

sign is divided; Foucault explains, 'between the certain and the probable: that is to say, there can no longer be an unknown sign, a mute mark.' (Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 59) The structure of resemblance which surrounds GR's lightning-bolt signs situate them within the order of appearances but their silence, their mute quality, ultimately withholds the logic of signification in a senseless, rhizomatic array. They are no longer signs, nor even visible signatures. They are intimations of the invisible disorder of things. In short, they are *idols*.

XIII

The flight out is delayed. The plane is sitting safe on the tarmac but GR senses an awakening fear — the ominous fear you get when you board planes that you tend to kill with pills or alcohol. Eventually, the plane takes off. About two hours into the flight the plane ascends its long arc across the North Atlantic. GR is drinking coffee to stay awake so he can witness the face of death. As he peers through small portal window out into the black blue darkness of 30,000 ft his own face is illuminated in the afterglow of not too distant lightning.

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HISTORY OF THE THIRTEEN

I

GR rises at 7am. He works on-line for about 45 minutes, checking emails, deleting some, sending others, before making the short walk past chain-link fence, cinder blocks and brownstones to Bedford Avenue to catch the L Train to Manhattan, that rhizomatic, sprawling, interlocking, air-conditioned, baroque network of neon signs and superstitions. The L Train. What's the L stand for? Love? Liquid? *Lightning*?

II

'... the storm begins when the air becomes heavy and agitated, the apoplectic attack at the moment when our thoughts become heavy and disturbed; then the clouds pile up, the belly swells, the thunder explodes and the bladder bursts; the lightning flashes and the eyes glitter with a terrible brightness, the rain falls, the mouth foams, the thunderbolt is unleashed and the spirits burst open breaches in the skin; but then the sky becomes clear again, and in the sick man reason regains ascendancy.'

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*

III

During the time he was working on *L'Histoire des Treize*, the tale of a secret society, Balzac would lead an ascetic existence. Each night the author would retire at eight o'clock in the evening only to be awakened at midnight by his valet, whereupon his 'monastic life' would begin. Donning a monk's robe of white cashmere with a golden chain the 'artist of the Faubourg Saint-Germain' would sit down by the light of four candles at the small table to write long into the darkness.

IV

'The word superstition is derived from the Latin words super: above, and stare: to stand. In ancient times those who survived in battle were called superstites because they had outlived their fellows. Our modern superstitions fall into this class for they so often represent apparently bizarre modes of thought that have survived the ages which created them, to linger on in our midst like ghosts from an unknown past.'

Eric Maple, *Superstition and the Superstitious*

V

'A sublime thought, if happily timed, illumines an entire subject with the vividness of a lightning-flash.'

Longinus

VI

'Bold, overhanging, and as it were threatening rocks; clouds piled up in the sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunder peals; volcanoes in all their violence of destruction; hurricanes with their track of devastation; the boundless ocean in a state of tumult; the lofty waterfall of a mighty river, and such like—these exhibit our faculty of resistance as insignificantly small in comparison with their might. But the sight of them is the more attractive, the more fearful it is, provided only that we are in security; and we willingly call these objects sublime, because they raise their energies of the soul above their accustomed height and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind, which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature.'

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*

VII

A lightning-flash is an event which is both worldly and otherworldly, the leap between land and sky an analogue of the fearful correspondence between man and god. This is why lightning is historically linked to the creative imagination and the divine moment of inspiration—resembling Balzac's 'belief in the mysterious, organic mingling of the material and spiritual worlds ... manifesting itself in magic, magic itself being the vehicle of the unconscious.' (V. S. Pritchett, *Balzac*). But GR's neon lightning-bolts suggest a cooler relationship to inspiration—the coolness of an inert gas. They mix a familiar conceptual art strategy of appropriation with a commercial eye for reification, all in a confectioner's candy-coloured palette. Yet there is still something of the sublime about these objects. Not the sublime terror of the threat of imminent death, of being struck by lightning or held hostage to the wrath of angry Nordic gods. Rather GR's neon signs share something of the whispered sublimity of a Cy Twombly work on paper.

VIII

In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault claims that 'once similitude and signs are sundered from each other, two experiences can be established and two characters appear face to face.' The two figures who characterize these separated experiences for Foucault are the madman and the poet. To Foucault, the madman 'sees nothing but

resemblances and signs of resemblances everywhere; for him all signs resemble one another, and all resemblances have the value of signs.' Alternatively, he continues, the poet 'is he who, beneath the named, constantly expected differences, rediscovers the buried kinship between things, their scattered resemblances. Beneath the established signs, and in spite of them, he hears another, deeper, discourse, which recalls the time when words glittered in the universal resemblance of things; in the language of the poet, the Sovereignty of the Same, so difficult to express, eclipses, the distinction existing between signs.' (Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 49)

IX

'Pierre Bayle not only prepared the way for the acceptance of materialism and the philosophy of common sense in France by the sceptical disintegration of metaphysics. He heralded the atheistic society soon to come into existence by proving that a society of avowed atheists is possible, that an atheist could be an honest man, and that man degrades himself not by atheism but by superstition and idolatry.'

Karl Marx

X

Ominous skies murmur above GR as he heads to JFK. From the back of the taxi cab he stares out across New York's fractured skyline. A beautiful fucked-up horizon. Restless signs taken for ghostly wonders. At that precise moment he inexplicably recalls Baudelaire's untimely augury: 'Superstition is the well of all truth.'

XI

As Balzac worked without interruption for hour after hour, the small sheets of paper upon which he wrote were of a bluish tint to prevent irritation to his eyes. When fatigue set in or when exhaustion seemed immanent, Balzac would brew the strongest black coffee he could find: Bourbon, Martinique and Mocha. It is assumed that in his lifetime he consumed approximately 50,000 cups of coffee.

XII

According to Foucault, in the sixteenth century the almost superstitious belief was harboured that signs held latent powers, enigmatic hieroglyphs waiting to be deciphered and reveal the secret order of things. From the seventeenth century onward, however, we enter the rationalisation of the sign: 'the whole domain of the