

## **The Sign and the Image in Michel Foucault (Approaches to Art and Meaning)**

**Dr Slimane – Mokhtari.**

**University:** Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University, Mostaganem, Algeria.

**Specialization:** Philosophy.

**Email:** [mokhtarislidane1985@gmail.com](mailto:mokhtarislidane1985@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the shifting ontological and epistemological status of the "sign" and the "image" within Michel Foucault's archaeological framework. Moving beyond traditional semiotic and iconographic approaches, the study explores how Foucault dismantles the classical link between representation and reality, particularly through his analysis of the transition from the Renaissance "episteme"—where signs were viewed as intrinsic components of the world—to the Classical and Modern frameworks. By analysing Foucault's seminal readings of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and his discourse on the materiality of the visible, this research highlights how the interplay between the "sayable" (discourse) and the "visible" (image) functions as a mechanism for the historical production of knowledge. The paper argues that for Foucault, the sign is not a passive vehicle of meaning but a historically contingent instrument of power. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how Foucault's inquiry into the visual and the discursive provides a critical "tool-box" for understanding the formation of objects of knowledge and the institutional regulation of visibility in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Michel Foucault, The Sign, The Image, Episteme, Representation, Discourse, Archaeology of Knowledge, Visibility.

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, Foucauldian studies have undergone a radical shift in the interpretation of the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, particularly with the publication of his lectures at the Collège de France. While traditional readings focused on the concepts of disciplinary power and biopolitics as tools of subjugation, the concept of spiritual politics has emerged as a key link for understanding how subjectivity intersects with political action. For Foucault, spirituality is not understood in the traditional theological sense, but rather as a set of practices through which the individual transforms himself to become capable of attaining the truth.

The concept of spiritual politics is one of the most controversial aspects of Michel Foucault's intellectual legacy, particularly in his later period, which began with his Collège de France lectures in 1978. While Foucault spent the 1970s deconstructing the society of discipline and analysing how docile bodies are produced, his trip to Iran (1978) and his readings of ancient Greek philosophy marked a fundamental shift. Foucault discovered that resistance cannot be based solely on a physical struggle of forces, but requires a different subjectivity. Here, spirituality emerged not as an escape from reality, but as a search, a practice, and an experience through which the agent transforms himself in order to reach the truth.

We are faced with an attempt to reinterpret "the semiology of the image" from an archaeological perspective, in which the visual sign becomes a tool for exposing structures of power and knowledge. From this standpoint, the study poses the following questions: How did Foucault redefine the function of the sign in his transition from the Renaissance to the Classical era? How did the image transform from a tool of correspondence into a space of absence and fragmentation? And what are the epistemological implications of the tension between what we see and what we say in shaping our contemporary consciousness of the image?

### Between the Visual and the Linguistic:

Foucault starts by looking at *painters* position in the painting. Here Velázquez is "standing a little back from his canvas looking closely at the model he painting. This is what Foucault is talking about" <sup>1</sup>.

The painter is looking at the model. This creates a kind of stillness. When the "painter is painting and the viewer is looking at the painting they are right in front of each other" <sup>2</sup>.

The viewer is us because we are the ones looking at the painting. We are the ones the painter is looking at. We can tell this because we are standing where the painter is looking. Foucault thinks this is like a game of mirrors. When we

look at the painting the painter is looking at us. This keeps going forth between the person looking at the painting and the person in the painting.

It is like the painter and the viewer are looking at each other and this is what Foucault is trying to say. Foucault likes art because it shows us the world in a way. He thinks art is important for understanding how we know things and how we see the truth. In his book *The Order of Things* Foucault talks about a painting called "Las Meninas" by Velázquez. He uses this painting to show how we see things and how we understand the world. He looks at the painting. The words we use to describe it and he tries to show how they are connected<sup>3</sup>

Foucault uses this painting because he wants to show how the painter sees the world. He wants to show what the signs and symbols in the painting mean and how they are, like the words we use to talk. In his writing Foucault says the painter steps back and looks at the model. The painter is trying to copy the model," He is looking at the viewer at the same time. The painter is looking at the viewer. The viewer is looking at the painting. This is what Foucault is trying to say about the painter<sup>4</sup> " and the viewer and Velázquez and the painting Las Meninas.

We can easily identify it, since this point is ourselves. Why is that, in Foucault's view? According to Foucault, it becomes and is embodied in a game of mirrors: when we look at the painting, the painter is looking at us at the same time, and in that moment an endless exchange takes place, "as the two significations the seeing and the seen—converge in a moment of embrace, or where the visible and the invisible meet. In his gaze upon us, the painter represents the invisible"<sup>5</sup> model he is painting, and the painting before us, in its perspective, represents the perceived visible. These icons or signs through the painter's posture, the gaze he directs, or even the window convey meaning, whether it be light, visual culture, or the mirror, as every artistic sign on the painting embodies the meaning of its representation, in a play of depiction and representation. Light in visual culture, Foucault intended to establish a new style that reinforces the hypothesis of the visible, citing Velázquez's painting, For light within the enigmatic frame of the painting radiates as if it were golden threads in the model's gaze, transporting his image there to find itself within this frame. This extreme window, barely indicated, transforms into a full light and a mixture that plays a normal role in representation (depiction)." Foucault continues his analysis of Velázquez's painting, reading the signs within its frame. Despite the crowded figures within it and what they express—conveying the painter's meaning or that of the viewer there is something more important, despite its position within the painting and its obscurity: "for it is the only element that performs its function with complete fidelity and allows us to see

what it is meant to reveal, but it is not the painting; rather, it is the mirror.”<sup>6</sup> For according to Foucault, while the mirror’s position in the painting does not attract attention, it plays a game of revelation and concealment at the very moment when the meanings of the other elements disappear.

### **The image must break free from the frame:**

Regarding the intersection of language and discourse, Michel Foucault allocates a substantial portion of *The Order of Things* to this thematic, effectively underscoring the aesthetic and artistic dimensions inherent in his philosophy—specifically, the dialectic between the visible and the articulable. While Foucault explores this dynamic extensively within that seminal work, it is further elucidated by Gilles Deleuze in his study *Foucault*. In this text, Deleuze provides an in-depth analysis of the relationship between linguistic and visual regimes, posing a fundamental question: how does knowledge manifest itself as a fine art?"

### **The Artistic Manifestation of Knowledge:**

Foucault does not confine himself to analysing gazes; his analysis extends to include the pictorial elements within the painting, such as the window and the light. The light in *The Maids* is not merely a technical element, but a tool for establishing a new style that reinforces the hypothesis of the visible. Light radiates within the painting like golden threads, transferring the model’s image into the representational frame, thereby “making the far window a medium that refracts the light to fulfil its functional role in the process of depiction”<sup>7</sup>

### **The Mirror and the Liberation of the Image from the Frame**

In Foucault’s analysis, the mirror is the most important element despite the ambiguity of its position; it is the faithful function that reveals what direct painting cannot. It plays a game of revealing and concealing when the signifiers of the other elements disappear, the mirror becomes a scene that embodies the “invisible” and makes it visible “<sup>8</sup>

This Foucauldian strategy aims to liberate the image from the grip of the rigid frame, which is consistent with the advice of ‘Pachico (Velázquez’s teacher) that “the image must step out of the frame”<sup>9</sup> “In this way, the painting becomes a form of structural and linguistic construction in which Foucault brings together painting and discourse.

Foucault approaches the issue from an understanding of language in relation to the image or vision and speech and explores “the world that speaks of itself through language and sees itself<sup>10</sup>” through vision, and the difference and contradiction between the visual and the linguistic, and the lack of connection between them, in his critique of the phenomenological conception, which understood the relationship from behind intentionality, particularly in the

matter of knowledge: “ Knowledge is doubly dual in a way that cannot be reduced or simplified; it is speech and vision, language and vision, and that is why there is no intentionality <sup>11</sup> “ This divergence between the two forms of knowledge brings us closer to Foucault’s task of understanding the formation of truth, and addresses a field of knowledge no less valuable or significant than the topics he has previously addressed.

In his analysis of the painting, Foucault posits that visual composition functions as a structural order equivalent to linguistic systems. He argues that vision, in the context of the painting, mirrors the status of the utterance in spoken language, possessing equal significance and depth. By viewing the painting as a text dense with signs and utterances—asserting that 'visions are, in their own right and in the light of historical formations, akin to paintings; their relation to the visible is like that of the utterance to the spoken or the written'—Foucault prompts a fundamental inquiry: Is language the sole medium of expression, and is it truly a prerequisite for understanding the world?"

Foucault, on the contrary, finds his fascination with the painting to be both an answer and a rejection: he is not mute, and his speech is language, and his silence is language; language cannot replace the thing, and the two are distinct. In his description of Velázquez’s painting, “the relationship between language and painting is finite, for the word is incomplete and stands before the visible, striving in vain to transcend it; yet neither can reduce the other, and in vain have we sought to make others see, through images, metaphors and comparisons, what we are now saying: for the place where it glimmers is not the place seen by the eyes, but rather the place defined by the sequence of linguistic structures<sup>12</sup>.” The text points to the importance of art and painting in Foucault’s philosophy, and their powerful influence on the concept of discourse; For paintings take shape and evolve in this world as silent signs, yet eloquent through their drawings, colours and lines: “Just as phrases are curves before they become sentences and ideas, so too are paintings lines of form before they become circles of colour.”<sup>13</sup>

The interplay of these three elements—knowledge, text and image—is a central concern he sought to establish in his analysis of the relationship between vision and language, as he sought to restore the artistic and aesthetic dimension of the world, as a language that is spoken and embodied in verbal signs through circles, lines and colours, for the world consists of overlapping structures of scenes and phrases, interspersed with breaks between them, such that neither can be reduced to the other; It is true that the process of thinking is formed by their intermingling, yet the truth is not a coincidence or a shared form, nor even a correspondence between two forms. Between speech and vision, or between

what is seen and what is expressed, there is a discrepancy; yet this difference does not imply the absence of an intertwined and overlapping relationship. It is true that each has its own distinct characteristics, signs and meanings, yet the process of thinking remains one, and what each seeks is knowledge and truth, and the search for their various manifestations. Thus, the materiality of vision resembles the materiality of language, for visuals are perceived as visible, and linguistic expressions are perceived as read and spoken. The process of thinking does not take place in isolation from other dimensions, but rather as a result of the interplay between language and image in that zone which separates them. Foucault believed that the world is constituted of spaces, each built upon the other from expressions and visuals, which together form the process of thinking.

Foucault embodies this interest through the visual and artistic signification in the history of madness in the classical era, through *The Ship of Fools*, the painting that expressed the symbolic meaning in the classical popular imagination, and the connotations embodied by the vision and the image regarding the status of the madman at a certain stage; that vision, in its lines, colours and figures, “is not one in which things are arranged and qualities organised in a particular way; rather, it is a visual composition in which light, shadow, and transparent and dark colours are distributed”<sup>14</sup>. As a language of visual signs no different from linguistic expressions, the world is brought into the light of day, and the truth implicit in visual discourse is revealed, expressing the dual process of thinking in the visual and the linguistic through its signs. Indeed, just as discourse is founded on the interplay of utterance and sign, so too does illness manifest itself in the clinic as a visual tableau, establishing a visual space of symptoms and signs ‘where the signs of diseases and their pathologies unfold in two dimensions, and at times as a pathological anatomy, in which those signs and symptoms bend again according to a third dimension, granting the eye anew the possibility of perceiving depth’. In his exploration of the image, Foucault attempts to link text and image to knowledge in general, since knowledge, vision, language and the process of thought are ultimately the result of the relationship between the scene and language; images are words, and a painting is ultimately a text full of artistic signs, as in semiotics, expressing culture and knowledge.

In his seminal work *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault examined how Western culture has organised its knowledge throughout the ages. In 1968, René Magritte sent him a letter discussing the concepts of ‘resemblance’ and ‘representation’. This correspondence inspired Foucault to write a lengthy article in 1968 for a literary journal, which he later expanded and published as a separate book in 1973 under the title *This Is Not a Pipe*.



Foucault's aim was to undermine the "visual and linguistic certainty" on which Western thought had relied for centuries, demonstrating that Magritte had succeeded through art in what Foucault himself was attempting to prove through philosophy.

### **An Analysis of the Painting 'Las Meninas': The Metaphysics of Absence**

Foucault opens his book *\*The Order of Things\** with a stunning archaeological analysis of the painting *\*Las Meninas\** by the Spanish artist Diego Velázquez, using it as an epistemological laboratory rather than merely a work of art, to extract the structure of classical representation and expose its internal contradictions [6]. This Foucauldian analysis can be unpacked along three main axes:

First: The Inversion of Vision: In the painting, the artist stands before his canvas and looks directly at us (the viewers). This situation overturns the traditional equation; the viewer, who believes they are contemplating the painting as a conscious subject, suddenly finds themselves the object of the painter's gaze and that of the other figures within the frame. We become the 'object' of the painting's gaze, whilst the painting becomes the 'beholder' and the external observer.

Second: The Sovereign Mirror: In the depths of the background, a small mirror appears, reflecting the image of the king and queen (Philip IV and his wife). Foucault sees this mirror as the sole and decisive 'sign' that reveals the true figures the painter is standing to depict, who occupy our place as viewers outside the painting. "The paradox here is that the actual centre of power and the primary subject of the representation is physically absent from the painting's real space, and is present only as an illusion and a faint reflection in the background of the scene"<sup>15</sup>.

Thirdly: The central void and the death of man: According to Foucault, the painting of the maids emphasises the impossibility of the 'beholding self' and the object of vision being present simultaneously within the space of classical representation. It is this central structural void in the painting that represents the absence of man prior to the emergence of the human sciences. Classical representation succeeds only when the human being, as a conscious subject, withdraws and is absent from the scene, allowing the transparent classificatory system to operate freely.

### **The Structural Tension between 'The Visible' and 'The Sayable':**

In his subsequent, in-depth study of the writings and drawings of the surrealist artist René Magritte, specifically in his book "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (This is Not a Pipe), Foucault deepens his radical analysis of the crisis of the sign and the image. Here, Magritte paints a pipe with meticulous precision and

writes beneath it the famous phrase: This is not a pipe”<sup>16</sup>. Foucault sees in this work a complete destruction of the icon and a definitive severing of the close bond that has historically linked the linguistic sign (the sayable) and the visual image (the visual). Here, the image no longer faithfully mimics external reality (Mimesis), but mimics itself and involves a network of self-references (Simulacrum). This tension represents the essence of epistemological modernity; for it is impossible for the visual to dissolve into the verbal, or for the verbal to fully encompass the visual, thereby creating a silent gap that cannot be filled.

### **The Image as a Dispositif of Power and Gazing:**

Michel Foucault’s analysis of the image cannot be separated from his subsequent intellectual shifts towards the study of the genealogy of power and its disciplinary apparatuses. For him, “ the concept of the image extends from the realm of the pictorial painting to the architecture of architectural and political vision, specifically in his analysis of the model of the ideal prison, The Panopticon, in his book Discipline and Punish “<sup>17</sup>

In this model, the image transforms from a mere aesthetic object into an all-encompassing “geometric structure of vision”. The prisoner is always in a position of being fully exposed to view but cannot see the guard (he is the object of vision, not the subject who sees), whilst the authority residing in the central tower sees everything without being seen. Here, the Gaze becomes a tool for producing truth and domesticating bodies; the image is no longer a representation of the world, but has become a strategic distribution of the spatial and the visible, enabling the exercise of power with extreme precision through absolute visual domination .

### **Deconstructing the Paradox: The Painting and the Phrase:**

In his subsequent, in-depth study of the writings and drawings of the Surrealist artist René Magritte, specifically in his book *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* Foucault deepens his radical analysis of the crisis of the sign and the image Here, Magritte paints a pipe with meticulous precision and writes beneath it the famous phrase: This is not a pipe. Foucault sees in this work a complete destruction of the ‘icon’ and a definitive severing of the close bond that has historically linked the linguistic sign (the spoken word) and the visual image (the visual). Here, the image no longer faithfully mimics external reality (Mimesis), but mimics itself and involves a network of self-references (Simulacrum). This tension represents the essence of epistemological modernity; for it is impossible for the visual to dissolve into the verbal, or for the verbal to fully encompass the visual, thereby creating a silent gap that cannot be filled, “ Magritte’s painting consists of two elements that are simple on the surface but complex in depth: An icon (a drawing of a pipe): drawn with great precision,



resembling the illustrations in school textbooks. A caption (written phrase): handwritten text in French reading: Ceci n'est pas une pipe This is not a pipe. Foucault poses the question: to what does the word this Ceci in the phrase refer “<sup>18</sup> ? He lists several possibilities that subvert the meaning :

The first possibility: This” refers to the drawing. In this case, the statement is entirely correct; for the drawing is not a real pipe that can be filled with tobacco and smoked, but merely colours on canvas.

- The second possibility: This’ refers to the phrase itself. In other words, the written sentence is not a pipe, but rather words and letters.
- The third possibility: ‘This’ refers to the entire composition (the drawing and the phrase together). The painting as a whole is not a pipe, but rather a work of art representing a pipe.

Through this labyrinth, Foucault explains that Magritte created a ‘rupture’ between the signifier and the signified, and shook the viewer’s intuitive certainty. Distinguishing between ‘Resemblance’ and ‘Similitude’

In this essay, Foucault draws a crucial philosophical distinction between two concepts that have emerged from the history of art and knowledge:

- Resemblance: This assumes the existence of a primary and authentic ‘original’, to which subsequent images are subordinate and resemble. This model is based on a hierarchy (the original at the top and the image at the bottom, serving it). Classical art was based on likening the painting to real reality.
- Similitude: This abolishes the idea of a ‘single original’. It is a series of copies and repetitions that resemble one another without any of them claiming to be the absolute truth. Magritte’s painting does not resemble a real pipe existing in the real world; rather, it is a ‘similitude’ that revolves within the realm of images and symbols.

Foucault argues that Magritte, through Surrealism, liberated art from the ‘authority of the original’ and turned it into a game of endless relationships and similitudes.

### **The Image as a Dispositif of Power and Gazing:**

Michel Foucault’s analysis of the image cannot be separated from his subsequent intellectual shifts towards the study of the genealogy of power and its disciplinary apparatuses. In this model, the image transforms from a mere aesthetic object into an all-encompassing “geometric structure of vision”. The prisoner is always in a position of being fully exposed to view but cannot see the guard “ he is the object of vision, not the subject who sees ”<sup>19</sup>, whilst the authority residing in the central tower sees everything without being seen. Here, the Gaze becomes a tool for producing truth and domesticating bodies; the image is no longer a representation of the world, but has become a strategic

distribution of the spatial and the visible, enabling " the exercise of power with extreme precision through absolute visual domination "20.

### The Shattering of the Two Traditional Principles of Western Art

Foucault argues that Western art from the fifteenth to the twentieth century was governed by two fundamental principles, which Magritte came along and completely shattered:

The first principle: the separation of linguistic representation and visual representation: traditionally, we either look at the image (the painting) or read the text the writing, and the two rarely overlap; and if they do, one is subordinate to the other the text explains the image, or the image illustrates the text. Magritte placed them on an equal footing in a contradictory relationship: the text negates the image, and the image poses a silent challenge to the text.

The second principle: the correspondence between resemblance and existence: art used to assume that if something resembled a pipe, then it represented a pipe, and the pipe existed. Magritte separated resemblance from existence; he painted a pipe and then told you, This is not a pipe, thereby cutting off the path of the mind that automatically links vision with the recognition of existence.

### Conclusion, Findings and Epistemological Outlook:

This academic study has arrived at a number of important epistemological conclusions regarding the issue of the sign and the image in Foucault's work:

Firstly: For Michel Foucault, the image is not a passive reflection or an innocent imitation of external reality, but rather a complex 'spatial arrangement' and a network of tense relationships between power structures and dominant discourses.

Secondly: The Foucauldian sign, in its advanced artistic manifestations whether in Velázquez or Magritte, is a problematic sign that points to emptiness and absence rather than to physical presence; it proclaims the absence of the human self and its illusory sovereignty over the visual world.

Thirdly: the archaeological turn in the study of the visual allows us to understand what might be called the history of visual silence; that is, to explore the fissures and boundaries between what can be seen and what can be said within a given epistemology, thereby opening up broad horizons for contemporary Visual Studies to deconstruct the mechanisms of visual hegemony in the current digital age.

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