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PAINTING (AND PHOTOGRAPHY)

TWO OF FOUCAULT'S signature essays on painting are especially well known: the analysis of Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, and an essay on René Magritte that includes a striking account of how abstraction displaced representation in Western art. In addition, many of Foucault's texts are studded with acute descriptions of major painters from Breughel to Warhol; he gave lecture courses on quattrocento painting and Manet and published essays on several contemporary artists (Rebeyrolle, Fromanger, Michals). Since one of Foucault's major themes was the relation between visibility and discursivity, it is not surprising to find that painting is a favored site for exploring variations in this conjuncture. Throughout his work, painting and the visual arts serve as emblems of the *epistemes* that characterize distinct epochs of thought. At the same time, Foucault's engagement with contemporary art reveals his sense of its political significance and force. These themes coincide in Foucault's continuing interest in how art forms can break with acquired archives, apparatuses, and practices. In (mostly implicit) contrast with romantic concepts of genius (as in Kant, or more generally in the time of "man and his doubles"), Foucault attempted to analyze and articulate the processes of rupture and transformation that mark specific changes in what is called style. Dominant trends in art history either sought to trace relatively continuous developments (following a Hegelian lineage) or operated with sets of categories derived from *Geistesgeschichte* such as Heinrich Wölfflin's linear and painterly modes. Philosophical aesthetics (as Derrida observes) has systematically (from Plato to Heidegger) given premier status to the linguistic arts of poetry and literature. Both of those ways of understanding visual art are put into question by Foucault's engagement with painting and photography.

In *The History of Madness*, Foucault articulates a distinction between visibility and discursivity in sixteenth-century constructions of madness. He contrasted writers like Erasmus and Sebastian Brant, who treated madness as an occasion for instruction and moral satire, with painters like Breughel, Bosch, and Grünewald,

who displayed madness as much more dangerous, eruptive, and invasive than the literary parallels they occasionally followed. This contrast leads to a reflection on a “cleavage” (*partage*) that emerged then between literary and visual art. If texts and images had once been mutually illustrative, now “painting was beginning the long process of experimentation that would take it ever further from language, regardless of the superficial identity of a theme. Language and figure are beginning to take two different directions” (EHM, 16). Whereas Foucault’s emphasis in *The History of Madness* involves the presentation of madness, he soon expanded his observation in a review of books by the art historian Erwin Panofsky. He praises Panofsky for mapping the complexity of the figurative and discursive: “chiasm, isomorphism, transformation, translation, in a word, all of the festoon [*feston*] of the visible and sayable that characterize a culture in a moment of its history” (FDEI, 621). In the case of painters like Bosch, the *partage* of discourse and figure meant that the power of the image was “no longer to teach but to fascinate,” a power that brings it close to the dream. Earlier, Foucault had developed a highly visual account of dreaming, taking issue with Freud’s more linguistic analysis (EDE). He describes sixteenth-century painting as “opening the way for a symbolism more often associated with the world of dreams”; that is, creating a public or collective dream (EHM, 17).

Just as *The Order of Things* is a definitive break with phenomenology, which is trapped in the oscillations of “man and his doubles,” so its opening essay on *Las Meninas* can be read as a critical alternative to the concept of painting in phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty (whose philosophy of ambiguity is seen as a typical product of the analytic of finitude). Merleau-Ponty had taken modern painting, especially as it took shape in Cézanne, to be a form of phenomenological inquiry: it suspends the natural attitude in order to explore forms of intentionality through which the visible world takes shape for consciousness. Foucault reads *Las Meninas* archaeologically rather than phenomenologically. Eschewing anything like the psychological account Merleau-Ponty offers of Cézanne’s continuous effort to discover the roots of perception, Foucault articulates the principles by which “classical” painting constructs its representations. As he suggests in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he takes it to be possible to delineate the rules, sequences, and transformations that a certain form of painting assumes, embodies, and occasionally disrupts or transforms (EAK, 193–194). He therefore describes *Las Meninas* in terms of its deploying multiple strategies of representation typical of the classical age, including linear perspective and the simulation of “natural” light within the image. Moreover, this remarkable painting pushes the limits of representation by explicitly thematizing the roles of artist, model, and spectator involved in the classical model. Foucault takes note of the painting’s apparent attempt to inventory all elements and aspects of representation (the core of the classical *episteme*). In viewing the painting, we must successively imagine the place in front of the picture as occupied by the royal models, the artist, or the spectator (ourselves). No one of these representative functions

can claim priority, so the position outside the painting, which seems to promise us a definitive understanding, is instead the scene of an endless oscillation among these constituents of representation. Foucault finally reads this indeterminate oscillation as the sign of an absence marking our modern distance from classical painting and indeed from the entire practice of classical representation. The three oscillating figures could be regarded as analogues of the three *epistemes* analyzed in *The Order of Things*: the sovereign models would personify that of resemblance, the painter that of classical representation, and the spectator that of man, the finite being tasked with comprehending his own finitude (Tanke 2010, 33–40). Foucault's reading of the painting reveals "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" (EOT, 16). The absent figure is "man," who will be delineated more fully as an "empirical-transcendental doublet," a being whose task is to discover the conditions of his own finitude; Foucault will argue that this is an impossible and endless task, one that could be abandoned if, as seems to be happening, the figure of man is erased "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (EOT, 386–387).

Foucault's essay is both an instance of *ekphrasis*, the verbal description of a visual work of art, and a reflection on that genre. Given his insistence on the distinction between visibility and discursivity, as well as their multiple forms of conjunction, it should not be surprising that Foucault is sensitive to the question of how his verbal analysis is related to the painting as a visual image. At the same time that the text of the essay is disclosing an absence in the painting, that of man, the writing marks its own distance from the image. The essay itself is divided into two numbered parts. The first proceeds by rigorously excluding any discussion of the historical identities of the figures in the painting or of art-historical context. This has the effect of defamiliarizing the work and forcing us to concentrate on its play of representation, a focus intensified by Foucault enlisting us within a "we," a community of observers under the guidance of a connoisseur. The second section of the essay takes a new turn by asking whether it is now time to name the persons in the image (Velazquez, the royal figures, and their entourage). Warning that this could lead to a reductive approach, Foucault insists that "the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say." This relation, Foucault maintains, should be kept open, so as to "treat their incompatibility as a starting-point for speech instead of an obstacle to be avoided" (EOT, 9). At the same time, there is no explicit reflection on the feigned community of "we" who follow the path of Foucault's *ekphrasis*. Yet such reflection becomes unavoidable much later in the text, as Foucault introduces the analysis of "Man and His Doubles" by reiterating the absence implied by the painting. It is as if man, "enslaved sovereign, observed spectator," appears "in that vacant space towards which Velazquez's whole

painting was directed" (EOT, 312). We readers realize that in order to discover the absence of man in the painting, we ourselves have to assume the initially unnamed position of "enslaved sovereign, observed spectator." Yet once such a position has been named, it becomes possible to take our distance from it and ask, as Foucault does, whether this position is inevitable or rather one that arose in a specific context and is subject to disappearance.

Foucault saw Manet as a painter who rethought the position of the viewer. Soon after publishing *The Order of Things*, Foucault took up temporary residence in Tunisia, where he lectured on quattrocento painting and Manet. His projected book on Manet (*Le noir et les couleurs*) was apparently never completed; however, a transcript of one lecture, along with some passages in "Fantasia of the Library," indicate how Foucault understood a body of work that overturned the conventions of representational painting (EMP). Just as Flaubert produced a self-conscious literature of the library and the archive in a novel like *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (itself inspired by a painting, as Foucault notes), Manet took the museum and its conditions of display as a frame to be altered and manipulated. Manet, in this analysis, rejected certain fictions of the art of his predecessors. These involved the idea that the canvas was a virtual window on a three-dimensional segment of an actual or possible world, a supposition enabled by the picture's use of linear perspective and the simulation of lighting internal to the painting. Drawing on Foucault's later, more explicit development of the concepts of apparatus and diagram (as in *Discipline and Punish*), we can articulate the lines of Manet's innovations. Bentham's Panopticon realized a diagram of visibility: each individual cell of the prison was observable from a central observation tower, thus encouraging prisoners to assume that they could be the subjects of surveillance at any moment and so discipline themselves to meet the behavioral expectations of the prison system. The museum, which rose and flourished in the nineteenth century, produced another viewing apparatus in which each canvas presented itself to the observer as a window opening onto an imagined scene. Manet effectively transformed this arrangement by creating paintings that insisted on their two-dimensionality and did not simulate an internal source of lighting. One no longer had the experience of looking through a window but of engaging with a flat canvas on the wall. By emphasizing rectangular elements and deliberately distorting perspectival expectations (as in *The Bar at the Folies Bergère*), Manet established a new diagram of viewing. Even the looks of the figures within the painting contribute to unsettling the experience of viewing, either by seeming to stare directly at the viewer (as in the scandalous *Olympia*), looking at the invisible (*The Gare Saint-Lazare*), or forming a set of disconnected gazes (*The Balcony*, with its disturbing trio).

"Force of Flight," an essay on the painter Paul Rebeyrolle, extends the analysis of visual framing explored in the lecture on Manet, making more explicit the possibilities of resistance and rebellion latent in the account of the museum and its

diagrams of vision. The subject of Foucault's essay is a series of paintings entitled *Dogs*, each depicting a dog in captivity, in various stages of confinement, struggle, suffering, or escape. Constructed as collages with wire lattices and wooden frames, the works reinforce the materiality of the situations represented. Foucault notes that the conditions of display also emphasize the sense of constriction: "Here you are held fast by ten pictures, that circle a room in which all the windows have been carefully closed. In prison, in your turn, like the dogs that you see standing on their hind legs and butting up against the grillwork?" Who are we who create, gaze at, or turn our eyes away from prisons? Foucault was involved at this time in political activity focused on French prison conditions; he takes Rebeyrolle's series as concerned with "the prison ... a place where forces arise and show themselves, a place where history takes shape, and whence time arises" (FDE2, 401). The featureless windows forming the background of the *Dogs* series are only illusory exits. Leaving through the window would leave the apparatus of confinement intact. Rather, "in human struggles, nothing great ever passes by way of the windows, but everything, always, by the triumphant crumbling [*l'effondrement*] of the walls" (FDE2, 403). Here, as in his account of Manet, Foucault shows how the apparatus of painting can deploy conventions of representation against themselves, but now the political potential of this reflexive move and its questioning of the viewer has become more evident.

In *This Is not a Pipe*, Foucault traces another route painting has taken in the wake of Manet's undoing of representation. Foucault claims that the movement of twentieth-century abstraction challenged two constitutive principles of Western painting that ruled since the fifteenth century: (1) rigorous separation of linguistic and visual signs, and (2) the assumption that resemblance implies affirmation, or that painting refers to a world external to itself (ENP, 32). Klee is credited with breaking down the first of these protocols by introducing words, letters, and signs (e.g., arrows) as compositional elements into paintings that retain a representational aspect (elsewhere Foucault suggests that Klee has an emblematic relation to his time analogous to that Velazquez had to his [FDE1, 544]). Kandinsky broke with the second protocol by first introducing nonrepresentative "things" into his paintings that were "neither more nor less objects than the church, the bridge, or the knight with his bow," and then producing paintings consisting solely of shapes, colors, and their relations (ENP, 34–35).

Foucault sees Magritte as intensifying the assault on representation begun by Klee and Kandinsky. Foucault does this by challenging both principles: separation and affirmation. Yet Magritte accomplishes this not through abstraction but by pushing the techniques of representation to their limits. Impossible objects and proportions, perspectival distortions, or incoherent but "realistic" scenes are produced with exaggerated representational clarity. Words, sentences, inscriptions, and titles play constitutive roles in Magritte's canvases. So far, Foucault suggests, a painting like *Les deux mystères* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*) can be compared to a calligram, a diagrammatic

representation formed by written words and letters. Yet to speak more carefully, he continues, we must describe the work as an “unraveled calligram” in which neither the visual nor discursive order becomes dominant; the painting sets up an unlimited interplay of the two modes.

While Foucault highlights Magritte’s rejection of the affirmative sense of the image (the implicit claim to resemble something external to itself), he sees another affirmation emerging in his work. Magritte’s paintings affirm the simulacrum or phantasm, the image without an original, and therefore proliferating without limit. Freed from the constraints of resemblance, the image floats free, like the “pipe” in the famous painting. Here Foucault draws on Deleuze’s transvaluation of the simulacrum (as in *The Logic of Sense*) that Plato had attempted to marginalize. Other partners in this conversation are Klossowski, whose rethinking of the simulacrum Foucault explored in “The Prose of Actaeon,” and Nietzsche, the thinker of eternal recurrence. “Seven Seals of Affirmation,” the title of the concluding section of *This Is not a Pipe*, paraphrases that of “The Seven Seals,” a song that Nietzsche’s Zarathustra sings to celebrate the thought of recurrence. That thought can be understood as a radical intensification of multiplicity, where each moment has an infinite depth. That Nietzsche calls these moments *Augenblicke*, “twinklings of the eye” or “momentary glances,” enables Foucault to play on the idea of a multiplicity of the visual image, a theme to which he alludes in his essay on Flaubert (ELCP, 101). Foucault also detected the infinitely multiple or “eternal phantasm” in Pop Art, which he invokes in the last line of *This Is not a Pipe* (“Campbell, Campbell, Campbell, Campbell”) and in his brief *ekphrasis* of Andy Warhol’s images of repetition in “Theatrum Philosophicum.” Arising from those images “that refer to each other to eternity” he discovers that “the striped form of the event tears through the darkness, and the eternal phantasm informs that soup can, that singular and depthless face” (ELCP, 189).

Other possibilities of repetition and fantasy are enabled by photography; these are in turn repositionings of the viewing subject. Foucault followed transformations in the apparatus of the visual arts by investigating several such adaptations and mutations. He provides a brief genealogy in “Photogenic Painting,” where he recalls the freedom of experimentation in early photography’s many ways of altering and recording the image, before the emergence of a canonical form of photographic art in the early twentieth century. Foucault’s focus in this essay is the art of Gérard Fromanger, who produces images by painting over projected photographic images of street scenes and public life. For Foucault, this technique mobilizes the image: “Fromanger’s paintings do not capture images: they do not fix them, they pass them on” (EPGP, 95). Here painting abandons any aspiration to fixity and solidity, embodying in its form the nomadic transitivity of contemporary life: “this is the autonomous transhumance of the image ... it agrees to become a thoroughfare,

an infinite transition, a busy and crowded painting” (EPGP, 102). Here Foucault introduces the theme of territoriality into his account of art.

In “Thought and Emotion” (1982), Foucault discussed the work of the American photographer Duane Michals (FDE4, 243–250). Emphasizing the dreamlike quality of Michals’s images and photographic narratives, Foucault returns, in a sense, to themes from his early exploration of the visual, the 1954 essay “Dream and Existence.” Michals experiments with photography in a different direction than Fromanger. Whereas Fromanger took painting into the street through photography, Michals captures and provokes fragile moments of “thought-emotion.” Foucault endorses Michals’s observation that photography has an advantage in provoking thoughts about the unseen, spectral, and dreamlike because it is initially taken to be a more realistic medium than painting. The text is contemporary with Foucault’s later writings and lectures on the aesthetics of existence and the process of subjectivization. In *The Care of the Self*, Foucault notes that the physicians and writers on love testify to the power of visual images (*phantasiai*) whether remembered, dreamed, or seen (EHS3, 136–139). Michals, as a gay man whose work alters the possibilities of photography while exploring varieties of sexuality, gender, and fantasy, becomes an exemplar of the self-experimenting artist and the practitioner of an aesthetics of existence.

Gary Shapiro

SEE ALSO

Literature

Madness

The Visible

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

SUGGESTED READING

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