entitled *La Belle captive*. However, despite the connotation, there is no woman in the paintings.¹

Ultimately, the “beautiful captive” is not a flesh-and-blood woman but a pictorial and writerly event. Magritte’s captives dramatize the artistic process as much as Robbe-Grillet’s discourse subverts realistic modes of writing; or, if you will, Robbe-Grillet’s fiction dramatizes the writing process even as Magritte’s discourse devalues reality. This change of status within the fictive body—a status that opposes the tenets of classic realism to the poetics of postmodernism—allows for bifurcations and metamorphoses that generate unusual narrative displacements.

These narrative displacements focus on the woman’s body as a metaphor for the artistic process. As in Robbe-Grillet’s writing, women are central to Magritte’s work, from the earliest cubistic paintings of the 1920s to the seascape entitled *The Beautiful Captive* that he painted just before his death in 1967. Another painting, *Les Fleurs du mal*—its title borrowed from Baudelaire—is one example among many of a body in the context of its narrative displacements.² The painting depicts a statue of a young woman holding a rose. The woman in the painting has a sensuous reality, but she is made of stone; she has the blank eyes of a statue, but she looks alive. This movement back and forth between the real and the unreal, between hardness and softness, between warm flesh and cold stone, between the animate and the inanimate sets up resonances that reverberate throughout Magritte’s and Robbe-Grillet’s works. The deliberate mating of opposites results in a paradox that is unsettling because meaning is ambiguous. For Jacques Derrida, *la différance* is part of the undecidability of all meaning that is endlessly deferred and which, therefore, is never fixed. The oscillation of meaning between the real and the unreal, between the signifier and the signified erases one of the binaries while its opposite is being considered. This “erasure” (*rature*) does not eliminate the contradiction, it only blurs and defers it, and this deferral remains as the trace of an alternative that refuses to go away (Derrida 62).

What also refuses to go away are the conventional expectations of classic realism—conventions that Robbe-Grillet transgresses by abolishing plot and character. The voices within a novel multiply and contradict each other, chronology reverses itself, diegesis self-destructs, the narrator interrogates the reader. A description of the inside of a prison cell morphs into a description of the outside terrace of a café. Despite these subversions, classic realism remains under erasure, always ready to reassert itself whenever a best seller and the mass market claim the public’s interest. A novel such as *La Belle captive*—a typical metafictional text on the writerly and painterly levels—must constantly strive to maintain its identity. To that end, Robbe-Grillet’s women, like Magritte’s, are dismembered, transformed, and sometimes canned like fish; and these captives survive precisely because they are not real: they are metaphors for the body of the text—a text that is forced to submit to figurative mutilations in order to reveal the play of language and the creative process.

La Belle captive dramatizes the mythology of art and woman even as Robbe-Grillet’s text stages an imaginary dialogue with Magritte’s pictures. Nor does the text mirror the paintings. Robbe-Grillet’s discourse parallels them, glosses over them, and contradicts them. The mysterious, poetic, and ludic structures of Magritte’s art foreground the cultural myths with which he and Robbe-Grillet are playing and the pleasure they derive from this creative parody. The text and the pictures are imaginative recreations of a reality that is perceived by both men in ways that are radically different

from the conventional canons of realism: floating boulders that defy gravity, flaming tubas, the simultaneity of day and night—contradictions that reverse the natural order of things, even as they set up modes of representation that generate resemblance.

Resemblance, however, is only part of the game. The image of the beautiful captive, in addition to her mythical and erotic connotations, is a metaphor for an artistic process that emphasizes disruption, disorder, and discontinuity. In their pursuit of a new textual and pictorial order Magritte and Robbe-Grillet depict stones that become birds that become women that become roses that become art. These “slippages of pleasure” invite the audience to join the two sign-systems in order to make the pictures “speak” and the text “see.” This juxtaposition of image and word generates a new discourse in which the observer produces meaning. The bliss thus engendered transcends any simplistic juxtaposition of two art forms, urging the reader to respond creatively to the simultaneity of the two texts. This collaboration between the audience and the text’s “intentions” results in a synthesis and a transcendence—a game that unifies separate discourses that are normally separate into a new discursive genre: the *pictonovel*.³

Notes

¹ The French edition of *La Belle captive* is out of print. My translation of it (1995—hardcover and 1996—paperback edition) may still be available from the University of California Press. This English edition contains an interarts essay illustrated with an additional twenty-one paintings by Magritte.

² In addition to the intertextual allusion to Baudelaire’s book of poems, the woman statue who is both flesh and stone is a quasi-literal transcription of a line from Baudelaire’s poem, “La Beauté”: “Je suis belle, ô mortels! come un rêve de pierre” (33).

³ See François Jost, “Le Picto-roman,” *Revue d’esthétique* 4 (1976): 57-73.

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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de rechercher
si, par hasard, se trouvait ici l'endroit où de telles
paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*.

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