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The Reenacted Double Repetition as a Creative Paradox

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ABSTRACT: The essay engages with a screenplay by Michel Foucault, written in 1970 for a film, not realized during Foucault's lifetime, about Pablo Picasso's *Las Meninas*, a series of 58 paintings that the artist made in 1957, taking up, updating, reinterpreting the famous painting with the same title by Diego Velázquez (1656). This screenplay is at the same time an example of critical reflection on reenactment in art history and itself a reenactment practice of sorts: the filmic repetition of an artistic repetition. It invites a reflection on the role of repetition as a critical operation: how doubles, reenacted images, and 'counter-mimesis' can become creative gestures and opening movements of transformation through plays of refraction, duplication, and multiplication of the realities and subjectivities at stake in them.

KEYWORDS: double; repetition; representation; mimesis; Foucault, Michel; Velázquez, Diego; Picasso, Pablo; criticism

The Reenacted Double

Repetition as a Creative Paradox

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As a starting point for my paper, I would like to take into question a short text by Michel Foucault that is at the same time an unfinished project: the screenplay of a film that does not exist (or better, has not existed for a long time). This Foucauldian screenplay is actually a *reenactment* of a *reenactment*, the repetition of an artistic repetition. It was written for a film never made (during Foucault's lifetime) about Pablo Picasso's *Las Meninas*, a series of 58 paintings that the artist created in the space of six months in 1957, taking up, updating, re-interpreting Diego Velázquez's famous 1656 painting of the same title. This artistic repetition will then allow us to reflect, theoretically as well as historically, on the value of the practice of reenactment as a critical and philosophical operation. The question that I would like to raise through this example (a question that is at the centre of both Foucauldian thought and theories of reenactment) is that of the critical dislocation of the place of thought. For Foucault, what is at stake is the notion of repetition as a practice that allows a current and creative reformulation of the question concerning the place from which one thinks, today, and the actual forms of historical subjectivity.

Velázquez's masterpiece *Las Meninas* has been astonishing its public for centuries in its ambiguous richness: who is really the subject of the representation? The infanta Margherita? Her retinue? The king

and queen in the mirror? The painter depicting a portrait session? The space opened by the figure of the servant passing through the door in the back of the painting? Picasso repeats this *mise en abîme* of representation 58 times: in turn, the infanta and the details of her dress, the servants, the mirror, the space beyond the open door, become the subject of the work, in a mobile dance that makes any fixed role and any precise interpretation impossible.

At the end of the 1960s, Guy de Chambure imagined, for the Adrien Maeght Gallery in Paris, a film documentary that would stage Picasso's *Las Meninas*. To write the screenplay, he immediately thought of Michel Foucault, and not by chance: the publication of *The Order of Things* in 1966 had established Foucault as the philosophical thinker of *Las Meninas*, but of those of Velázquez, which Picasso reenacted, so to speak. Foucault accepted this proposal (there is a signed contract) and in the summer of 1970 wrote a script of about twenty pages, whose first part is entitled 'The Disappearance of the Painter' (*La Disparition du peintre*), a typescript kept in the Foucault Archives at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (boîte 53, in three slightly different versions) and published in 2011 in an issue of the *Cahiers de l'Herne* dedicated to Foucault.¹ However, the film project was not realized under Foucault's supervision, for reasons that are both technical or legal and historical-political. Shooting was in fact impossible in the Spain of Franco's fascist regime. The original director Alain de Chambure was denied permission to shoot at the Prado and the material already filmed in Barcelona, where the complete series of Picasso's *Meninas* is located, was confiscated by Spanish authorities. In any case, this idea of a Foucauldian film about *Las Meninas* has not ceased to fascinate those who knew about it, and the project to finally shoot a documentary with the original screenplay of Foucault was finally realized in 2020 by director Alain Jaubert.² This film is therefore the reenactment of

1 Michel Foucault, 'Les Ménines de Picasso', in *Michel Foucault*, ed. by Philippe Artières, Jean-François Bert, Frédéric Gros, and Judith Revel, *Cahiers de l'Herne*, 95 (Paris: L'Herne, 2011), pp. 14–32.

2 *Le Subtil Oiseleur, Foucault de Velázquez à Picasso*, dir. by Alain Jaubert (Éditions Montparnasse, 2020). Michel Foucault's family asked the director Alain Jaubert to follow the same screenplay the philosopher had written fifty years before. The film was finally shot and edited in 2019 and 2020, and presented to the public in 2021 during the fourteenth *Journées internationales du Film sur l'art* at the Musée du Louvre. Foucault's

a reenactment, between artistic practice and philosophical thought, linking in a counter-linear historical temporality the Spanish court of the seventeenth century, Francoist Spain of the 1950s and 1970s, 1970s France, and France and Europe today, in the ‘COVID-19 era’ of film production.

As the title of the first part suggests, Foucault’s screenplay plays with the painter’s position, or rather the painter’s non-position, in Picasso’s repetitions. It thus transforms these paintings into an opportunity to rethink the role of the subject of thought, which was already central to Foucault’s famous reading of Velázquez’s painting *Las Meninas* at the beginning of his 1966 *The Order of Things*. The images are supposed to follow the movement of an extremely theoretical text, thus describing the passage from the subject of classical representation, which vanishes to let only the representation itself speak in its representative power of reality (Velázquez), to the subject of modern painting (Picasso): a divided, disparate, plural subject that gives itself in an image only to be able to disperse again from there in its infinite repetitions, in its ‘doubles’.

Las Meninas by Velázquez is for Foucault in *The Order of Things* the emblem of a category of thought so fundamental to modernity that it defines for him its ‘episteme’, that is, the set of conditions of production and circulation of true discourse: representation. Velázquez’s painting is the ‘representation of Classical representation’ and the ‘definition of the space it opens up to us’. The representation is the modern, Cartesian dream of an order of thought in which each element finds its place, in a precise, methodical, measurable concatenation. The order of the world, of language and thought become superimposable, without remainder. *Las Meninas* by Velázquez would then be the representation that undertakes to represent itself in all its elements, with its images,

text runs through a subtle montage of the images of Picasso’s paintings and is read by the voice of Fanny Ardant. The choice of Alain Jaubert is not a coincidence: he was a very committed journalist in the 1970s, participating in movements such as *Le secours rouge* and *Le groupe d’information sur les prisons* (GIP), he taught philosophy at the University of Vincennes (1970–1974) on the same chair held by Foucault in 1969, and then became a director for television and cinema. In 1971 (on 29 May), working as a journalist for *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Alain Jaubert was beaten up in a police bus while accompanying a detained person to the police station, and charged with resisting arrest. The case provoked strong reactions and Foucault, among other intellectuals, campaigned for his acquittal.

the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being. 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 — of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance. This very subject — which is the same — has been elided. And representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form.³

Representation as a historical ‘episteme’ of thought implies for Foucault the impossibility of representing the subject of such representation: the subject of thought in its concreteness and empirical depth. In Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*, the place of the painter as well as that of the spectator is empty, according to Foucault. Three groups of characters allude to it: the painter in the picture, the servant leaving the door, the sovereigns in the mirror. But the subject of the representation itself, in its concreteness, is elided. This subject instead overwhelmingly invades the scene with Picasso and his *Las Meninas*. As an insistent presence in and through the canvases, the subject returns as the protagonist in all its declinations: as eye, character, light, or ‘demiurge’ of the pictorial world – world unfolded by the materiality of the painting. But this presence is never embodied in a unique and stable point, in a ‘true’ vision of the world. It is rather the continuously reactivated opening of a multiple and evolving perspective. The classical representation for Foucault is not only a mode of visibility, but a form of thought that has shaped Western philosophy since Descartes. Representation is the name of an emblematic experience for Western philosophical culture: (1) the myth of an ordered scientific space transparent to the activity of the subject; (2) the correlation between an object-world and an a-historical subject, capable to dominate the world in its truth; (3) the necessary expulsion from discourse of what is essentially unrepresentable: the disorder of non-sense, of madness, of unreason. The impossible repetition of such representation by Picasso is, according to Foucault, the sign of a new world of thought, which no longer offers

3 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. by Matthew Chrulow and Jeffrey Bussolini (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 17–18.

itself in its transparent truth but emerges in a non-linear sum of perspectives that the subject must not only unfold but create in its activity. And it is precisely in the game of repetition (the 58 reenactments of Velázquez's canvas) that this creative position of the subject is staged.

It should not be forgotten that, immediately after the publication of *The Order of Things* and shortly before the project on Picasso, in 1967, Foucault himself experienced a subjective 'dislocation of thought.' He left for Tunis as an invited professor and remained there until 1969. In Tunisia he lived some fundamental political experiences (his 'May 1968') and held a series of important courses: (1) on fifteenth-century painting and geometric perspective as an archaeology of representation; (2) on philosophical discourse and Descartes, sketching a genealogy of classical philosophical thought; (3) on Manet, considered to be the first painter of modernity, who made the same gesture in painting as Nietzsche in philosophy or Mallarmé in literary language: the questioning of the traditional subject of thought and its representative relationship with reality. The representation and its form of visibility are therefore, for Foucault at the end of the 1960s, at the centre of a broad reflection on the Western history of thought. Foucault's aim in assembling a series of plastic, pictorial, and architectural references in various works of the 1960s and 1970s is to construct a counter-history of classical thought as a representative practice built on a dialectic of complementarity between the subject and the object of knowledge, and to offer new ways of doing philosophy. He tries to find forms of anti- or counter-representative thought in which artistic practices themselves remain an important element of criticism and historical concretization of the concepts at issue.⁴

4 'Penser l'intensité [...] c'est se rendre libre pour penser et aimer ce qui, dans notre univers, gronde depuis Nietzsche; différences insoumises et répétitions sans origine qui secouent notre vieux volcan éteint; qui ont fait éclater depuis Mallarmé la littérature; qui ont fissuré et multiplié l'espace de la peinture (partages de Rothko, sillons de Noland, répétitions modifiées de Warhol); qui ont définitivement brisé depuis Webern la ligne solide de la musique; qui annoncent toutes les ruptures historiques de notre monde. Possibilité enfin donnée de penser les différences d'aujourd'hui, de penser aujourd'hui comme différence des différences. [...] Théâtre de maintenant.' Foucault, 'Ariane s'est pendue' [1969], in Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, ed. by Daniel Defert, François Ewald, and Jacques Lagrange, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1: 1954–1975, text no. 64, pp. 798–99.

The notion of the 'double' is fundamental for the construction of such counter-representative thinking. Thanks to a deep dialogue with philosophers and artists such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Antonin Artaud, Gilles Deleuze, but also Pierre Boulez, Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot (to name but a few), Foucault elaborates an extremely important conception of the creative force of repetition, particularly through literary language. Repetition is the possibility of deforming and disturbing the traditional space of thought through a grotesque *mimesis*: an impossible imitation of the objective representation of reality by a unique and sovereign subject, the subject of the dialectics and teleologies of history. Andy Warhol comes to mind and his Marilyn in series, or the repetition of Campbell's cans:⁵ the position of the 'simulacra' of an image (or a concept or discourse) is a way of immediately contesting its unique and truthful meaning. A truth that is repeated can no longer be the only One. It is inevitably a truth that is said 'in the interstice', in the space between one repetition and another, and that thanks to this difference in repetition (Deleuze *docet*) can be criticized, transformed, made 'other' than itself.⁶ Repetition, as artists who practice *reenactment* well know, has a creative power intrinsic to its constitutive monotony. The double is the same all over again and yet always different from itself. As an operation that is not only artistic but also aesthetic, philosophical, and political, it is then a force of agitation and restlessness, which allows us to put into question our ways of thinking and being. In the same way, the Foucauldian analysis, repeating Picasso repeating Velázquez 58 times, aims at questioning the consolidated forms of discourse and their relationship with the conceptions and positions of subjects and objects of knowledge. Repetition in philosophical discourse and artistic practice is a critical staging: a movement of transformation through plays of refraction, duplication, and multiplication of the realities and subjectivities at stake. To take up and

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- 5 See Foucault, 'Theatrum philosophicum' [1970], trans. by Donald F. Brouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. by Paul Rabinow, 3 vols (New York: New Press, 1998–2001), II: *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. by James D. Faubion (1998), pp. 343–68. See also an unpublished text about Andy Warhol kept in Boîte 53, Foucault Archives, Bibliothèque nationale de France (NAF 28730).
- 6 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* [1968], trans. by Paul R. Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), and Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* [1969], trans. by Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

paraphrase an expression used by Foucault in a famous 1984 essay on Kant's 'Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung', reenactment practices would then be a new way of thinking about the 'ironic heroization of the present, [the] transfiguring play of freedom with reality'.⁷ They question the forms and limits of a historical configuration of thought, blurring its set of relations and opening up new possibilities for existence.

To return in conclusion to the starting point of this discussion: the screenplay of Foucault on Picasso on Velázquez. Its posthumous actualization and realization today is a reenactment of archival material through an artistic repetition, between the seventeenth and twentieth century, fifty years after its creation by Foucault. Yet what sense does it make to update this project today, situated as it is at the hybrid intersection between philosophical reflection, exploration of museum painting collections, audiovisual techniques, and archival fragments? Is it possible to recover, after so many years, the philosophical force that the screenplay imagined by Foucault should have embodied in the filmed reproduction of Velázquez's and Picasso's paintings? This project develops at a fertile crossroads between philosophical and political dimensions, aesthetic experience, the materiality of the archives, and the possibilities of reactivation, circulation, and creation made available by new technologies. The actual documentary on Foucault's screenplay exploits an entire series of digital potentialities unimaginable in 1970. It is moreover, inevitably, not only a film about *Las Meninas*, but also and above all a film about Foucault as an interpreter of the painters of the past, in a creative short-circuit between the (visual, this time) archives used by Foucault and the works of Foucault that have become his archive. Whether the documentary does indeed manage to convey this interweaving of creative and critical thinking is up to the audience to decide. It is, however, important to reflect — through Foucault's screenplay — on the power of repetition as an aesthetic and philosophical practice. Foucault's text is an archival material on works of art (*Las Meninas*), in which these works are not analyzed as simple aesthetic entertainments but as forms of visibility essential

7 Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment' [1984], in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 32–50 (p. 42).

to a historical configuration of thought (a way of thinking about the paradigms of discourse and the positions of the subject in history).

Repeating and reenacting Foucault's archives has therefore undoubtedly an immediate appeal from a marketing point of view. A Foucauldian documentary is probably first and foremost a 'good investment', as were its archives, acquired in 2013 by the Bibliothèque nationale de France for the exceptional amount of 3.8 million euros. The philosopher's archives are a 'treasure' not only in a cultural sense (the French Ministry of Culture did designate them a 'national treasure' to legally prevent their sale abroad, for example to American universities). But archives can also become the place of a repetition in a strong artistic and philosophical sense: they might be the material of a creative practice using the power of reenactment as a critical operation and a philosophical problematization. Foucauldian (and more generally philosophical) archives might in turn transform themselves, like the thought that unfolds there, also through forms of artistic *reenactment*, into an exercise of updating the critical effort.

Repetition, doubles, reenactments as historical-artistic and conceptual events have therefore a powerful philosophical and intrinsically political value. They allow us to reformulate the fundamental question concerning the place of thought today and for the future. Maurice Blanchot, at the beginning of a powerful critical text on Foucault, asked him this question directly, underlining the paradox of the archivist who, by digging to find the conditions of possibility for discourse in our history, risks undermining the very ground from which he takes his word: '*Monsieur Foucault, from where do you speak — D'où parlez-vous?*'⁸ It is precisely the creative practice of repetition, the double as an aesthetic-philosophical instrument, that allows perhaps not for a solution to this paradox, which remains all too real, but to deploy it as a critical force. It is as if reality, intrinsically plural, were always 'excessive'. The forms of knowledge, the relationships of power, the techniques of existence always take place with a surplus of meaning and strength, which can be used in turn and which consequently makes history an open system. The possibility of resistance would be

8 Maurice Blanchot, *Michel Foucault as I Imagine Him* [1988], transl. by Brian Massumi and Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Zone Books, 1990).

hidden in the power of repetition inherent in the relationships that make up the concrete fabric of our language and our world. According to Foucault, repetition games are political tools to reactivate this creative power immanent to reality. Taking advantage of the power of the double means being able to imagine another world and render it possible. Repetition is an exercise in freedom, a gesture of insubordination that Foucault himself never ceases to affirm through his practice of thought: a power of scandal, the force of *fiction*.

Foucault therefore dreams of a philosophical practice that takes up this power of repetition and short-circuits any search for univocal sense and any strategy that invokes ‘meaning’ and ‘truth’ in order to call to order. To use another of Foucault’s key concepts, an ‘ontology’ of discourse and images understood through their power of duplication would consecrate them as ‘heterotopias’: the ‘other spaces’ that question and transform every given and ritualized place in a society. The language of fiction is the disturbing double of reality: a subtle yet radical fracture that marks the position of a real difference, the opening of a possibility of transformation. Like the performance of a court jester, the mocking imitation exposes its presumed model. ‘The wound of the double [...] The present infinity of the mirage that constitutes, in its vanity, the thickness of the work, that absence within the work from which it paradoxically arises.’⁹ Beyond any principle of economy of speech, the repetitive act of the double becomes a ‘*dépense*’ of sorts, in the sense that Bataille gives to this concept: a force always excessive to itself, and precisely for this reason capable of establishing new forms of meaning, reality, and existence.¹⁰ Through repetition, a new practice of thought forges its path.

9 ‘La blessure du double [...] Infini actuel du mirage qui constitue, en sa vanité, l’épaisseur de l’œuvre — cette absence à l’intérieur de l’œuvre d’où celle-ci, paradoxalement, s’élève.’ Foucault, ‘Le Langage à l’infini’ [1963], in *Dits et écrits*, I, text no. 14, pp. 287–88 (my translation).

10 See in particular Georges Bataille, *La Notion de dépense* [1933] (Paris: Lignes, 2011) and *La Part maudite* (Paris: Minuit, 1949).

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