

## Foucault and Surrealism of the Truth

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Calling attention to surrealism may seem an odd beginning for a discussion of Foucault's conception of truth and its relevance to the study and practice of rhetoric. One justification is that such a beginning is no less odd than the twists and turns in Foucault's own thought. More seriously, the study of art forms is a principal "agency" through which Foucault gives voice to concerns about the relations between power, truth, and knowledge. For example, it is no accident that he begins *The Order of Things* (1970) with a critical appraisal of Velazquez's *Las Meninas*. As expressed through the painting, "representation--whether in the service of pleasure or of knowledge--was posited as a form of repetition: the theatre of life or the mirror of nature, that was the claim made by all language, its manner of declaring its existence and of formulating its right of speech" (1970, p. 17). When counterpoised to Foucault's critique of Rene Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* ("This is not a pipe"; Foucault, 1982) as well as other works by Magritte, Klee, and Kandinsky, surrealist imagery displaces the "repetition" of representation, and thereby dissolves comfortable, naturalized impressions of reality. Seen in the context of this conjunction, the claim "Foucault is a surrealist of truth," is less "odd" than it might at first appear. Foucault calls the "real" into question through its depiction in surrealism.

There is a painting by Magritte, currently in the Peggy Guggenheim Museum in Venice, that allows us to carry the analogy further. In this painting, entitled "The Voice of Space" (1932), three silver-grey globes are depicted hanging free over what appears to be an otherwise normal landscape, with green rolling hills. The three globes appear to be separate objects, but are shown as if they might be interconnected one to another. The ambiguity between separateness and togetherness is reflected in the interaction between two Foucaultian "triumvirates": truth, right, and power; and truth, power, and subjectivation. While they may exist separately, they also are the products of interaction. Suspended as potentially free floating objects, the globes reflect the indeterminacy and contingency of the triumvirate: while each has antecedents in prior history, their particular formation at this moment in time is reflective of the present social practices which sustains their present position. While they are neither tethered nor clearly capable of immediate flight, there remains a sense of momentary "fixedness" with respect to the globes' position in space. Insofar as they represent the interaction of truth, power, and

subjectivation, movement would be accomplished through social critique's analog of brush strokes. For whatever reason (and surrealism in general was short on reasons), Magritte chose to present the globes as intruders over an otherwise pristine, quiescent countryside. Might there not be a difference had he selected the background of a bustling, noisy city? While the "reality" of such an intrusion on our sight is alarming, the soft background is far less sinister than that represented by downtown Philadelphia. There is an odd sense of peacefulness even as the objects fill the sky with their alien presence. My point, in concluding this analogy, is that truth, power and subject are reflected against a quiescent background--their perceived naturalness gives us a sense of security. We are comfortable with those social practices that define us, even as they limit our spirit and constrain our freedom to be other than we are.

What Foucault claims for Magritte can be claimed for his own work; both "are the farthest from *trompe l'oeil*" (Foucault, 1982, p. 43). As the surrealist of truth, Foucault, like Magritte, establishes contradictory juxtapositions, thereby making the "games of truth" appear as they are--fictionalized games influencing and directing our social practices while masquerading as naturally independent entities that both precede and supercede our lived experience. Thus contextualized, the nature of truth in the Foucaultian corpus needs more precise delineation. This will be accomplished by noting, in its most general sense, its Nietzschean character, and its incarnation first as "regimes of truth," and then as "games of truth" in the evolution of Foucault's writings.

#### The Nietzschean Character of Truth

There is little controversy among scholars with respect to Foucault's general indebtedness to Nietzsche. There is disagreement over the extent of that indebtedness, and the nature of Foucault's departure from a Nietzschean *Weltanschauung*. For our purposes, it will be sufficient to acknowledge at the outset that Heidegger and Nietzsche are the philosophers that have influenced him the most. Foucault refers at one point to his "fundamental Nietzscheanism" and notes in response to a query "that I am simply Nietzschean, and I try to see, on a number of points, and to the extent that it is possible, with the aid of Nietzsche's texts . . . what can be done in this or that domain" (Foucault, 1988, p. 251). His Nietzscheanism is, however, tempered by a more optimistic outlook. Where Nietzsche was fundamentally nihilist, Foucault is a skeptical thinker who aims toward a permanent state of critique: "My role--and that is too emphatic a word--is to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truths, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment in history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed. . . . All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence" (R. Martin, 1988, pp. 10-11).

Nietzsche contrasted the classical ideal of truth as correspondence to an accurately described world that exists "out there" and is knowable to a human construction which works in the absence of a correspondent model (Nietzsche, 1979, p. xxxi). In the latter context, truth is a fiction: "all possession of truth is at bottom nothing but a belief that one possesses truth" (Nietzsche, 1979, p. 94). In an oft-quoted passage, Nietzsche observes: "What is truth? a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations which were poetically and rhetorically heightened, transferred,

and adorned, and after long use seem solid, canonical, and binding to a nation. Truths are illusions about which it has been forgotten that they are illusions, worn-out metaphors without sensory impact, coins which have lost their image and now can be used only as metal, and no longer as coins" (Gilman, et al., 1989, p. 250). This is the generic sense of truth which Foucault adopts as his own (Flynn, 1985, p. 532; Dews, 1987, pp. 177-86; Megill, 1985, p. 245). Reminiscent of an Isocratean if not wholly sophistic conception of truth, Nietzsche's perspectival view does not imply the absence of any standards of judgment: "What one sees and knows is not subjective, but rather an error. By being an error, it is not thereby false. Falsity implies truth. One cannot say something is false without having some notion of what would be truth. Yet this is precisely what Nietzsche is trying to get away from, judging on the basis of what something is not. One can say how and why an error is made without being able to say what a 'truth' would be" (Strong, 1975, p. 51). While neither Nietzsche nor Foucault is precise in giving consistent expression to this difference, the general tenor of their allusions to "truth" and "falsity" assumes that the "false" is equivalent to error.

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#### Truth in the Socio-Political Sphere

While a dichotomy between "regimes of truth" and "games of truth" is somewhat forced, it nonetheless is a convenient means of demarcating changes in Foucault's emphasis on the role of the subject. In what can be styled the "earlier Foucault," there is a clear sense of an absent subject--of a historicized subject that is created by those forces which encase her in social practices. Raised to the level of the society or culture, these social practices function as "regimes of truth" that work to deny the historicised nature of their own creation. Tacitly agreeing with Nietzsche's conception of "human agency in terms of a fragile, contingent possibility dependent upon historical and cultural practices for its realization," Foucault interprets cultural norms in terms that deny the subject freedom (Ansell-Pearson, 1990, p. 12). As he writes in an essay on "Truth and Power," " 'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements" (1980, p. 133). Connected to relations of power which both produce and sustain these procedures, they function as "a 'regime' of truth" that is "not merely ideological or superstructural" (1980, p. 133).

The role of a critical rhetoric (McKerrow, 1989) in the analysis of "regimes of truth" carries forth Foucault's "role": describing those procedures to the extent that they have been normalized, inscribed so deeply in the social fabric of a community that they function as taken-for-granted in the exercise of legitimized power. In the process, the aim is to demystify the universalization of such practices as they move forward in time, to point the way to other possible inscriptions that may alter the existing regime and thereby re-individuate what has been disindividuated. The goal is not so much to simply create the conditions for social change, but to allow the individual to re-inscribe herself in new social relations which are particularistic, at least until they too become universalized over multiple repetitions. As Rawlinson (1987) notes, "the productions of any system of truth--the concepts, rules, foundations, or justifications that it supplies--are almost destined to become conventionalized, repeated, circulated, and disseminated" (p. 389).

The subject, in this context, is not a sovereign individual; instead, the subject is one which has been historically created: "One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical relationship" (Foucault, 1980, p. 117). What is crucial about this historical subject is that it avoids the "empty sameness" that marks a transcendental view of the human being (as in a phenomenological subject; 1980, p. 117). Subjects do not "call the world into being." Rather, the world pre-exists their participation, and the social practices to which they become conditioned or socialized are not initially of their own making. That is why it is so easy to see socially constituted power relations as natural, as having a life of their own beyond our reach. Recapturing a sense of one's own freedom in this context is a matter of recognizing the historical framing of those practices within which we live out our daily lives. From that recognition, change can proceed. Subject is not isomorphic with "agent" in this analysis, anymore than the universal subject reflects the role of agent. As agent, the task is to react to information on "the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; . . . the techniques and procedures accorded values in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). Truth is not the mysterious property of the elite, nor is it the independent, universal "form" that Plato idolized. Rather, truth is what, over time, a community has endorsed, complete with the procedures for its determination, its legitimization, and its evocation by those sanctioned to speak on its behalf. The question is: is this "regime" the most appropriate one for the realization of the freedom of the human subject?

#### Truth and the 'Care of the Self'

The shift in language from "regimes of truth" to "games of truth" is not a shift in truth's conceptualization. Rather, there is a changing emphasis on the role of the subject, with more concern expressed for the individual as subject than was the case in earlier work by Foucault. Games of truth simply replaces regimes of truth as the preferred expression. As Foucault noted in one of his last interviews, "I have tried to discover how the human subject entered into games of truth, whether they be games of truth which take on the form of science or which refer to a scientific model, or games of truth like those that can be found in institutions or practices of control" (Gauthier, 1988, p. 3). The sense of game

is not equated with sport or entertainment: "when I say 'game' I mean an ensemble of rules for the production of truth. . . . it is an ensemble of procedures which lead to a certain result, which can be considered in function of its principles and its rules of procedures as valid or not, as winner or loser" (Gauthier, p. 15). The Nietzschean sense of truth as fiction remains; what is focused on in the revised discussion is that some truth games succeed where others fail. Unlike Habermas, who postulates an ideal speech situation wherein games of truth would have the best chance of success, Foucault is a realist (some would say skeptic). Instead of an absolutely, universally free discourse community, the best one can attain is a community in which one commands the requisite rules of procedure, as well as the "ethics, the ethos, the practice of self, which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination" (Gauthier, 1988, p. 18). Gaining control in this way over one's own destiny, allows each individual to "think his own nature" (Foucault, 1985, p. 7). More often than not, this thinking is done for us. In an astute summary of Foucault's "project," Hutton (1988) clarifies the means by which the subject is "subjectivated":

Economy in Foucault's conception of the policing process signifies the production of linguistic and institutional forms through which human beings define their relationships. In this sense, the policing process is the public expression of our essential activity as human beings: the construction of modes of discourses and of action through which we shape our conception of human nature. It is in the formalities of our words and our deed that we define ourselves. (p. 127).

The process of definition does take a new turn in the "later Foucault." In the view of one critic (Dews, 1989), the 1970s Foucault "describes the individualization in a one-sided manner as merely the effect of the technologies of power. Then, in his last works, he surprisingly shifts to a positive evaluation of the individual cultivation of the self" (p. 40). While giving voice to its existence, Dews overstates the shift. First, Foucault has not altered the original Nietzschean project of "historicizing the subject" (Flynn, 1985, p. 535). What has in fact occurred is a focus on the moral and ethical domains of the self's constitution: how does one best govern (care for) oneself? The focus of the *History of Sexuality*, especially in volumes 2 and 3, becomes an examination of classical precepts for valuing one's own being. In responding to questions about how contemporary sexual practices have come to repress talk, to silence one's sexuality, Foucault returns to the classical era for answers. It is in *The Use of Pleasure* (1985) and *The Care of the Self* (1986) that his analysis of classical texts uncovers the social procedures governing changes in the self's obligation to "care for itself." What is essential in this "shift" is that while Foucault underlines the possibilities of a new "aesthetics of existence" he does so for the individual, and not as a displacement of a universal moral code governing the lives of persons (Flynn, 1988, p. 114).

## Conclusion

Whether one speaks of regimes or games, the sense of truth that is open to critique has its analog in the surrealism of a Magritte painting. The "break" with that which is universally represented as the social norm is made evident through critique; in similar fashion, the "break" with reality is made evident through the juxtaposition of incongruous

images in surrealist art. What Foucault provides, as presented above, is a conceptual framework for the continued attack on universalist conceptions of reason and the good. The critique of present social practices allows one to recast the "freedom to" participate in social life in new ways. For rhetorical theorists, the critical practice becomes an active engagement with the "real" as it presents itself to society, and an active appraisal of how it came to be, and who is authorized to act and speak on its behalf.

In fulfilling this task, with Foucault's conception of truth as a starting point, there are three additional caveats that are important to consider. First, the relation between self and symbol is not total. As Foucault notes, "it is not enough to say that the subject is constituted in a symbolic system. It is not just in the play of symbols that the subject is constituted. It is constituted in real practices --historically analyzable practices. There is technology of the constitution of the self which cuts across symbolic systems while using them" (Foucault, 1984, p. 369).

Second, the role of the intellectual, if one accepts Foucault's formulation, "is not to tell others what they have to do. . . . The work of the intellectual is not to shape others' political will; it is, through the analyses that he [sic] carries out in his own field, to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people's mental habits, the way they do and think things, to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to reexamine rules and institutions and on the basis of this re-problematization . . . to participate in the formation of a political will (in which he has his role as citizen to play)" (1988, p. 265).

Third, rhetorical scholars cannot automatically assume that Foucault's aversion to Platonic thought makes him directly amenable to a sophistic or even Isocratean perspective. In his last course at the college de france, Foucault's lectures on parrhesia as a moral or ethical virtue contrasted "truth-telling" with the activity of the classical rhetor. "The rhetorician, in Foucault's view, was the open contrary of the parrhesiast. He did not have to meet these prior conditions [imposed on the parrhesiast] to enter into discourse. For example, he did not have to believe what he said" (Flynn, 1988, p. 103). In his analysis of those engaged in truth-telling, Foucault included the "prophet, the sage, the teacher-technician and the parrhesiast," but not the rhetor. Whether one should read this as an acceptance of the Platonic charge against sophistry, and the resulting diminution of rhetoric's role in constituting historical social realities is unclear. What is clear is that parrhesia imposes a condition that one not only speak the truth that one believes in, and also run the risk of disapproval from those to whom it is addressed. Insofar as Foucault may have thought of himself as a "speaker," it was as a parrhesiast and not as a rhetor. While we may "make over" his ideas to suit our needs, we can remain mindful of the "truth-telling" obligation he imposes on a critical rhetoric.

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