

*Decoding Magritte*. By SILVANO LEVY. Bristol: Sansom & Company, 2015. 280 pp., ill.

The paintings of the prolific Belgian surrealist artist René Magritte have never fallen out of favour as a subject for discussion and dissection, as writings from Henri Michaux to Michel Foucault testify. Silvano Levy's elegant study, in arguing that Magritte develops a code throughout his visual art, uncovers perhaps the primary reason behind Magritte's enduring appeal. Magritte engages us precisely because we detect a visual lexicon across his body of work that speaks to an inherent logic in what might otherwise appear to be a perfectly illogical realm. Levy meticulously appropriates Roman Jakobson's studies on the condition of aphasia, which he then uses to break down the 'grammar' of Magritte's visual production. Understanding composition and content by means of this Jakobsonian model allows for a well-paced reassessment of Magritte's body of work as an innovative — but no less systematic — rejection and reconfiguration of the tenets of academic painting. Divided into three main sections, 'Rebel in the Making 1919–1924', 'The Rebellion 1924–1930', and 'Interviews' (the latter reproducing transcripts of illuminating interviews with key figures such as Georgette Magritte, the artist's wife), the book lays out its thesis in a preliminary section entitled 'To Decode or not to Decode'. One particular claim in this Introduction seems to jar, however. In suggesting that 'the presence of the written word renders the image redundant' in Magritte (p. 14), Levy passes up an early opportunity to capitalize on the imagistic properties of the written word, a driving force behind Michel Butor's seminal text *Les Mots dans la peinture* (Geneva: Skira, 1969; listed in Levy's bibliography). Moreover, in the light of Butor's work, it is perhaps surprising that a discussion of the frequently enigmatic titles of Magritte's paintings is mostly eschewed, except for a few fleeting instances (p. 109 and pp. 227–28). However, none of this is to detract from Levy's consistently superb pictorial analysis. The linguistic model he deploys helps to make persuasive connections among different paintings and periods, enriching an extended analysis of Magritte's treatment of the body in particular. It allows the reader to attain a comprehensive understanding of Magritte's evolution as an artist, taking into account his early flirtations with Dada and Cubism, for instance. Indeed, it was a delight to read an entire chapter devoted to Magritte's Vache period ('Vile Paintings'), highlighting a comic and even more reactionary sort of playfulness on the part of the artist in comparison to what is seen in his better-known work. The book is handsomely illustrated throughout; however, it would have been useful to have figures listed in the text as a quick guide to locating illustrations while reading. (This would have the added benefit of helping the reader ascertain immediately whenever a painting is *not* reproduced.) This oversight aside, Levy's work constitutes a distinctive and important addition to scholarship on Magritte and, more broadly speaking, to Belgian text and image studies.

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doi:10.1093/fs/knw279

*L'Esthétique du pli dans l'œuvre de Henri Michaux*. Par LLEWELLYN BROWN. (Bibliothèque des lettres modernes, 45.) Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015. 230 pp.

This study takes as its starting point the recurring references to Henri Michaux in the writings of Gilles Deleuze, and that philosopher's recognition of the importance of the figure of the *pli* in Michaux's work. While Michaux had himself foregrounded that figure in the title of his 1949 volume, *La Vie dans les plis*, Deleuze would insist on its wider underlying presence for the writer-artist: 'Le thème du pli hante toute l'œuvre de Michaux, écrite, dessinée, peinte' (*Le Pli: Leibniz et le baroque* (Paris: Minuit, 1988), p. 124). Llewellyn Brown takes this insight

one stage further, with the *pli* emerging here from the multiplicity that is so characteristic of his authorial subject to offer the possibility of a unified reading of Michaux's multiple artistic activities: 'Le pli paraît s'imposer comme LA figure de Michaux: celle qui régit chaque réalisation au sein de son œuvre et nous permet de la lire' (p. 9; original emphasis). This is a bold, two-pronged claim, suggesting both a causal architecture and a promise of privileged understanding of a body of work exceptional in its ability simultaneously to invite and to elude comprehensive interpretation. In developing this claim, Brown is not, however, proposing a simple extension of the Deleuzian reading; instead the study grounds and sustains the pertinence of the *pli* figure (and the attendant *pli/dépli* dialectic) in extended engagements with Michaux's narrative and other accounts of the developing self that are informed by a (broadly) Lacanian psychoanalytical approach. This is interesting, given Michaux's own resistance to psychoanalysis, which Brown acknowledges. Beginning with the 'Portrait de A' and its canonical image of the originary self as 'une boule hermétique et suffisante' (Michaux, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998–2004), 1 (1998), 608), Brown goes on to develop readings of a strikingly axiomatic cumulative virtue, offering new purchase and insight on a variety of texts as slippery as they are compulsively readable (among the most successful here being the revisiting of various episodes from the imaginary travels, collected as *Ailleurs* (1948)). But the *pli* for Brown is not simply an aid to such topologies of the (problematic) subject; it leads also to an account of the cardinal poetic manoeuvre in Michaux: that of transformative emancipation (*exorcisme, dégagement*, etc.), where *pli* and *dépli* relay each other in what Brown terms a 'transposition poétique', with its apparent enactment of cathartic power grounded in the very threat confronted: 'le *pli* oppressant se renverse, prenant la forme d'un *dépli* aérien, insufflé par la violence même du *pli*' (p. 164; original emphases). Ultimately, then, the *pli* becomes a theoretical metaphor that allows its advocate to shadow in an impressively robust critical prose the subtle movements and layers of creative practice in Michaux — both feline in its elusiveness and occasionally feral in the intensity of its aggression. The specific limits of the study are no doubt also functions of this important strength. The centrality of the *pli* to the critical project means that the various domains and stages of the work are re-inscribed to what at times feels like a point of saturation in its ultimately unanswerable terms. Overall, however, this is an accomplished and significant contribution to the literature on Michaux, and an impressively sustained engagement with the full range of a challenging œuvre. First published in 2007, its recent re-issue marks the passage of the 'Bibliothèque des lettres modernes' list into the stable of collections published and distributed by Classiques Garnier.

doi:10.1093/fs/knw276

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*L'Idée de littérature à l'épreuve des arts populaires (1870–1945)*. Sous la direction de PASCALE ALEXANDRE-BERGUES. (Rencontres, 110; Littérature des xx<sup>e</sup> et xxi<sup>e</sup> siècles, 16.) Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015. 392 pp.

Cette publication des actes d'un colloque éponyme rassemble vingt-deux essais 'dévolu[s] à une littérature a priori moins pure mais non moins féconde, qui s'édifie [...] en puisant dans des formes d'art et de culture volontiers qualifiées de populaires' (p. 7). Ce volume propose donc de montrer comment la littérature 'légitime' (p. 14) s'est esthétiquement et idéologiquement réinventée entre 1870 et 1945 en s'inspirant entre autres du roman-feuilleton, de la chanson, du cirque, du mélodrame, du dessin humoristique et du cinéma. La première section regroupe des essais aidant à cerner la notion de populaire, laquelle peut désigner tant le peuple que la nation, des communautés réelles ou rêvées qu'un