

## FOUCAULT'S REPRESENTATION OF WORDS AND THINGS

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**Abstract.** This text analyzes Michel Foucault's developments on the relationship of representation between things and words in *The Order of Things*. Particularly, it focuses on his notion of representation presented in the preface of the book and in the chapter on Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, as well as in what Foucault identifies as the evolution of the notion in Classical Modern age and in Contemporary forms of analysis. From such an examination, it is concluded why, for Foucault, "man" lacks representation in human sciences.

**Keywords:** Foucault, Representation, The Order of Things, Classical age, Classification, Words, Things, Human sciences

Language is a permanent and fundamental subject in Michel Foucault's work; particularly, its capacity for representation. But, in his opinion, what does it represent? Things, power, the self, truth?

Foucault's exploration spans all areas of representation, without establishing criteria systematically to cover them all. Therefore, in order to understand his approach, we cannot deduce from a general principle its consequences at other levels. We ought to rather follow him in his exploration.

In order to begin to undertake such a task, I propose to analyze Foucault's developments on the more elemental relationship of representation, the one between things and words in *The Order of Things*.

*The Order of Things* is perhaps the most influential of Foucault's works and an obliged reference to try to define the notion of representation in his thought.

By using Borges story *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*, in the preface, to explain his approach, Foucault exemplifies what the study aims. He is not proposing an *a priori* theoretical framework.<sup>1</sup> The theory, if we can speak of it, will emerge from the empirical analysis of all the discourses chosen by Foucault. And these discourses seem to have been chosen because they share the characteristics of the analytical language of John Wilkins,<sup>2</sup> which, in turn, refers to something fundamental: the relationship between words and things.

What are the characteristics of this "language" that called Foucault's attention? That its arbitrary and potentially infinite classifications, not merely classify things,

but also themselves, which lead us to the limits of language and to the impossibility of finding the “classification of classifications” that could stabilize the relationship between words and things. That is to say, classifications allow us to think the relations between things, their neighborhood, but not “the common ground on which such meetings are possible” (Foucault, 1994: Preface xvi). Words can represent their relationships, but the space in which they relate each other, that makes them possible, is immeasurable; it escapes to the rules that language itself provides.

Where, then, are the things that we classify? They are certainly in language. But language is a kind of non-place: “an unthinkable space” (Foucault, 1994: Preface XVII). Therefore, we cannot appeal to a theoretical framework that allows us to explain the rules of representation in its entirety. Just as the “classification of classifications,” a theory would reduplicate to infinity. What we can do, rather, is to study those innumerable classifications and theories – in relation to which the former are generated – with the aspiration to identify theoretical sets, *epistemes*, each irreducible to the other.

There is no possibility, therefore, of conceptually determining the utopian place in which our discourses on the world could be reconciled; where we could order “harmoniously” all things. What we can deploy, in any case, are *heterotopias*;<sup>3</sup> a number of sites unrelated to each other – except for the fact that we can list them in a text, such as those of Borges or Foucault – that threaten the integrity not only of language but of history itself and of our desires.

As the classifications of aphasics, we can describe Foucault’s attempt as an effort of “creating groups then dispersing them again, heaping up diverse similarities, destroying those that seem clearest, splitting up things that are identical, superimposing different criteria, frenziedly beginning all over again” (Foucault, 1994: Preface XVIII), always concretely, through empirical exploration, not because of an inability to articulate a coherent theory but because the historical dissemination of our categories can reveal, as cases of aphasia, another consistency: that the analysis and understanding of the order of things will be sterile if one tries to impose it *a priori*, because any kind of relation of similarity, contiguity, or cause, is the result of applying a previous criterion. It is always essential to have a system that gives coherence to the elements, and this does not arise spontaneously from pure reason but from the effort of a will to manage things. “The fundamental codes of a culture [...] establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home” (Foucault, 1994: Preface xx). And the determination of such codes is not decided at the level of philosophy, science, or mathematics, but in a battle of theories to determine the order of things: “anterior to words, perceptions, and gestures [...] there is the pure experience of order and of its modes of being” (Foucault, 1994: Preface XXI).

What Foucault wants to study, therefore, is how the spaces of order have been instituted – as a kind historical *a priori*, as rationalities in their positivity – in or-

der to determine our way of representing things, through a history of their epistemological fields –the sets of systems that enable to conceive similarities between things – ; which, in fact, “is not so much a history, in the traditional meaning of the word, as an ‘archeology’” (Foucault, 1994: Preface XXI).

The chapter on Velázquez's *Las Meninas* is a kind of metaphor that condenses the qualities that, for Foucault, we must take into account to analyze a representation. In this regard, it is essential to note that the deployed representation is set in relation to a place, which is not shown in the picture, and which cannot be accessed via the represented content. It is a blind point to which, however, everything in the picture is directed. A site on which we can speculate and assume that contains endless possibilities, such as the “spectator,” the “painter,” the “model,” the “king,” or any other substance; but that, relying on an objective analysis of the representation, we can never fill up. And Velázquez's merit, of course, like that of Borges, and that of Foucault, is to make it evident.

Regarding the question “what refers, ultimately, the representation to?”, Foucault notes that we face an impossibility. Before the image, the evidence we encounter is the limit of our own eyes, our own subjective position; which, in turn, is an indication that image and language:

*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. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax (Foucault, 1994: 9).*

What we see in the picture, then, depends on the syntactical order, *a priori*, of our linguistic structures; and, in turn, the order finds its limit when we try to represent it in a picture before our eyes. What is absent from the picture, but is presupposed by it, is the place itself where we expect, require, and desire, that order. The ideal point of reference, absent as a structural need, “but a perfectly real one too, since it is also the starting-point that makes the representation possible” (Foucault, 1994: 15).

Representations thus represent something impossible but real: the real as impossible. They do so through a set of signs visible within their limits, which, as Borges' “classification of classifications” may well be, as in Velázquez's painting:

*the representation [...] of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us [...] 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 (Foucault, 1994: 16).*

The subject, therefore, despite all our attempts to make it tangible, can only be represented as essentially suppressed; which, of course, has the following conse-

quence: “freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form” (Foucault, 1994: 16). Pure representation, pure object, regardless of the subject or the reference, contrary to the Kantian assumption of a subjective structure independent of empirical circumstances. Foucault’s empirical analysis of our representations allows to treat their *a priori* basis as a problem and to make it, more than the fundament of a demonstration, an object of reflection.

All of this goes against our traditional common sense, but Foucault’s merit is to show that common sense and tradition are the natural consequences of our constitution as subjects; the effect of circumstantial, historical, contingent, *epistemes*, which are just stabilizing assumptions about how we classify things, that, as such, can be exposed, distinguished, and classified, in a way that Foucault’s task becomes analogous to those of Borges and Velázquez: to classify classifications and represent representations.

Foucault, then, is like a painter of the kind of Velázquez, and in *The Order of Things* he realizes three paintings in order to present what, in his opinion, were the dominant epistemes of modernity.

The first one is a representation of the sixteenth century episteme, as an “infinite accumulation of confirmations [...] The only possible form of link between the elements of this knowledge is addition. Hence those immense columns of compilation, hence their monotony” (Foucault, 1994: 30). Knowledge was equivalent to scholarship. The dominant belief was that the more particular things were known in detail, the better the world would be known in general. Therefore, it was important to classify each aspect of reality, under the assumption that the sum of classifications will represent the whole of the world faithfully.

The change between the sixteenth century and the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was that in the latter the language began to be considered a case of representation and not of correspondence, introducing this way a discontinuity in the alleged, uncritical, and magical community between language and world. It was therefore introduced a critical distance between things and words, and their correspondence was maintained only in literature and art as a kind of compensation for the development of knowledge.

For Foucault, the metaphor for this change is *Don Quixote*, a work that in his opinion marks the boundary between the Ancient and the Classic modern age. Why? Because for the protagonist, books are no longer sets of opinions on things but become a duty to follow. Alonso Quijano consults them to learn what to do and how to look. Consequently, the book becomes a representative of a supposed knowledge independent of things, which the individual must emulate in order to become a worthy subject.

It was no longer the writer’s task to represent the world faithfully, assuming its reality, but that the individual imitated the texts “of which he is the witness, the representation, the real analogue, Don Quixote must also furnish proof and provide

the indubitable sign that they are telling the truth, that they really are the language of the world [...] must endow with reality the signs-without-content of the narrative" (Foucault, 1994: 47). The individual must prove by his very existence that the books tell the truth, just as a scientist has to prove the truth of his theory with its practical application. Ironically, what in the novel serves to make clear the fictitious character of such an enterprise, with humor, in the field of knowledge is taken very seriously as a sign of truth.

Don Quixote is like the reverse of the epic heroes, revealing that heroes like Odysseus do not just undertake all kinds of risks on their own initiative, asserting their freedom and power to act upon the world, but that they themselves become signs, representatives of the power of language. This perspective allows Foucault to identify and confront two key modern characters in his work: the madman and the poet: "The madman, understood not as one who is sick but as an established and maintained deviant, as an indispensable cultural function [...] the man of primitive resemblances" and "the poet [...] who, beneath the named, constantly expected differences, rediscovers the buried kinships between things, their scattered resemblances" (Foucault, 1994: 49).

The madman and the poet are two opposite ends of modern culture, and in turn represent a cultural function inherited from an episteme left behind by history, but assimilated into the present. The madman and the poet are a surplus, produced and assimilated by modern culture as a result of the establishment of the new episteme based on Descartes' gesture that rejects the complexity of the similarities of the world, introducing the simplicity of the order of thought as a fundamental measure.

From this moment on, the important thing was no longer to discern the correspondence between words and things but "the primary and fundamental investigation of difference: providing oneself by intuition with a distinct representation of things, and apprehending clearly the inevitable connection between one element in a series and that which immediately follows it" (Foucault, 1994: 55). Or said otherwise, the representative function is established as the essence of the relationship between language and things in terms of a *mathesis*, namely, a general order, a kind of universal concept of all comparisons and empirical similarities, their pure form, under the various manifestations of scientific method, algebraic method, system of signs, general grammar, natural history, or analysis of wealth.

Each sign thus becomes representative of the overall structure, which has the dual function of serving as tool of analysis and mark of identity: "principles whereby things can be reduced to order". The world is then divided into two realms: "On the one hand, the general theory of signs [...] on the other, the problem of immediate resemblances, of the spontaneous movement of the imagination, of nature's repetitions" (Foucault, 1994: 58). We have, in this way, the picture of the episteme

of the Classical age, culminating in the eighteenth century with the philosophies of Hume and Kant, who carry it to its limits.

Strictly speaking, as shown by both philosophers, under this notion of representation of the world, nothing is discovered; everything fluctuates between the probable and the certain, canceling the cause-effect relation as one of correspondence with reality, allowing degrees of clarity and distinction, and leaving open the question of truth. “Western reason is entering the age of judgment” (Foucault, 1994: 61) which should be understood as one of speculation and risk-taking in terms of an established fundamental measure that allows variable control of the consequences of actions over the world and its objects.

What happens then to the notion of representation, if language, through signs, must represent itself and not things? Something quite complex:

*An idea can be the sign of another, not only because a bond of representation can be established between them, but also because this representation can always be represented within the idea that is representing. Or again, because representation in its peculiar essence is always perpendicular to itself: it is at the same time indication and appearance; a relation to an object and a manifestation of itself. From the Classical age, the sign is the representativity of the representation in so far as it is representable (Foucault, 1994: 65).*

The representation refers not only to other ideas but represents itself – as the “classification of classifications” – and appears not only as a representative of an object but as a reality in itself; all of which, besides, happens regardless of its meaning; it doesn’t matter if someone is trying to say something to other one through language. Plainly, “the table of the signs will be the *image* of the things” (Foucault, 1994: 66).

Beyond the limits of the image no knowledge is possible.<sup>4</sup> “In this limiting and conditional position [...] resemblance is situated on the side of imagination, or, more exactly, it can be manifested only by virtue of imagination, and imagination, in turn, can be exercised only with the aid of resemblance” (Foucault, 1994: 68). Things can be associated by the conditions imposed by imagination; therein resides the origin of representation. And, in turn, in a point outside imagination and any representation, we find the notion of “nature” postulated as mythical origin.

The relationship between imagination and nature, therefore, is presented as the genesis of a world that is nothing more than representation and that should be the base that allows realizing the order of the mathesis and the taxonomies. “The analysis of representation therefore has a determining value for all the empirical domains” (Foucault, 1994: 209). Did it not exist, in relation to the faculty of judgment, a non-deterministic relationship between nature and imagination? Not under the episteme of the classical period.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, the end of Classical thought “will coincide with the decline of representation, or rather with the emancipation of language, of the living being, and of

need, with regard to representation." The representative function ceases to be the main feature of language, and the notions of freedom, will, desire, or force, become the determinant elements of language. "This reversal is contemporaneous with Sade. Or rather, that inexhaustible body of work manifests the precarious balance between the law without law of desire and the meticulous ordering of discursive representation." The transcendental (and fictional) representation no longer determines the desire and action of men, like in *Don Quixote*, but now nature, the mythical presupposition, acts directly on language determining the representation and its order. "Here, without doubt, is the principle of that "libertinage" which was the last in the Western world (after it the age of sexuality begins)" (Foucault, 1994: 209).

So, we passed from the subjection of the order of representation of the mathesis, to the subjection of the order of freedom and the will; to the duty to be free. "Sade's characters correspond to him [Don Quixote] at the other end of the Classical age [...] It is no longer the ironic triumph of representation over resemblance; it is the obscure and repeated violence of desire battering at the limits of representation" (Foucault, 1994: 209).<sup>6</sup> It is no longer a clear and distinct reference to ensure consistency and certainty; it is rather the notion that order responds to the indeterminacy of a violence imposed on representation from the outside, in its negativity; that law is founded on its opposite, as a way to contain it.

The consequence is that the notion of universal order is left behind, and is replaced by different discontinuous organizations whose space is history, which takes the place of the order of things. Whereupon, the fundamental question is no longer what kind of knowledge is required to ensure the knowledge of things, and is substituted for that on what kind of relation of representation we establish with them when we say (or think) that we know them. Hume and Kant, for example, in the limit of the Classical age, ask the question on what makes representation possible. And Kant also questions on its limits and its relation to freedom, which cannot be contained by the space of representation:

*In this sense, Criticism brings out the metaphysical dimension that eighteenth-century philosophy had attempted to reduce solely by means of the analysis of representation. But it opens up at the same time the possibility of another metaphysics; one whose purpose will be to question, apart from representation, all that is the source and origin of representation; it makes possible those philosophies of Life, of the Will, and of the World, that the nineteenth century is to deploy in the wake of criticism (Foucault, 1994: 243).*

The ideological character of the order of things is revealed, but the way to a new ideology is opened up. The forms of analysis are separated from the laws of the synthesis – the analysis of reality no longer leads directly to the possibility of representing its unity –, and transcendental subjectivity from the modes of being of the objects – the subject is no longer recognized and projected onto the objects. The new ideol-

ogy is one of denunciation and of myth dissipation; “of rendering once more noisy and audible the element of silence that all discourse carries with it as it is spoken” (Foucault, 1994: 298). As *Las Meninas*, the new episteme makes clear that the space to which the representation is directed is empty; that the empirical figure of the king is not the correspondence of a higher transcendental order; that, ultimately, the longing for the synthesis of reality faces a fundamental impossibility.

Words, in this context, do not talk about things; but they do not talk about order either. They rather stop talking, or at least, they just speak of their silence. That is why the analysis of contemporary forms of representations is reduced to the formalization of symbolic logic and to psychoanalysis; to the unconscious as the necessary reverse of the analysis of pure forms.

However, the question remains, though modified: it is not anymore to establish who gives the orders, who is the sovereign, but to understand who is silent; who speaks without speaking, behind the words. And so, according to Foucault, the human sciences arise, in which “man,” rather than an object in a classical sense, is the unachievable, impossible, end of comprehension. Man becomes the hypothetical and longed middle term between representation and being.

Foucault’s thesis is not only attractive but provocative, because if “man” as the object of science arises precisely between the end of the Classical age and the beginning of ours, in the open gap between the empirical and the transcendental realms, between objectivity and subjectivity, what can we expect there to appear? A “normal” man, a “producer,” a “creator,” a “manager,” a “madman”? Foucault confronts us to the problem of the uncertainty of the notion of “man,” as the reverse of the attempt of understanding of human sciences; to the possibility that understanding could be just an illusion which “is nevertheless perhaps not without hope” (Foucault, 1994: 314); to the fact that “man” came to the world only to realize that it is impossible to find his representative in it.

## NOTES

1. Rather, Foucault will try to define the theoretical framework a posteriori in *The Archeology of Knowledge*.
2. “This book first arose out of a passage in Borges” (Foucault, 1994: Preface XV).
3. In *Of Other Spaces*, Foucault explains his concept of *heterotopia*, which is distinguished from utopia, as a space that effectively exists and opposes to the spaces determined by everyday order.
4. There are no knowable things, phenomena, but what Kant called the *Thing-in-itself*.
5. That is why the figures of the poet and the madman will be particularly important to try to show such a possibility in the horizon of modernity, though outside the limits of knowledge.



6. Therefore, for Foucault, Sade is not really an author; he is only developing his phantoms. At this regard, please consult Foucault's text *What Is an Author?*

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