

# FOUCAULT

main theme of Foucault's work traces how assumptions about the nature of knowledge have determined much of the development of modern European culture

his work includes:

a history of madness

an account of the birth of clinical medicine at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century

an archeology of the modern sciences of language, life and labor

a genealogy of the modern form of punishment

and fragments of a history of sexuality

his work can be seen as a development of Nietzsche's radicalization

of Kant's recognition that the human mind shapes human experience

(the mind conceived not as a passive mirror but as an artist—giving shape to experience)

Kant held on to Enlightenment hopes only by assuming a universal structure to the human mind

Nietzsche developed the notion of the philosopher as artist, and knowledge as creative

and questioned the notion of any universal human nature

Foucault then focuses on how the particular conceptions of knowledge, self and world

which frame so much of Western culture are the products of historical and social factors

As Robert Wickes points out

“A good portion of Foucault's work reveals how what presents itself frequently in everyday life as being natural, universal and unchangeable is in fact the product of specific social practices relative to a certain place and time” (Wilkes, 144)

Foucault's work aims thus to expose these mechanisms of social constructions

to thus show how they discriminate and “marginalize underprivileged sectors”

thus his work aims to liberate those oppressed by these social constructions

his view “comprehends the world in a more tolerant, multifaceted and perspectival manner”

and aims to increase “the possibilities for people to exercise a more artistic control over their lives”

Wilkes outlines three main points of Foucault's reflections on artistic themes:

1) “that works of art reveal the intellectual temperament particular to a specific historical epoch”

Velázquez's 1656 masterpiece *Las Meninas* reveals something important about the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries—or the Enlightenment

Magritte's work of 1926 entitled *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (*This is not a pipe*) expresses something important about 20<sup>th</sup> century thought

2) “that works of art can bring our existing conceptions of personhood into serious question, and can stimulate radically new modes of awareness”

[think of Nietzsche's notion of Greek tragedy as stimulating a new awareness and thus enabling the Greeks of the tragic age to affirm life despite its tragic dimension]

3) “that the concepts of artistic style and creativity can direct how we can positively reinterpret the person, or subject of experience”

**Velázquez's *Las Meninas***



The main point of Foucault's analysis of the painting is how "the painting's compositional structure displays quintessentially the mode of representation that dominated the thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (Wilkes, 145)

the classical modern epistemological standpoint is that of the detached, passive observer  
if one could eliminate all the factors of one's personal perspective  
one's expectations and subjective affections  
then one would be able to see reality as it really is  
think of Descartes' view of the world as revealed through mathematics  
the world as a collection of discreet objects that are quantifiable (understood through numbers)  
and related in mechanically predictable ways (obey the laws of nature)

objective knowledge of the world was possible if we remove the perspective of the knower  
if we see the world from a perspective that is not a perspective  
"the view from nowhere" as recent philosophers have put it

Foucault's analysis of the painting shows how it exemplifies this standpoint  
"this way of regarding the world does not allow the observer to include itself simultaneously as another object to be measured" (Wilkes, 145)

Foucault's analysis of the painting:

begins from the perspective of the painter depicted in the painting in the process of painting  
the painter has just stepped back from his painting and is then in view of the subject of the painting

the subject of that painting is King Phillip IV and Queen Mariana Teresa  
their perspective is also our perspective as the viewer of Velazquez's painting

the painter emerges into our view and that of the subjects of the painting in stepping back  
in a moment he would step forward and disappear from that perspective behind the canvas  
Velazquez then paints himself in the act of painting  
"caught in a moment of stillness, at the neutral centre of this oscillation" (443)  
he is "half-way between the visible and the invisible"

the painter stares at a point—our point of reference as the viewer  
"The spectacle he is observing is thus doubly invisible: first, because, it is not represented within the space of the painting, and, second, because it is situated precisely in that blind point, in that essential hiding-place into which our gaze disappears from ourselves at the moment of our actual looking" (443)

Foucault calls attention to  
the ceaseless exchange of the observer and the observed  
the painter's gaze commanding a triangle  
from his eyes to the painting and from his eyes to the subject of the painting (to our eyes as well)

he then notes the light coming in from the right, from a window which our perspective makes hidden  
but the light from which illuminates the picture

From the right there streams in through an invisible window the pure volume of a light that renders all representation visible; to the left extends the surface that conceals, on the other side of its all too visible woven texture, the representation it bears. The light, by flooding the scene (I mean the room as well as the canvas, the room represented on the canvas, and the room in which the canvas stands), envelops the figures and the spectators and carries them with it, under the painter's gaze, towards the place where his brush will represent them. But that place is concealed from us. (445)

Next Foucault notes the paintings on the back wall depicted in the painting  
they are all in shadow and their representation is invisible  
except for one that is at the center of the painting  
but it turns out not to be a painting, but a mirror  
and in the mirror are the reflected images of the subject of the painting

"Of all the representations represented in the picture this is the only one visible; but no one is looking at it" (446).

the mirror doesn't capture anything that is represented in the painting (not the painter, any of the other figures or objects in the room that are depicted in the painting)

the mirror captures only what is invisible in (the rest of) the painting  
“Instead of surrounding visible objects, this mirror cuts straight through the whole field of the representation, ignoring all it might apprehend within that field, and restores visibility to that which resided outside all view” (446-7).

In part 2 Foucault finally identifies the subjects of the painting  
Velaquez in the act of painting Philip IV and Queen Mariana Teresa  
their daughter stands before them gazing at them (and at us)  
she is attended by an entourage

then Foucault makes a point about the relation between language and painting  
neither can be reduced to the other  
“it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say” (448)  
he suggests we must then pretend not to know who is reflected (these proper names) in the mirror  
and attend to the reflection in the mirror on its own terms

next to the mirror is a doorway  
a figure stands in the doorway, ambiguously entering or leaving the room depicted in the painting

next he turns to the figure at the center of the painting, the princess

but her gaze is directed absolutely straight towards the spectator standing in front of the painting. A vertical line dividing the canvas into two equal halves would pass between the child's eyes. Her face is a third of the total height of the picture above the lower frame. So that here, beyond all question, resides the principle theme of the composition; this is the very object of this painting. 945)

the princess is attended by two maids of honour  
one in profile turned directly toward the princess  
the other turned toward the princess but gazing toward the front  
towards the same spot being gazed at by the painter and the princess  
the spot occupied by the king and queen (and by we the viewers of the painting)

then he turns to the other figures, two pairs of figures  
in the foreground two dwarves,  
one looking toward the subject of the painting, the other looking inward  
in the background two courtiers  
to the left a woman looking right toward the window  
a man on the right looking also at the subject of the painting

these two groups form two different figures  
from the eyes of the painter and the eyes of this courtier lines can be drawn to the bottom corners of the painting  
lines which form an X and at the center of the X are the eyes of the princess

the other figure, a vast curve, from the painter across to the princess and then to the man on the right

thus there are two centers of the picture  
the princess  
the other center is the figures in the mirror (?)  
from these two centers two lines emerge  
and then converge at a point in front of the picture  
the point of the king and queen (our point of view as observers of the painting)  
and it is a point that we cannot see in the painting

“it is not possible for the pure felicity of the image ever to present in a full light both the master who is representing and the sovereign who is being represented” (453)

Foucault’s point is to bring out an aspect of “Classical representation”  
by which he means the modern, or Enlightenment, conception of knowledge  
a conception in which the knower  
“necessarily fails to represent himself or herself in its capacity as an active center of awareness”  
(Wilkes, 145)

Perhaps there exists, in this painting by Velázquez, the representation as it were, of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us. And, indeed, representation undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call in into being. But there, in the midst of this dispersion which it is simultaneously grouping together and spreading out before us, indicated compellingly from every side, is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation—of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance. This very subject—which is the same—has been elided. And representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form. (453-4)

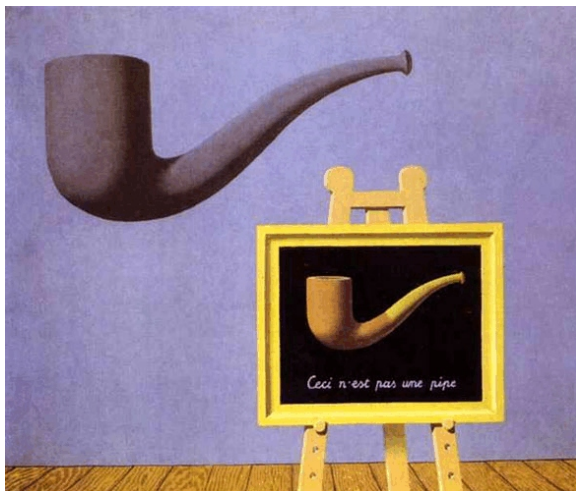
### This Is Not a Pipe



*The Treason of Pictures*, first version 1926



*The Treason of Pictures*, 1929



*The Two Mysteries*, 1966

this later painting shows within it, what Foucault is referring to as Magritte's second version of the painting (though it appears there were at least the two versions above prior to this version). This version (what Foucault refers to as the second version) shows the first version as a painting on an easel. I take it that this 1966 painting is yet another, perhaps fourth version.

[I could not find an image of what Foucault refers to as the second version]

Foucault finds the surrealist painting of René Magritte as indicators of 20<sup>th</sup> century thought

according to Foucault two principles have ruled Western painting from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries

- 1) words and images have usually been kept distinct, and when they have been both present words were subordinated to images in artistic importance
- 2) whenever a painted image resembled an object in the world, the image usually served to direct the viewer's attention outside the painting to the objects represented

Foucault argues that Magritte's *The Treason of Pictures* subverts these assumptions

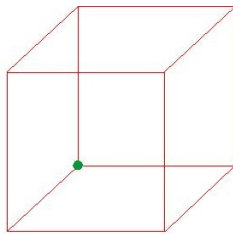
[Wilkes doesn't notice that the title of Magritte's painting is not *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, a point that Foucault does draw attention to (374)]

Foucault's point is that the painting is intrinsically ambiguous

this capacity for multiple interpretations is one of the key features of 20<sup>th</sup> century art

the whole composition of the painting generates an interpretative oscillation between word and image

like a calligram: an image constructed with the shapes of words whose meanings themselves refer to the kind of object represented



Necker Cube

or ambiguous geometrical configurations like the Necker cube

Focus on the green dot  
is it on the bottom left front corner of the cube  
or on the bottom left rear corner?

in multiple-interpretable imagery of this kind none of the projected points of view is given precedence

In Magritte's painting there is a painting of a pipe and underneath the pipe the handwritten words "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" ("This is not a Pipe") within this sentence the word "ceci" ("this") is ambiguous

- 1) it perhaps says "this (the image of the pipe) is not a pipe"
- 2) it may also say "this (the sentence) is not a pipe"
- 3) or perhaps even "this (the entire painting) is not a pipe"

returning to the two principles that ruled Western painting from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries:

- 1) the principle that words (linguistic reference) and images (plastic representation) should be kept distinct



“Either the text is ruled by the image (as in those paintings where a book, an inscription, a letter, or the name of a person are represented); or else the image is ruled by the text (as in books where a drawing completes as if it were merely taking a short cut, the message that words are charged to represent)” (379).

This principle was already abolished by the paintings of Paul Klee



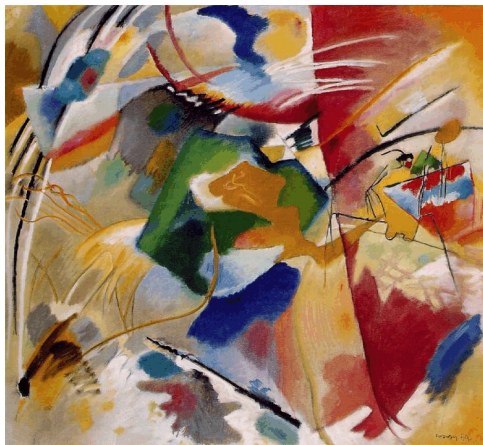
Klee, *Villa R*, 1919

“by showing the juxtaposition of shapes and the syntax of lines in an uncertain, reversible, floating space (simultaneously page and canvas, plane and volume, map and chronicle)” (379).

2) the principle that when a painted image resembled an object in the world, the image usually served to direct the viewer’s attention outside the painting to the objects

represented

“The second principle that long ruled painting posits an equivalence between the fact of resemblance and the affirmation of a representative bond. Let a figure resemble an object (or some other figure), and that alone is enough for there to slip into the pure play of the painting a statement...’What you see is *that*’” (379-80).



Kandinsky, *Improvisation with Green Center*, 1935

This principle was abolished by works of Kandinsky,

“Kandinsky’s is a naked affirmation clutching at no resemblance, and which, when asked ‘what it is,’ can reply only by referring itself to the gesture that formed it: an ‘improvisation,’ a ‘composition’...” (380).