

**“THE IMAGE IS NEVER INNOCENT”
MICHEL FOUCAULT ON THE ARCHITECTURE
OF THE VISUAL ARTS**

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Abstract. Michel Foucault approaches art not only from an aesthetic perspective, for the French philosopher art represents a form of resistance that includes and reveals a sort of a mechanism for understanding the world through artistic concepts, which could be designated as a *technology of existence*. Nevertheless, art is also a way to question the main structures of power and knowledge. Foucault analyzes, from this multidisciplinary perspective, several key works by Magritte and Velázquez, with an assumed preference for deep look into a stabilized, historical, classicized artistic medium: the painting. Obviously, the research of these two examples is characterized by the analysis of the relationship between language, representation, the definition and the architecture of the visible.

“The image is never innocent” illustrates the fact that images are never objective, if we determine objectivity as representations of reality. Images are always constructed by a complex inner grammar, regarding choices of color, perspective, framing, lighting, but also, they are very linked with context or specific ideological or political agendas. All the images pack the weight of cultural, social context and elements of technology etc. making them subjective and never innocent.

Keywords: *Michel Foucault; Heterotopias; Diego Velázquez – Las Meninas; René Magritte; Surrealism; Visual Arts*

Foucault has a constant concern with analyzing the structure and role of images, but also characteristics of the visual arts, viewed inside a complex, interdisciplinary context. Although he was not an art critic, his ideas about power, *the gaze*, and representation, radically changed the way we understand images¹. For instance, following his methodology of inquiring the role and status of images in the modern society the assertion that “the image is never innocent” is associated with theoretical

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¹ James D. Faubion (ed), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (Essential Works of Foucault, Vol. 2), The New York Press, 1998, pp. 215-221.

perspectives on visual culture, photography, and film studies. Foucault claims that the act, the process of creating, generating an image is never innocent; it is a conscious assumed choice, an adaptation, an action of framing and tuning our perception of the world.

His influence on contemporary art and art history approaches a series of structural and conceptual aspects. One of the most prominent debates, the relation between art and power, is inquired through the binomial elements' visibility² and power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault analyzes the concept of the Panopticon, a prison where everyone is seen without being able to see who is watching them; this mechanism of surveillance changed the attributes of art, from an object with aesthetic purpose into a tool for social and political analysis. Furthermore, artists began to document and investigate, developing specific artistic tools, using a whole series of mediums: video art, immersive artistic installation etc. how public or private institutions: museums, artistic NGOs, galleries control how we "look/see" and what we are allowed to observe, detect and assimilate from reality.

Inside the long-time based relationship between art and power, Foucault claims that art and madness, in the sense of "something else", different from reason, can behave as an escape from the normative, punitive and disciplinary mechanisms of society.³

Another important theme addressed by the French philosopher in his studies on the social role of art directly targets the liaison of art seen as a form of resistance. Foucault regarded art not as a plain, elementary decoration, but as a complex form of *subjectification*.⁴ Through art, the individual can reshape, recreate and extend himself outside the normative rules established by society. This concept has massively influenced conceptual art, performance art after the mid of the 20th century, but also was an important boost for activism in art, perceiving the artist's body actively placed in a battlefield against medical, political, economic or social power. For Foucault images intently construct significance, meaning and content rather than passively recording them.

The act of an artist of assuming and choose a certain technical approach as: lens focal length, camera positioning, lighting, perspectival assemblages, color and filters; obviously alter the representation of reality. In addition, the image must be seen inside and in relation with the whole context, which can dictate how its truth is observed and perceived, every image is framed and shaped by culture, power structures, and political objectives, or by embedded ideologies.

For example, photography, commonly perceived as the most objective among the artistic mediums, host the "weight of what has come before," often involving with themes like patriarchy or historical narratives, in subtle backpack of historical and social load.

² Concept of *visibility* understood from the perspective of the interdisciplinary methodology that defines the mechanisms and role of the gaze in relation to the image. *Ibidem*, pp. 176-182.

³ Michel Foucault, *A supraveghea si a pedepsi. Nasterea inchisorii*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997, pp. 331-357.

⁴ *Subjectification* understood as part of the process of becoming a "subject" used by Foucault in the context where signifies how social, cultural, or pedagogical forces shape an individual's identity. James D. Faubion, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-167.

Every image, received or not as an artistic work, painting, photograph, sculpture, video or new media art is unmistakably involved in a network of power and knowledge. Part of his influence in art critic is that art stopped being perceived as seeking only “the beautiful” associated with aesthetic function, art has an extensive capacity to question “truth” and the way we are governed and driven by our gaze. Michel Foucault’s influence on contemporary art embodies a mosaic of intersections between philosophy and artistic practices representative for the second half of the 20th century, which reverberates even nowadays. His attempt centered on the relationships between power, knowledge, and subjectivity, offered creators and artists a series of conceptual instruments through which they could question the norms, institutions, and invisible mechanisms that shape human perception and different stages of experience. Although Foucault was not an art theorist or curator, in the way we refer to these professions inside the contemporary art field, his concepts had a weighty and subtle impact on the way art is generated and produced, interpreted or exhibited in the most important cultural institutions or the uttermost contemporary artists. Among Foucault’s fundamental concepts is that of “power-knowledge”⁵, which advocates that power is not only repressive, but also productive, able to generate discourses, shaping institutions and patterns of subjectivity.⁶ Contemporary artists have advanced this idea in order to document and deconstruct the structures of authority in the artistic field.

In the contemporary culture museums, galleries and other systems of artistic legitimization have thus become objects of critical reflection. Foucault profoundly changed the institutional practices such as the established institutional critique and institutional authority. Starting with conceptualism, artists have begun to exhibit not only works, but also the artistic processes and mechanisms that determine what is considered art, who decides this and under what conditions. For example, the American artist Bruce Nauman clearly said in his early days “*If I was an artist, and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing in the studio must be art.*”⁷

Most of the conceptual artists, especially from the 60s, 70s and 80s have integrated this vision into their work, exploring how text, archives, and documents can become artistic materials. After Foucault, art is no longer perceived just a visual representation, but also a space for reflection on language and its limits, and probably one of the best examples of artistic practices following this pattern of thinking is Bruce Nauman and his language games – the neon series, which were translated and transformed into artistic installations.

⁵ For Foucault the *power-knowledge* concept claims that knowledge and power are inseparable, mutually co-constitutive, but definitively not mutually exclusive. Power generates knowledge, and conversely, knowledge reinforces power, molding truths and societal norms rather than revealing or discovering them, often influencing who operates authority in society and communities.

⁶ Joseph J. Tanke, *Foucault’s Philosophy of Art: A Genealogy of Modernity*, Continuum Publishing House, London, 2009, pp. 170-185.

⁷ Nancy Spector, *The Guggenheim Museum: A-Z*, Guggenheim Publishing, New York, 5th edition, 2005, p. 214.



Bruce Nauman – *None Sing Neon Sign* – 1970 & *Run for Fear*
 – *Fun from Rear* Ruby-red and cool-white neon, 33 x 61.6 x 3.8 cm
 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Panza Collection, 1991

Nonetheless, Foucauldian analysis of discourse had an extensive contribution to reevaluate the role of language in art. For Foucault, discourses are not simple elements of communication, but systems able to structure reality and delimit what can be explained, said or thought about reality.

A further essential operative concept introduced by Foucault is that of the “archaeology” and “genealogy” of knowledge, he asserts an analysis of history that does not follow a linear evolution, but highlights the ruptures, discontinuities and transformations of discourses. This point of view has inspired artists to reimagine and revise history and collective memory. Alternatively, of presenting a coherent, official and stable narrative, many contemporary art works highlight the fragility and constructed character of the history and the past. Artists use archives, historical images and documents to reveal alternative or marginalized perspectives. Correspondingly, Foucault’s interest in the politics of the body and the way that individuals are disciplined and controlled by society has profoundly influenced performance art. In his writings about institutions such as prisons, hospitals or schools, Foucault displays how the body becomes an object of surveillance and norming. Contemporary performance artists have taken up this theme, exploring the limits of the body, vulnerability and the relationship between the individual and authority. In this context, body becomes a venue of resistance, but also an ideological space in which power manifests its authority. The concept of *panopticism* analyzed by Foucault, inspired by the model of the panopticon prison initiated by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century has had a particular resonance in contemporary art, especially in the context of present digital society.⁸ Foucault describes a system in which individuals’ self-control due to the constant possibility of being observed. Many contemporary artists have revisited and adapted this idea into works and artistic installations that explore surveillance, privacy, and the loss of anonymity. New media art, video installations,

⁸ Michel Foucault, *op. cit.*, pp. 230-254.

digital art, and urban artistic interventions have become vehicles through which these themes are called and investigated, often placing the viewer, through an immersive situation, in the position of being simultaneously observer and observed.

Foucault extensively perused the mechanisms in which identity is constructed through social norms, discourses and political practices. His perspective has had a massive impact on developing gender based, feminist, queer and postcolonial theories and artistic discourses. Contemporary artists have followed these ideas to review norms of gender, sexuality, and race, emphasizing their constructed and historical contingent character. Instead of accepting identities as fixed and natural, contemporary art treats them as fluid, dynamic highlighting a negotiable process for their assemble.

An important aspect is the relationship between art and institutions of political and social control which is unfold by the methodology of analyzed the way in which modern institutions structure, define and regulate the lives of individuals in different societies. For instance, in contemporary art, this phenomenon expands into an increased interest in marginal spaces, peripheral and social groups and excluded voices. Artists assiduously commenced to work with disadvantaged communities, traumatic experiences due to social or political injustice in order to create participatory art projects. As follows, art becomes a tool for social investigation and intervention, not just a product/object with pure aesthetic purpose. The Foucauldian notion of “biopolitics” has influenced many contemporary artistic practices. The biopolitics concept, also introduced by the French philosopher, refers to the way in which power manages the biological life of populations.

Themes such as health, medicine, genetics, and the control of the body on a collective level are nowadays among the most important narratives of contemporary art. Proposing and displaying works and artistic projects that address these topics, questioning social ethics and the mechanisms of interventions the relationship between the individual and systems of power with impact on public and private life.

An important theme of Foucault’s research on art and its role in forming and defining the mechanisms of looking is represented by painting. The relationship between Michel Foucault and painting represents a seminal meeting point between philosophy, the history of ideas, and the visual arts. His analysis of the relationship between what we see and what we know, published in his famous work *Words and Things* (1966), Foucault select as case study the work signed by the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez *Las Meninas*. He used this specific example to expose and demonstrate how visual representation is in fact never neutral nor innocent. The painting becomes a space where the artist’s gaze, the position of the viewer, and the structures of power and knowledge of that specific period encounter, they create a sort of methodology of intersection.⁹ Foucault shows that the image does not simply reflect reality, but constructs it through a system of invisible conventions and rules.

⁹ Catherine M. Soussloff (ed.), *Foucault on the Arts and Letters: Perspectives for the 21st Century*, Rowman & Littlefield International, Maryland, 2026, pp. 148 -219.

For Foucault, painting deeply relates with the concept of episteme¹⁰, defined as set of rules that determine what can be known in a given historical period. Hence, the way in which artists choose to paint does not involve only personal talent or style, but also reflects the limits and possibilities imposed by the culture and discourses of their period, following a cultural, politic, aesthetic context. The transition from classical to modern representations reflects a profound change in the way human being relates to the world and himself. Another important aspect spotted by Foucault is the relationship between the visible and the invisible, the author advises that painting does not only show what is present on the canvas, but also what is hidden: power structures, ideologies, social norms. In this context, the image becomes a place of tension between what is exposed and what remains truly unsaid, so the painting can be interpreted as a discourse, similar to language, able to transmit meanings beyond appearances. Foucault's main interest reflects in how the gaze is organized, what is the inner architecture of the complex social structure of the gaze. Who is looking? From what position? What is allowed to be seen and what is hidden? These kind questions are imperative in the analysis of painting, they are able to explain and expose the power and the dynamic between artist, subject, and viewer.



Diego Velázquez – Las Meninas – 1656
Oil on canvas, 318 x 276 cm – Prado Museum in Madrid

Foucault's relationship with painting does not reveal or follow the methodology of a classical aesthetic theory, discloses, in a deeply philosophical way, a completely new approach to the image and the whole context where the image is generated. Painting becomes, in his vision, a tool for exploring how knowledge,

¹⁰ Michel Foucault claims that the episteme concept is the unconscious, an operating system of knowledge that sets what can be known and accepted as truth within a specific historical period of time. This system acts as an historical a priori organizing the discourse and shaping the limits of thought even before conscious ideas are generated.

power, and representation merge; influence each other and how they intersect in certain period. Foucault proposes a new way of seeing, challenging us to refer to art not simply as a form of expression, but as a complex system of meanings that reflects and shapes the world in which we live. His analyses of Diego Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas* represents one of the most dense and influential analyses in the history of aesthetics and the philosophy of art. His argument is not just a description of a painting, but a profound meditation on the relationship between representation, gaze, knowledge, artist's role and subject. Foucault constructs this interpretation, focusing on the mechanisms of visuality and the epistemological implications of the painting.

He starts from the hypothesis that *Las Meninas*, painted by Velázquez in 1656, is not a simple court scene, but a complex device of representation, it depicts Infanta Margarita surrounded by her ladies-in-waiting, dwarfs, a dog, a courtier, and even the painter himself. The mirror in the background reflects the faces of King Philip IV his Queen Mariana. A common narrative court scene becomes, in Foucault's interpretation, an enigma of the gaze structured by the equation who looks and who is looked at? The key role in this analysis is set by the position of the painter; Velázquez appears in the painting, standing in front of a large canvas, looking in the direction of the viewer. The involvement, incorporation of the artist in his own work, what usually would be called a self-portrait, generates a fracture, a schism in the traditional convention of representation. The painter is no longer an invisible mediator, but becomes part of the whole scene depicted; Foucault claims that Velázquez's gaze seems to be directed towards a focal point placed outside the painting, suggesting the presence of an invisible model, a model that corresponds with the position of the viewer. An apparatus that attracts the viewer into the structure of the painting, he takes the place of the king and queen, whose faces appear only, reflected in the mirror, which is also a central element of the scene. The insertion of the mirror does not simply reflect, but creates a game of a series of substitutions. The image of the two monarchs is not directly present, is premeditated, mediated, suggesting that center of power and authority is constructed through representation, not through immediate presence. Foucault depicts this configuration as a staging of absence. The king and queen are simultaneously present and absent: they are present, represented in the pictorial space itself, but they are involved in all the characters' gazes, because the Infanta and the ladies-in-waiting seem to look towards them. This network of gazes creates a complex system in which no point is stable. A significant element that shapes the construction and the reading trajectory of this work relates with the distribution of space. The painting is organized into several planes: the foreground, occupied by the characters; the middle plane, where the painter is; and the background, dominated by the mirror and the open door, where a character appears in the light.

It is easy to notice a certain stratification, which manifests not only compositional, but also epistemological, a layering system that reflects the way in which knowledge is organized: through levels of representation but also through distances between subject and object. In the background, an open door

unfolds an additional dimension, where the character seems to be in motion, placed between entrance and exit. The light flowing from strongly contrasts with the darkness of the studio, Foucault interprets that field as a vanishing point, but also as a metaphor for exteriority, which escapes the representation itself. The main effect of these artistic methodologies makes the painting expand; open to a beyond the bounds that cannot be fully captured. In fact, what Foucault sees in *Las Meninas* is an assumed critique that the artist does, spotting a crisis of classical representation, because during Renaissance and Baroque representation was endowed as a transparent relationship between subject and object, convention that in Velázquez's painting is undermined. The gaze is no longer a neutral instrument, but becomes problematic, announces a series of questions about the mechanics of seeing. Who sees? From what position? What is truly visible and what is completely absconded? Foucault aims the fact that this painting forecasts a major epistemological shift that will become axiomatic in modernity, in *Las Meninas*, there is no privileged point of view, the subject of knowledge is no longer stable and central, but fragmented and dispersed. All the elements: the spectator, the painter, the characters, and the monarchs are bound in a game of reflections and substitutions that completely undermines certainty and trust. Foucault direct references towards the meaning of this work claims to be a "representation of representation."

The artist does not show a scene, in the traditional way of representation, but reflects on its own status as an image, the involvement of the painter, the canvas, and the mirror converts this painting into a visual metadiscourse, inquiring the conditions and the possibilities of representation. There is also another layer of this interpretation involving the political element and the dynamic of power and authority. For a better understanding of this level we need to invoke again the concept of panopticon, so, the presence of monarchs, even in their absence, suggests that power is omnipresent but invisible; the presence of power and authority structures the visual field and stages the positions of subjects. Foucault intuitively saw in this painting an early illustration of how power operates through representation and discourse.

Foucault interpretation of Velázquez's work remains consistent and relevant today, requiring us to reevaluate the way we see, understand and contextualize images. This matter, which inquires the architecture of seeing sets as one of the most important themes in the contemporary society, dominated by visuality, it activates the questions introduced by Foucault about the gaze, the subject, and representation.

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