

## MICHEL FOUCAULT'S (MIS)INTERPRETATION OF *LAS MENINAS*. OR, *PURE REPRESENTATION AS THE TAUTOLOGOUS STRUCTURE OF THE SIGN*

*UDC 165.75 Foucault M.*

**Zdravka Gugleta**

Monash University, School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics, Australia  
E-mail: zgug1@student.monash.edu

**Abstract.** *The article looks at Velázquez's Las Meninas through the prism of phenomenology and poststructuralism. It takes as its starting point Foucault's assertion that the painting is quintessentially an example of pure representation characteristic of the Classical age, as Foucault defines it. The article strives to show pure representation as a self-positing structural organization resembling nothing but itself, and consequently interprets Las Meninas painting as a philosophical metaphor of the functioning of tautologous signification. This necessarily leads to the radicalisation of Foucault's archaeology by extending the boundaries of the modern episteme to include the painting Las Meninas. Furthermore, the essay reflects on the implications of such an interpretation, namely on the interplay between the interpretation and the interpreted, on the self-referentiality of the poststructuralist discourse that subsumes all history of ideas within itself.*

**Key words:** *pure representation, tautologous sign, absence/presence, phenomenology, poststructuralism*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Diego Velázquez's masterpiece, *Las Meninas* (1656), has inspired a number of diverse modern interpretations, ranging from Picasso's radical reworkings of it to Michel Foucault's subtle writing about it.<sup>1</sup> We shall offer a deconstructive reading of this ever-enigmatic painting proceeding from Foucault's interpretation in *Les mots et les choses*. Foucault insists that *Las Meninas*, being an example of the Classical representation, resembles the painter's thought communicated metaphorically in the invisibility of the "real" painter in the depicted mirror. This convergence of the painter's position with that

---

Submitted February 2010, accepted for publication in September 2010.

<sup>1</sup> Velázquez, Diego. *Las Meninas*. 1656. Prado Museum, Madrid

of the royal couple does not take into account the embedded structure of a text or painting, which excludes the concrete author or painter. *Las Meninas*, it will be argued, is a paragon, not of *pure* representation, but of self-referential representation or structure, that is, a representation understood in relation to the structural dialectic of the sign – as shown in the interplay between *absence* and *presence*, between the absence of the model (the royal couple) and the (material) presence of the image or signifier. The Classical *pure* representation that Foucault postulates is built on a paradox: as something that "reflects" the outside model, and as something that exists as an autonomous tautological structure. The paper will rely on the (phenomeno)logical theories of C. S. Peirce, E. Husserl and L. Wittgenstein (intertwined with J. Derrida's terminology) to emphasise representation existing as a self-referential, tautological structure only.

Foucault dedicates the very first chapter of his *Les mots et les choses* or *The Order of Things*, as it is known in English, to the interpretation of Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas*.<sup>2</sup> After proposing that the painting is "perhaps" (17) an example of, what he calls, the Classical representation, Foucault then goes on to discuss in the subsequent chapters the pre-Classical episteme of the sixteenth century – the Renaissance – without any mention of the painting. Nor is the painting touched upon in the discussion proper about the Classical episteme. Only towards the end of the book does Foucault invoke the painting again, this time, interestingly enough, to show how it anticipates the "analytic of finitude" characteristic of the modern age (hence the hesitant "perhaps" above). We come to realise that the book's "archaeology" is something of an enlargement or an exploration of the metaphorical implications of the painting: the book writes out the painting, as it were; or, the opposite might be the case: the painting "paints," enacts, Foucault's book.<sup>3</sup> If we were to write about *Las Meninas* painting differently, and were to "discover" a new meaning in it, make a reticent, invisible, metaphor of another order speak – would we be able to rewrite *The Order of Things*? would we be able to rearrange Foucault's epistemological shifts?

But we should explain first just what this Classical representation means to Foucault, and how it is differentiated from the other two epistemic fields he deals with in *The Order of Things* – the Renaissance and Modernity. Knowledge in the Renaissance period remains governed by the principle of resemblance, which would lead signs and things to infinitely circulate in a self-enclosed book of the world were it not limited by the Commentary that imposes the sovereign, the original truth – the Word of God. By contrast, in the Classical period, which dominates the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, signs become *pure* representation, a transparent arbitrary system; and knowledge reflected in the use of taxonomic classificatory differences, which are nevertheless regulated from the outside by the Same, by the Idea or Ideology. Since representation acts as a duplication or reflection of imagination, resemblance features here as well. The modern episteme begins

---

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002). All in-text parenthetical references are to this book.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gary Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003) 247-50, where he notes Foucault's use of *ekphrasis* in the opening chapter of *The Order of Things*. Foucault's meticulous description of the painting brings out for Shapiro the problem of the discrepancy between the visual and the written. This play at writing out the painting, as it were, can be attributed to the whole book; namely, Foucault's archaeological method is, metaphorically speaking, that of "delving into" the visible surface of the painting and extracting vertical invisible, embedded, *surfaces* or discourses, which are of completely different order: the painting is an example of the Classical, but also contains within itself a possibility, via Foucault's writing that is, of the pre-classical and modern episteme.

at the threshold of the nineteenth century. It privileges language as such generating signs in all their material density – signs that resemble nothing, are grounded in nothing.

How does *Las Meninas* figure in all this? As already said, Foucault suggests that the *Las Meninas* painting perfectly represents the Classical representation. The painting stages the invisibility of the real painter who is engaged in the act of representing. The invisibility of the concrete painter who is the original source of all representation is effected by a stylistic ruse Velázquez employs on us by placing in the far background of the depicted studio a mirror revealing the royal couple towards whom everybody is looking – the model that is being painted on the reversed canvas – but, more importantly, at the same time hides the master at his work (as well as the viewer). Although not always consistent, the following assertion of Foucault does emerge:

These three 'observing' functions [the model's gaze, the spectator's gaze and the gaze of the represented painter – Z. G.] come together in a point exterior to the picture: that is, an ideal point in relation to what is represented, but a perfectly real one too, since it is also the starting-point that makes the representation possible. Within that reality itself, it cannot not be invisible. . . . That space where the king and his wife hold sway belongs equally well to the artist and to the spectator: in the depths of the mirror there could also appear – there ought to appear – the anonymous face of the passer-by and that of Velázquez (16-7).

Despite the full visibility of all the necessary components of representation, "the gaze, the palette and brush, the canvass . . . the paintings, the reflections, the real man" (12), and "despite all mirrors, reflections, imitations and portraits" (17) offered as a "spectacle" (4), the painting, Foucault maintains, ultimately conceals the profound invisibility of the concrete painter who orders all this dispersion. The painter is the original mainspring of representation, the real sovereign for whom *Las Meninas* offers itself as a *pure*, immediate, resemblance or expression of his thought. Representation appears perforce as a binary, duplicating, presentation where the represented resides comfortably *in stead of* representation. As said elsewhere in *The Order of Things* apropos of *pure* representation:

This appears to give us three terms: the idea signified, the idea signifying, and within this second term, the idea of its role as representation. What we are faced with here is . . . an inevitable displacement within the two term figure, which moves backward in relation to itself and comes to reside entirely within the signifying element. In fact, the signifying element has no content, no function, and no determination other than what it represents: it is entirely ordered upon and transparent to it. But this content is indicated only in a representation that posits itself as such and that which is signified resides, without residuum and without opacity, within the representation of the sign. . . . From the Classical age the sign is the *representativity* of the representation in so far as it is *representable* (71-2).

What all of this amounts to is that the Classical representation posits itself as referential while hiding its referentiality; the role of the signifying function of representation is something taken for granted or neutralised, so that the material exteriority of representation remains invisible and only the *Idea* that it ostensibly refers to shines in its full presence, *without residuum*. Such representation is, according to Foucault, tautological, because it moves back upon itself, enclosing itself in a concave and arbitrary space. Yet, it

is precisely this tautological nature, we hold, what makes representation non-referential, non-resembling, thereby dismissing any claim about its supposed transparency.<sup>4</sup>

The whole idea of representation understood as reflecting an extrinsic origin – be it an object or referent in the transcendent reality or a concept, the signified of the artist's thought – has been challenged by the (phenomeno)logical work (interlaced with semiotics) at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century by seminal theorists such as Peirce, Husserl, and Wittgenstein (who are then echoed by Derrida). Representation in their work is indeed conceived in terms of reference, albeit in a negative way. Representation, they showed, needs to be understood in connection with non-reference or self-reference. Representation does not *essentially* refer to the origin, manifests not a *necessary* presence or an expression of it; rather its office is in being a mediated structure that entails the split between itself and the other of the referent. Not a simple dualism, but a structuralism, anchored in negativity or difference, is what the purity of *pure* representation inevitably connotes. *Pure* representation has little to do with transparency, and much to do with affirming only itself, having a *pure* origin within itself. Representation is hence still an operative term, and the crisis of representation Foucault attributes to the post-Classical period must needs to be reformulated as the crisis of representation formerly seen merely as an imitation.

That thought itself is always already a re-presentation, or a sign, we find in Peirce's conception of the three modes of the being of consciousness: Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness.<sup>5</sup> Firstness is an assumed category of a phenomenon, a possibility of an outside object, which is nevertheless constituted as such by being actualised as a fact *via* the conscious apprehension of Secondness. The object existing in the supposed reality is elided and comes to reside within consciousness as a sign.<sup>6</sup> Translated into the Derridian post-structuralist terms, the object *appears* as a "*trace*," which undermines any metaphysical notion of there being an "absolute origin" in the first place.<sup>7</sup> Secondness or the *trace* then gives rise to a Thirdness, the cognition or knowledge, the thought of the object<sup>8</sup>; for "the trace is the difference which opens appearance [l'apparaître] and signification."<sup>9</sup> Consequently, thought never surfaces as a full presence, but involves a triadic process of representation grounded in split consciousness or "*differance*."<sup>10</sup>

The generation of thoughts constitutes a process where representations become other representations' objects or referents, with the latter fully existing as monadic, self-enclosed, structures. The Thirdness above becomes a First, a sign which stands for its object (the afore-mentioned Secondness), which in turn gives rise to a third sign, an Interpretant or a Third, which then transmutes into a First, and so on *ad infinitum*:

---

<sup>4</sup> I am using the term "resemblance" in Foucault's sense as a transparent or immediate representation, a copy. Resemblance in itself, intrinsically connected to the much-contested term "mimesis," deserves a theoretical speculation which would take us far from the present line of argument, for example, looking at resemblance in the context of the similarity-difference dyad, where the two are not binary opposites. This deconstruction of resemblance is, however, hinted at as the argument progresses.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Principles of Phenomenology (from Manuscripts)," *Charles Sanders Peirce, Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955) 75-97.

<sup>6</sup> Peirce, *The Principles of Phenomenology* 75-6.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1976) 65.

<sup>8</sup> Peirce, *The Principles of Phenomenology* 78.

<sup>9</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 65.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 65.

A *Sign* or *Representamen*, is a First which stands in such a genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its *Object*, as to be capable of determining a Third, called its *Interpretant*, to assume the same triadic relation to its Object in which it stands itself to the same Object . . . . [T]he Interpretant, or Third, cannot stand in a mere dyadic relation to the Object, but must stand in such a relation to it as the Representamen itself does. . . . The Third must indeed stand in such a relation, and thus must be capable of determining a Third of its own; but besides that, it must have a second triadic relation in which the Representamen, or rather the relation thereof to its Object, shall be its own (the Third's) Object, and must be capable of determining a Third and so on endlessly.<sup>11</sup>

By the same token, we conclude, a text or painting partakes of a similar triadic structure. The written or painted surface is a First, an actuality that refers to the Second of a thought in a *quasi*-like manner, insofar as this Secondness remains predicated by the Firstness of the signifier, treating the thought for which the signifier "stands for" only as a possibility. Namely, the whole process of correspondence does not happen *essentially*: the sign (to echo Dostoyevsky) *could have and could not have taken place equally well*, so that its "standing for" abides in retrospect. The First of the signifier exists *per se*, its outside reference being bracketed out.<sup>12</sup> The Third is the Interpretant or the mediated meaning, the signified, and as a potential First it emerges as yet another representation.

We perceive then how the very idea of representation as expressive or referential proves unfeasible. But Foucauldian interpretation of *Las Meninas* as a quintessential example of *pure* representation seems doubly fallacious. Notwithstanding its subtleties, Foucault's metaphoric treatment of the essential invisibility of the painter in the mirror problematically confuses the real painter with the structural instance of the model, the royal couple. Far from being a linear representation, Velázquez's *Las Meninas* stages a structural model of representation or signification that functions through the lack of the extrinsic origin or the transcendent signified. This is evident in the embedded structure of the picture, which, excluding the concrete painter as an inherent organising centre, asserts itself as an autonomous whole.<sup>13</sup>

Unarguably, *Las Meninas* revolves around the royal couple of King Philip IV and his wife Mariana posing as the model. They are assumed by the gaze of the Infanta and her entourage, the represented painter Velázquez, and, above all, by their reflection in the mirror (this use of names labelling the personages, both visible and invisible in the structure of the picture, belongs to the traditional reading which we are at for now). The

<sup>11</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs (First as a Manuscript c. 1897)," *Charles Sanders Peirce* (New York: Dover, 1955) 99-100.

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Husserl, "Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology," *The Essential Husserl; Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology*, ed. Donn Welton (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999) § 32, § 33.

<sup>13</sup> Compare the embedded model of a literary text, or any artistic creation for that matter, in: Slobodanka B. Vladiv, *Narrative Principles in Dostoevskij's Besy: A Structural Analysis* (Bern: Lang, 1979) 17-29. The structural analysis does not refer to the structuralist semiotics in the manner of R. Barthes. Vladiv-Glover theorises in her writings about the structural model of representation (of meaning or the sign), which is based in phenomenological philosophy as well as in poststructural psychoanalysis. In the present essay we draw on the (phenomeno)logical tradition (the brackets, we feel, are needed to include Wittgenstein's logic, and also to emphasise that all of the thinkers considered here are working within the *logical* space of consciousness *qua* sign).

implied presence of the royal couple is achieved by the painter's (the painter of *Las Meninas*) ingenious artistry. Brown explains:

This process is used in *Las Meninas* to accomplish a special purpose – to make the implied presence of the king and queen *as real as possible* [italics: Z. G.]. . . . First, he focused the attention of the figures in the picture around the entrance of the royal pair. Next, he *revealed* [Z. G.] the monarchs' presence indirectly by the mirror reflection. . . . Finally, Velázquez grasped the possibility of strengthening the implied existence of the king and queen by projecting an imaginary space in front of the canvas that seemingly inhabited by beings more corporeal than the figures in a painting. By choosing a large format for his picture, he could use a life size scale of people and architecture, thus opening wide the door for implying *an actual royal presence* [Z. G.]. The effect of this presence is considerably strengthened by the fact that the extension of space in front of it the picture plane coincides with the part of the room that is not shown in the painting.<sup>14</sup>

Brown contends that the artifice on the part of Velázquez aims to "bridge the gap between art and reality" determining the real royal couple in front of the painting.<sup>15</sup> However, the thesis about the *real presence* of the model is highly contentious, for what is implied belongs only to the structural unity of the painting. The gaze that issues from the painting constitutes only the *fictitious presence* of the model: the lines that extend from the concentrated eyes of the represented painter, from the curious eyes of the Infanta, from the respectful look of the bowing Maid of Honour, including the line that stretches from the mirror – all these outreaching lines intersect in the imagined front of the depicted studio, if only the painting's "bottom edge were brought lower" (8-9), creating a locus which is nevertheless, let us anticipate the conclusion, a non-locus, an absence, from which all those lines refract in a tautological leap to point only to the self-evident material surface of the signifier.

Foucault recognises the fictitious space of the model as an absence, but not as a non-locus; the fictitious point that belonged once to the model is reserved, in turn, for the concrete viewer:

[I]n this precise but neutral place, the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange. No gaze is stable, or rather, in the neutral furrow of the gaze piercing at a right angle through the canvas, subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity. . . . As soon as they place the spectator in the field of their gaze, the painter's eyes seize hold of him, force him to enter the picture, assign him a place at once privileged and inescapable, levy their luminous and visible tribute from him, and project it upon the inaccessible surface of the canvas within the picture. He sees his invisibility made visible to the painter and transposed into an image forever invisible to himself (5-6).

Despite having an illusion of being directly observed by the figures in *Las Meninas*, we nevertheless stand just like the painter outside its embedded structure. The viewer can, without doubt, be absorbed by looking at the painting; however, that is something

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Brown, *Images and Ideas in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Painting* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978) 98-9.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, *Images and Ideas* 98.

that pertains to a completely different level of contemplation and interpretation of an artwork as a whole. We are interested here in the "narrative"<sup>16</sup> nature of the *gaze* akin to the second-person narrative which does not directly address the concrete reader, but the reader that resides within the structure of a text, the reader who "may turn out to be [just another – Z. G.] fictional character."<sup>17</sup> Although seemingly transitive and ostensive, indexical, the second-person point of view of a text or painting in actuality prevails as always auto-referential. What all those figures in *Las Meninas* "are looking at" stays enclosed within the painting's structural being. The inverted comas are necessary here, because, in fact, the *gaze* should by no means be understood in any determinist way. The *gaze* in question is the one that transcends vision; it operates through the structural dyad of the *visible* and the *invisible*.<sup>18</sup> The figures are gazing with their eyes wide open at what was never there before them; all the rays of looking construct the fictitious *point of/at view* that the monarchs occupy, but which is not an inherent, centre, permanently rooted and identical to itself, because they exist as a consequence of the *gaze*, after it, or at least, simultaneously with it.

Ultimately, the model is brought back within the surface of the painting. This "bringing back," effectuated by the "magical" appearance of the two figures gazing from the mirror at the far back wall identified as King Phillip VI and his wife, imparts, however, a non-essential gesture, because grounded in showing something which was never there as a presence or positivity to start with. The supposition that the mirror reveals the model outside arises as an effect of a structural ruse, so to speak.<sup>19</sup> The reflection confers a self-sufficient image or sign that does not mirror or resemble anything but itself. Husserl points out, for instance, the contradictions involved in believing an image to be merely a copy of the original model; were that the case, the infinite regression would set in, that is to say, the unceasing quest for the original, never questioning the idea of resemblance itself. Husserl repudiates the so-called image-theory. The constitution of an image involves for him an intentional act, whereby the idea of the image's likeness, of its relationship to the perceived object, is given in consciousness *a priori*:

<sup>16</sup> Svetlana Alpers, "Interpretation without Representation, or, the Viewing of *Las Meninas*," *Representation* 1.1 (1983) 32. Alpers explains that the *gaze* in *Las Meninas* is not narrative in nature, since it is expressionless. While agreeing with her that it is not expressive or essential in itself, we nevertheless use the term "narrative" to refer to the *gaze* as a part of a structural or tautological event.

<sup>17</sup> M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, eighth ed. (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005) 243.

<sup>18</sup> It is Merleau-Ponty who postulates the *gaze* as the pre-condition of representation: "What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them – but something to which we could not be closer than by palpitating it with our look, things we could not dream of seeing 'all naked' because the *gaze* itself envelops them, clothes them with their own flesh." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible, Followed by Working Notes*, trans. Alphonse Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968) 131. The *gaze* "envelops" the *invisible* and makes it appear in its *visible* being. The invisible is in-visible; the two form a structural dyad that grounds self-referential representation. The *visible* and the *invisible* are in this essay metaphorically displaced by the Derridian *absence/presence* couplet.

<sup>19</sup> Compare also the famous painting by Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Wedding*, which dates even earlier than *Las Meninas* (the significance of the date will be apparent later in the essay). Eyck, Jan van. *Giovanni and His Wife*. 1434. National Gallery, London. The mirror in this painting "reflects" the room depicted so that we see the painting in an inverted order including the two invisible figures, the painter at work and another "eyewitness." These two figures belong to the embedded structure of the painting which incorporates the invisible or imagined painter and the visitor. Like the royal couple in *Las Meninas* they are structural instances only and are not in any way to be confused with the concrete persons.

[I]n a representation by images the *represented* object (the original) is *meant*, and meant by way of its image as an apparent object. . . . Resemblance between two objects, however precise, does not make the one be an image of the other. . . . The constitution of the image as image takes place in a peculiar intentional consciousness, whose *inner* character, whose *specifically* peculiar mode of apperception, not only constitutes what we call image-representation as such, but also, through its particular inner determinateness, constitutes the image-representation of this or that definite object . . . ."<sup>20</sup>

Like Peirce initially, Husserl focuses representation within the structure of consciousness. Husserl's image (together with Peirce's Icon, we add in passing) has a *quasi*-resemblance: although it may start as an intention towards replicating or emulating the original object, the image nevertheless proves to be a self-contained and self-resembling sign existing in the phenomenologically reduced space of representation.<sup>21</sup>

The notion of an image as tautological is especially underlined in Wittgenstein's much-contested picture-theory of language. The picture of language Wittgenstein defines in his *Tractatus* is a *logical* picture: "A picture whose pictorial form is logical form is called a logical picture," and the notion of resemblance *qua* reference derived self-reflectively within the sign itself: "a picture . . . also includes the pictorial relationship, which makes it into a picture."<sup>22</sup> Of a propositional sign, Wittgenstein writes:

[A] proposition is a propositional sign in its projective relation to the world. A proposition includes all that the projection includes, but not what is projected. Therefore, though what is projected is not itself included, its possibility is.<sup>23</sup>

Although Wittgenstein here defines the propositional sign, he nevertheless equates it with the pictorial sign in the above notion of the logical picture of language. Indeed, he nicely conflates the two notions traditionally opposed: image/picture *versus* word/logos – through his formulation of the logical picture of language by placing them on the same conceptual level as signs. Therefore, what Wittgenstein says of the propositional sign above can hold equally well for the pictorial sign, such as the mirror image in *Las Meninas*. They both acquire the resembling, referential, projective, relationship within their existence as signs, which is then not a referential relationship, not a relationship at all, but pure self-referentiality or tautology. The outside persists only as a possibility, not an actuality; or better still, the sign actualises this possibility, concretises the merely possible, that is, brings, as if by magic, the absent into the full material presence. The origin exists in so far as the signifier exists and not the other way around. Thus, the royal couple as the

<sup>20</sup> Edmund Husserl, "Logical Investigations," *The Phenomenology Reader*, ed. Dermot Morgan and Timothy Mooney (London: Routledge, 2002) 104-105.

<sup>21</sup> Phenomenological reduction and bracketing are two cardinal concepts in Husserl's transcendental phenomenology whereby a purely eidetic or transcendental attitude is adopted, which eliminates the actuality of the so-called natural, or transcendent, objective, world and leads us into "the realm of pure consciousness and its phenomena not as de facto existents but as pure possibilities with their pure laws." Edmund Husserl, "Pure Phenomenology, Its Method, and Its Field of Investigation (1917)," *The Phenomenological Reader*, ed. Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney (London: Routledge, 2002) 132. See also endnote xvii for further references.

<sup>22</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2001) § 2.181 § 2.1513.

<sup>23</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* § 3.12, § 3.13.



model that is "reflected in the mirror" evinces a spectral possibility, not as an essential invisible that determines the signifier in advance, but as an *invisible* or *absence*, a negative, out of which the signifier springs forth as if by an occulted process, to use Derrida's terminology,<sup>24</sup> "by means of a violent, instantaneous movement, a movement of pure surprise" (11).

It might be said that *Las Meninas* fully exemplifies Derrida's "structurality of structure" with the royal couple acting as the absent or invisible "centre" outside the painted surface, which is however de-centred and returned within the visibility of the painting.<sup>25</sup> Derrida writes:

[Language] excludes totalisation. This field is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite *substitutions* only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible fixed, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it, a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions. . . . [The] movement of play permitted by the lack or absence of a center is the movement of *supplementarity*. One cannot determine the center and exhaust totalisation because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements its taking the center's place in its absence – this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*. The moment of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified.<sup>26</sup>

Derrida echoes Peirce and, despite himself, Husserl, in his critique of the totalising presence of the signified in language, and not only in language but in any process of signification. He postulates representation as a *supplement*, *techné*, in other words, as the exteriority of signifiers based on finitude, that is to say, on its differential relationship with what provisionally lies on the other side of the material sign – the *absence*, the non-visible or non-sayable. The lack of meaning attests to a necessary reverse side against which the material supplement of the sign operates. The *absence* and the *presence* form the *tautologico-structural dialectic* of meaning.

The invisible monarchs are not a precondition of the visible signifier; their invisibility is prefigured within the visible signifier itself. This is achieved through the *gaze* that issues from the "staring" figures-signs within the painting, from all the looks and the reflections – and that comes to constitute the object *qua* signified supposedly residing outside the visible realm. There was, as a matter of fact, no centre embodied by the royal couple to begin with. Only retrospectively are the monarchs situated as referents in the "outside." The hierarchical binarism is then subverted, for what is foregrounded is the *presence* of the material signifier (image), or, more precisely, the *material presence* of the signifier, while that which is signified remains apostrophised. By being represented in the mirror reflection, the monarch – the very symbol of the "authoritative" and totalising signified – is now captured, objectified, and rendered on a par with his former subordinates. The sovereignty of the centre is no more; the "unprecedented event" has taken

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 47.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Allan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978) 278.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 289.

place, which consists in an ironical placing of the sovereign to be yet another signifier among others.<sup>27</sup> *There is only the sovereignty of the signifier.*

At this point, a slight qualification needs to be made in regard to the "critical" question of the painting's perspective. Our understanding of the perspective in *Las Meninas* has followed from Foucault's presupposition that the mirror, "the Image *par excellence*" (6), "reflects" the model outside of the painting towards which everybody (or almost everybody) is looking so "fixedly" (8). It has been heavily debated whether Foucault "got the painting 'right'" with many claiming that the strict perspectival measures confirm that the mirror, actually, reveals the content of the reversed canvas.<sup>28</sup> The issue of perspective, however, appears irrelevant as either way the signifier of the mirror image emerges out of the *invisible*: both the reversed canvas and the invisible model act as the reversed side of meaning, as ultimate *absences*, giving birth to the visible signifier. In truth, given what we have argued so far, the mirror establishes itself, as one critic has noted, as a fully-fledged painting.<sup>29</sup> For, the mirror is uncannily situated as one frame among others; juxtaposed to other paintings proper it acquires the same status; it exists as an *image par excellence*, self-enclosed, residing in its own *raison d'être*.

Going back to the beginning, we said that Foucault also attributes to the painting an indication of the modern episteme. In the penultimate chapter nine, "Man and his Doubles," Foucault returns to the metaphor of *Las Meninas* (without ever truly abandoning it) suggesting it has prepared for the appearance of man, who as "an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows: enslaved sovereign, observed spectator . . . appears in the place belonging to the king" (340). The painting opens a possibility, albeit an unrealised one, to the analytic of finitude where "man" appears to himself as an exteriority, a representation that exists as "an order that now belongs to things themselves and to their interior law" (341). But we have argued that the interior laws of a structure – with its absolutization of the surface, of the exteriority of signifiers, and with the exclusion of the extrinsic origin – are already under way in *Las Meninas*.

*Las Meninas* serves Foucault as a pivot on which he comes to structure his *Order of Things*. His interpretation of the painting is an archaeology of the painting, which is then the book's archaeology of knowledge, and *vice versa*; the painting and the book appear to exchange places as the book positions itself as writing out the invisible vertical surfaces of the painting. Having arrived at a different interpretation of *Las Meninas*, however, we can now arrange the epistemological shifts in different order. First, we could argue that *Las Meninas* exemplifies not the Classical but the modern age.<sup>30</sup> The radicalness of the picture consists in its being a metaphor for the structure of meaning specific to the modern age where the sign operates through difference – the signifier being grounded in nothing, in the invisible or *absence*, against which it identifies. This means that we can move the boundaries of Foucault's modern episteme entire two centuries back.

---

<sup>27</sup> Brown, *Images and Ideas* 92.

<sup>28</sup> Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision* 248-49.

<sup>29</sup> Shapiro mentions Joel Snyder's "*Las Meninas* and the Mirror of the Prince" in his notes: *Ibid.*, note 14, p. 419.

<sup>30</sup> Vladiv-Glover, for example, insinuates that Foucault's analysis of *Las Meninas* paradoxically implies that the modern episteme began much earlier: "Foucault placed the evolution of European modern discourse (medicine, discipline and finitude) somewhere in the 18<sup>th</sup> century while his analysis of representation in Velázquez's *Las Meninas* goes even further to the mid-17-th century." Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, "What Is Classical and Non-Classical Knowledge?," *Studies in East European Thought* 58 (2006), note 6, p. 229.

A second, tentative, inference entails that, since we now understand representation functioning as an empty sign without an origin, the boundary could be pushed even further back; or better still, we can do away with these relative divisions altogether and look at the episteme that encompasses the whole of Western culture according to this new model of representation. For it is not a matter of dates; Foucault's thesis about the crisis of representation is nothing but a structural crisis, so to speak, not a matter of historical dates but of our redefining just what we mean by the word "representation." This is after all what Foucault's discursive method teaches. Taking a cue from his discursive method, all texts comprising the discourse of Western culture could then be combined between themselves to infinity – those belonging to the so-called modernity and those coming from the "other pole," the antiquity – creating and recreating ever-new meanings.<sup>31</sup> The elimination of the origin allows for generative interpretations which are nevertheless tautological representations staying within their own circle of meaning. We may look at a painting through other reading(s): read *Las Meninas* through the history of ideas (what Foucault did), read *Las Meninas* through Foucault's text (what we did), read *Las Meninas* through this text (what the present reader is doing), and so on, but the final word forever eludes us with each new reading being a potential "object" for yet another (poststructuralist) reading *qua* representation.

A doubt might be expressed as for the validity of (theoretical) interpretation, which can never pinpoint the "truth" of a particular text (a painting, a poem, a philosophical text – why not?) but always encloses itself in a maze-like self-referentiality.<sup>32</sup> It is not that *Las Meninas* offers in itself the model of the logic of the sign; our knowledge of the operation of the sign invests it with this meaning. *Las Meninas* is not only a meta-text staging the process of its own signification; interpretation envelops it with another meta-layer subsuming its "object" into the interpretation's own working. Perhaps, it is not a question of validity, which hints at a disillusioned realisation that we can never arrive at the "true meaning" of a text – not a question of validity but of affirmation. The dualist relationship imputed to exist between theory or interpretation and an artwork as the former's object or reference that needs to be "conveyed" is more than outworn. The notion of the authorial intention, and of the loss of the original intention or meaning, is rendered unwarranted by the self-reflexivity or circularity of the sign, in the most neutral sense of the term. And this is something positive: an interpretation is a tautological representation, but despite, or rather, because of this, the creation of meaning without a beginning (transcendent origin) or an end (teleology), the process of endless interpretations of interpretations, unleashes itself.

Setting out to deconstruct Velázquez's *Las Meninas* taking Foucault's interpretation as "a point of reference," we have also deconstructed Foucault along the way. We have

---

<sup>31</sup> Foucault defines discourse as a totality of signs, "groups" or "series" of signs, a dispersed space within which a "series of series" of signs can be established, that is, more narrowed discursive unities which follow certain rules of formation. These discursive, epistemological, fields are not determinate or fixed but can be created and recreated to infinity. Foucault's arrangement of discourses in *The Order of Things* could be seen as one such possible discourse, one possible order by no means definitive. Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2002) 11, 120-21.

<sup>32</sup> On the aporias of literary interpretation (or, indeed, any interpretation) see, for instance, Axel Fliethmann, "The Right of Passage," *CCLCS Research Seminar* (Melbourne: Monash University, 2004). Fliethmann discusses "passage" and "analogy" as utilised in criticism to translate the original meaning of a text, but which ultimately tell us more about the commentary than the work that is being commented on. Fliethmann defines criticism as "play," which he finds exemplified in Foucault's self-referential interpretation in *The Order of Things*, and which is, *en passant*, also staged in Fliethmann's writing.

contested that *Las Meninas* painting belongs to the Classical representation Foucault assigns to it, and at the same time, challenged the very notion of such a representation. The *pure* representation has been deconstructed into a tautologous structure of the sign as exemplified in *Las Meninas* where the centre of the royal couple is constituted as an *absence* by the structural network of the *gaze*; the *absence*, in turn, acting as a negative against which the materiality of *presence* of the signifier (the mirror image) appears. This led us to extend "backwards" Foucault's modern episteme so as to include *Las Meninas* within its boundaries; we have also "playfully" disregarded the existence of boundaries altogether. An inevitable self-referential labyrinth of interpretation at the end posed itself, not as a lamentable problem, but rather as a positive condition that "preserve[s] the infinity of the task" (10). Approaching Velázquez's painting through an incorporation of Foucault's text, *via* the structural phenomenology or phenomenological semiotics, the tautology of meaning could not have been starker. But this ever-imposing tautology also generates meaning(s): "it is perhaps through the medium of this grey, anonymous language, always over-meticulous and repetitive because too broad, that the painting may, little by little, release its illuminations" (10).

## MIŠELA FUKOOVO TUMAČENJE *LAS MENINAS*. ILI, ČISTI PRIKAZ KAO TAUTOLOŠKA STRUKTURA ZNAKA

Z. Gugleta

*Rad analizira Velaskvezovu sliku Las Meninas kroz prizmu fenomenologije i poststrukturalizma. Kao polazna tačka uzima se Fukoova tvrdnja da Las Meninas predstavlja kvintesencijalni primer čistog prikaza karakterističnog za klasično doba u Fukoovom smislu te reči. Rad ima za cilj da pokaže da čisti prikaz kao samodata strukturalna kompozicija nije nalik ničemu osim na sebe samu, i prema tome tumači Las Meninas kao svojevrsnu filozofsku metaforu funkcije tautološkog označavanja. Ovo nužno vodi ka radikalizaciji Fukoove arheologije proširujući granice moderne episteme tako da ova uključuje i sliku Las Meninas. Dalje, esej promišlja implikacije takve interpretacije: međudnos interpretacije i interpretiranog, te auto-referencijalnost poststrukturalnog diskursa koji obuhvata čitavu istoriju ideja.*

Ključne reči: čisti prikaz, tautološki znak, odsutnost/prisutnost, fenomenologije, poststrukturalizam