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We Dream in Images:
**How did I become what I am, and
why do I suffer from being what I am?**
Foucault's Anthropology of Imagination

Anthropology of Imagination	6
Artists, Authors, Cynics, and the Coordinates of Existence.....	26
Bibliography	44

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“I’m not an author. First of all, I have no imagination. I’m completely uninventive. I’ve never been able to conceive of something like the subject of a novel.”
Michel Foucault, *Speech Begins After Death* (1968)

Although critical of his own power of imagination, as stated in the above quote, Michel Foucault left us one of the finest works on precisely this—imagination. Nevertheless, when we think about dreams or imagination, his name is not the one that comes first to our minds. Why it is so, one might ask? In the summer seminar of 2012, Giorgio Agamben spoke of the theologian Franz Overbeck (1837–1905) who divided each historical phenomenon on pre-history (*ur-geschichte*) and history (*geschichte*).¹ In pre-history, one finds the point of emergence of a phenomenon, which tradition tries to conceal through canonization: “Canonization is the way to conceal pre-history.”² As Bryan Smyth writes, “Foucault’s interest in *Daseinsanalyse* is generally seen as... a ‘false start,’ a juvenile pre-history of the real Foucault, and thus as lacking any philosophical import with regard to his later work. However, notwithstanding that Foucault did reject *Daseinsanalyse*, that view is incorrect.”³ Hence, we could consider this part, a so-called young Foucault, as a pre-history in the canonization of Foucault’s work: where the origin of ideas is evident, but not yet the discourse. Our task shall be to see what exactly has been concealed from us by a canonical approach to Foucault, what is to be found in his “pre-Foucauldian”⁴ phase, as well as to detect the elements escaping a fixed discourse about his work.

In the year 1954, at age 28, Michel Foucault published one of his first essays entitled “Dream, Imagination and Existence,”

¹ Giorgio Agamben at the summer seminar, European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland, August 2012.

² “Standard periodizations of Foucault’s work begin in 1961 with *History of Madness*.” Bryan Smyth, “Foucault and Binswanger. Beyond the Dream.” *Philosophy Today*, SPEG Supplement 2011, DePaul University, pp.94.

³ *Ibid*, pp.92.

⁴ Yasuyuki Shinkai, *L’Invisible visible. Étude sur Michel Foucault*. Doctoral thesis, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1999, pp.8.

written as an introduction to Doctor Ludwig Binswanger's French translation of the 1930's work *Dream and Existence*. The introduction took Binswanger's text only as a starting point for a lengthy elaboration on what Foucault named the anthropology of imagination.⁵ Ludwig Binswanger (1881-1966) was born in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland, into a family of noted psychiatrists.⁶ A close friend of Sigmund Freud, he is remembered in psychiatry as a person who introduced Heideggerian ideas to psychiatric practice through *Daseinsanalyse*.⁷ Foucault visited Binswanger at his clinic at Kreuzlingen, "possibly multiple times, as well as at his summer residence, and he also entered into a correspondence with him."⁸ As Foucault stated in one of his later interviews,

Reading what has been defined "existential analysis" or "phenomenological psychiatry" certainly was important for me: it was a period when I was working in psychiatric hospitals, and I was looking for something different to counterbalance the traditional grids of the medical gaze. Certainly those superb descriptions of madness as fundamental, unique experiences that could not be superimposed on others, were

⁵ "Our proposal is only to write in the margins of *Dream and Existence*." Foucault, "Dream, Imagination and Existence" in: Ludwig Binswanger, "Dream and Existence." *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*, v. XIX, no.1, 1985, pp.33.

⁶ "That included his grandfather Ludwig, his father Robert, and his uncle Otto. His grandfather Ludwig had founded Bellevue Sanatorium in Kreuzlingen in 1857, and his father Robert was the director during the time that Anna O was hospitalized there. His uncle Otto was the discoverer of an Alzheimer-like disease, which is still called Binswanger's disease, and was one of Nietzsche's doctors." Joseph Reppen, "Ludwig Binswanger and Sigmund Freud: Portrait of a Friendship." *Psychoanalytic Review*, 90(3), June 2003, pp.282.

⁷ "Despite the metaphysics and the faintly religious aura that surround Binswanger's idea of the "universal," the clinical value of dream-analysis is a means of helping patients recover a sense of mastery over their lives that will restore them to effective functioning in the real world." James Miller, "Michel Foucault: The Heart Laid Bare." *Grand Street*, No.39, 1991, pp.58.

⁸ Bryan Smyth, pp.93.

crucial.⁹

One of the specificities of Binswanger's work on dream analysis was an unusual tolerance of the suicide, "as the best hope for some human beings, but he also saw in dreams a means of unriddling, in Nietzsche's terms, "what one is.""¹⁰

Foucault had been helping Jacqueline Verdeaux translate Binswanger's essay and, when the translation was finished,

Verdeaux asked her collaborator if he would like to write an introduction. Foucault said yes. And a few months later, around Easter 1954, Foucault sent her his text. At first Verdeaux was stunned: Foucault's piece was more than twice as long as Binswanger's original essay. But when she set down to read it, she recognized its brilliance.¹¹

This "introduction" is:

By no means an easy read and only the most valiant scholars have persisted with it. (...) It bore only a marginal resemblance to the material it was introducing. Essentially it offered a brief history of Western dream interpretation and an analysis of the image and the imagination in Western history.¹²

Scholars who did pay attention to this early phase of Foucault's work agree that "certain themes and structures characteristic of all of Foucault's work are in evidence" here.¹³ He

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*. Semiotext(e), New York, 1991, pp.72.

¹⁰ James Miller, *Ibid*, pp.57.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp.76.

¹² Claire O' Farrell, *Michel Foucault*. Sage Publications, 2005, pp.34-35

¹³ *Ibid*.

is clearly interested in history, but with a particular focus: “He is interested in where the orders of history break down—the margins and limits of orderly experience. It is dreams which signal that point where people become aware that everyday orderly existence is not all there is.”¹⁴ In here, Foucault turns

Both Binswanger and Freud upside down. His main thesis is shockingly simple: the dream is “the birth of the world... the origin of existence itself.” The dream must therefore be approached not as a psychological symptom to be analyzed but rather as an enigmatic key to solving the riddle of being—just as André Breton and the Surrealists had been arguing since the 1920s.¹⁵

Or, in the words of Claire O’Farrell, “this piece is also notable for its scathing attack on Freud’s reduction of dreams to a mere pathology. In Freud’s work, Foucault argues, dreams become no more than a set of symptoms—no longer the sign of another world.”¹⁶ Equally important, when considering the overall assessment of Foucault’s work, his dream essay provides “the seeds of his future arguments against phenomenology, structuralism, and hermeneutics that together constitute the complexity of his critical project.”¹⁷

Hence, without our clear understanding of Foucault’s

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ James Miller, *Ibid.*, pp.77.

¹⁶ Claire O’Farrell, *Ibid.*

¹⁷ “Specifically, Foucault argues that (1) hermeneutics will miss the fact that “the imaginary world has its own laws, its specific structures”; (2) structuralism will miss the fact that the materiality of linguistic practices are themselves constitutive of meaning; and (3) phenomenology will always seek but never be adequate to what exceeds it and, consequently, will fail in its foundationalist ends.” David Vessay and Stephen H. Watson, *The Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*, Lester Embree, Elizabeth A. Behnke, David Carr, J. Claude Evans, Jose Huertas-Jourda, Joseph J. Kockelmans, William R. McKenna, I. Algis Mickunas, Jitendra Nath Mohanty, Thomas M. Seebohm, Richard M. Zaner eds. Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997, pp.243.

beginnings, we won't be able to fully grasp the potential and full significance of the rest of his critical project. As we shall see, Foucault took "the *dream* rather than waking existence as the basis for understanding an individual's transcendence in and toward the world."¹⁸ More significantly, in the last publication before his death, Volume 3 of *The History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self*, Foucault "included a lengthy opening section on Ancient Greek dream interpretation. He had come full circle."¹⁹ The goal of his project was intended "to confront the dialectics of history with the unchanging structure of the tragic."²⁰ This, he explained, would require a multifaceted inquiry, into madness, of course, but also, in future books, into dreams and "sexual prohibitions" and "the happy world of desire."²¹ For Foucault, each culture was defined by a set of clear limits not to be crossed, and to those he devoted his life, writing the history of limits of our, Western culture, "of those obscure gestures, necessarily forgotten as soon as they are accomplished, through which a culture rejects something which for it will be the Exterior."²² The accompanying list of those "avatars of the Exterior"²³ includes the Orient, madness, sexual prohibitions, and the domain of dreams. What follows is an attempt to give an overview of Foucault's main ideas from *Dream, Imagination and Existence*, as a modest contribution to the inclusion of one of the remaining avatars of the exterior of Western culture, since "dreams, madness, death, sexuality, literature all point to this silenced truth in Foucault's work."²⁴

¹⁸ Laura Hengehold, "'In that sleep of death what dreams...': Foucault, Existential Phenomenology and the Kantian Imagination." *Continental Philosophy Review*, June 2002, Vol.35, Issue 2, pp.136.

¹⁹ Claire O' Farrell, *Ibid*.

²⁰ James Miller, *Ibid*, pp.67.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² Michel Foucault, "Preface to the 1961 edition," *History of Madness*. Routledge, London, New York, 2006, pp. XXIX.

²³ Colin Gordon, "History of Madness" in: Christopher Falzon, Timothy O'Leary, and Jana Sawicki, *A Companion to Foucault*. Blackwell Publishing, West Sussex, 2013, pp.89.

²⁴ Claire O'Farrell, *Ibid*, pp.90.

Anthropology of Imagination

“Man has known, since antiquity, that in dreams
he encounters what he is and what he will be,
what he has done and what he is going to do,
discovering there the knot that ties
his freedom to the necessity of the world.”

Michel Foucault, *Dream, Imagination and Existence* (1954)

Perhaps one of the possible reasons why Michel Foucault himself preferred not to talk about his earliest work was the personal transformation he went through in each of his works, marking this essay a starting point for a lifelong journey of self-exploration. Namely, each of Foucault's investigations started from a deeply personal experience which he confronted through a thorough historical and theoretical analysis:

The books I write constitute an experience for me that I'd like to be as rich as possible. An experience is something you come out of changed. If I had to write a book to communicate what I have already thought, I'd never have the courage to begin it. I write precisely because I don't know yet what to think about a subject that attract my interest. In so doing, the book transforms me, changes what I think.²⁵ (...) What I write does not prescribe anything, neither to myself nor to others. At most, its character is instrumental and visionary or dream-like.²⁶

Foucault's first published essay is built of exactly those dream-like elements, and his brilliance lays in the fact that he managed to translate into a written form the dream-like experience he is simultaneously writing about. The task of each reader will be to follow his thoughts and allow herself to come out transformed.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, pp.27.

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp.29.

One of the major frustrations of a reader's scientific mind stems from the fact that Foucault's style simply doesn't allow for his "dream" to be deciphered in its totality; the images have a meaning that is not fully determined, and this freedom of interpretation, as precarious and uncomfortable as it is, makes this work into a highly poetic one. The other reason for Foucault to avoid discussing this work later in life is perhaps because he revealed too much of himself here; if his writing is dream-like, as he later characterized it, he might have offered us here his "heart shown naked."²⁷ Let us begin with the transformative voyage this text has put us through—some concepts might be harder to grasp than the others, as from time to time one might feel like starting to learn a completely new language.

I

At the very beginning, Foucault will announce the aim of his project—to write in the margins of Binswanger's *Dream and Existence*, as a contribution to an anthropology he undertakes in order to articulate an analysis of a human being through an analytic of existence (*Existenz*, presence-to-being). The theme of his inquiry is the "human 'fact'... the real content of an existence which is living itself and is experiencing itself, which recognizes or loses itself."²⁸ According to Foucault, the theme of Binswanger's essay is "less dream *and* existence than existence as it appears to itself and can be deciphered in the dream."²⁹ For Foucault, the major interest of Binswanger's work is in pointing out the paradox of his decision to focus on dreams—the dreams are a mode "in which existence is least engaged in."³⁰ The world the existence inhabits in dreams is fundamentally different from the one in the waking hours which is taken as a defining point of existence in the first place: "In Heideggerian terms, the dream itself is "inauthentic" almost by

²⁷ "The dream is that absolute disclosure of the ethical content, the heart shown naked." Michel Foucault, *Dream, Imagination and Existence*, pp.52.

²⁸ *Ibid*, pp.32.

²⁹ *Ibid*.

³⁰ *Ibid*, pp.33.

definition, for it is the product of a “self-forgetting” existence. To become authentic, the human being must “*make something*” of himself in the shared sphere of “history.””³¹

II

For Foucault, dream analysis should not stop at the level of a hermeneutic of symbols, but initiate “a whole anthropology of the imagination that requires a new definition of the relations between meaning and symbol, between image and expression—in short, a new way of conceiving how meanings are manifested.”³² Hence, his introductory analysis will focus on two almost simultaneous works which caused significant changes in the philosophy of thought, Sigmund Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and Edmund Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* (1899). What follows is a meticulous critique of both psychoanalysis and phenomenology.

Giving credit to Freud for bringing dreams into the field of “human meanings” after centuries of having been considered the nonsense of consciousness, Foucault nevertheless believes that this reification of the unconscious has neglected something he finds more significant, namely, the relation of meaning and image. What he believes psychoanalysis did was the reduction of plurality, a “multiplication of meanings which override and contradict each other”³³ where “the language of the dream is analyzed only in its semantic function:”³⁴ “The peculiarly imaginative dimension of the meaningful expression is completely omitted.”³⁵ Hence, the first thing Foucault points out is the fact that we dream in images, signaling a particular significance that should be paid to this connection between dreams, imagination and images. Psychoanalysis has managed to close the distance between images

³¹ James Miller, “Michel Foucault: The Heart Laid Bare.” *Grand Street*, No.39, 1991, pp.57.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid*, pp.34.

³⁴ *Ibid*, pp.35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

and meaning, the imaginative dimension of the meaningful expression is omitted, and the meaning manages to hide itself in the image; it is to this we should bring back our attention, away from the imprisonment of the simplified game of semantic interpretation and associations played in an average psychoanalytic session:

It is important that the image possesses its own dynamic powers, that there is a different morphology of space when it is free, luminous space and when the space put into play is imprisoning, dark and stifling. The imaginary world has its own laws, its specific structures, and the image is somewhat more than the immediate fulfillment of meaning. It has its own density, and the laws which govern it are not solely significant propositions. (...) One may say that psychoanalysis gave the dream no status beyond that of speech, and failed to see it in its reality as language.³⁶

According to Foucault, Freudian analysis retrieves only one meaning among many possible meanings, and dream interpretation becomes “a method designed to discover the meanings of words in a language whose grammar one does not understand.”³⁷ The origin of these “defects” of Freudian theory lies in an inadequate elaboration of the notion of symbol:

Freud takes the symbol as merely the tangential point where, for an instant, the limped meaning joins with the material of the image taken as a transformed and transformable residue of perception. The symbol is that surface of contact, that film, which separates, as it joins, an inner world and an external world; the instantiation of an unconscious impulse and of a perceptual

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

consciousness; the factor of implicit language and the factor of sensible image.³⁸

In contrast to Freud, according to Foucault, Husserl has rightly made, in the first of the *Logical Investigations*, a distinction between the index and the signification. Nevertheless, the index has no signification by itself, and it acquires one in a secondary way, “by the oblique route of a consciousness which uses it as a marker, a reference or a token.”³⁹ What surprises Foucault is that phenomenology never developed in the direction of a theory of expression, “which it left in the shadows, while bringing into full light a theory of signification. But philosophy of expression is no doubt possible only by going beyond phenomenology.”⁴⁰

Psychoanalysis, by contrast, has always confounded the two structures, defining meaning by cross-referencing of objective signs and coincidences within the deciphering process. As a result, Freudian analysis could see only an artificial connection between meaning and expression, namely, the hallucinatory nature of the satisfaction of desire. Phenomenology, on the contrary, enables one to recapture the meaning in the context of the expressive act which founds it. To that extent, a phenomenological description can make manifest the presence of meaning in an imaginary content.⁴¹

As a conclusion in pointing out the difference between the two, if “psychoanalysis has never succeeded in making images speak,”⁴² “phenomenology has succeeded in making images speak; but it has given no one the possibility of understanding their

³⁸ *Ibid*, pp.36-37.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp.39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pp.41.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp.41-42.

⁴² *Ibid*, pp.38.

language.”⁴³ In this context, Foucault has found in Binswanger’s *Dreams and Existence* an attempt to resolve this problem, where the meanings are “knit together.”⁴⁴ ⁴⁵ What Freud missed to see, according to Foucault, is that dream is more than a rhapsody of images—it is a specific form of experience, “an imaginary experience”⁴⁶ which cannot be exhausted by a psychological analysis.

III

[The dreaming mind]

In the next part, Foucault guides us through the experience of dreams and the nature of imagination by introducing the concept of the dreaming mind, as well as an “old idea, constant in the literary and mystical tradition,” that not all dreams are suitable for interpretation: according to this, only “morning dreams have a valid meaning.”⁴⁷ In this interregnum, between the deep sleep of the dark night and the waking power of the morning sun, “between the sleeping mind and the waking mind, the dreaming mind enjoys an experience which borrows from nowhere its light and its genius.”⁴⁸ Taking from Spinoza who stated that imagination is a specific form of knowledge, Foucault concludes, “Dream, like

⁴³ *Ibid*, pp.42.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

⁴⁵ “Throughout “Dream, Imagination and Existence” Foucault demurs from providing a more comprehensive critique of phenomenology, but its outline is clear. He thinks that Binswanger’s existential-psychological prioritizing of dreams is justified and completed in the two-fold operation of first prioritizing the IMAGINATION OVER PERCEPTION, and then founding the imagination in dreams. We can only regain the rigorous goals of phenomenology if we recognize that dreams, rather than being an effect of the imagination, are the source of the imagination. Moreover, since dreams have a symbolic structure of their own, by analyzing dreams we analyze the fundamental structures of perception.” Vessay, David and Stephen H. Watson, “Michel Foucault.” In: *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*. Springer-Science+Business Media, B.V., 1997, pp.243.

⁴⁶ Foucault, *Ibid*, pp.43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, pp.44.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

imagination, is the concrete form of revelation.”⁴⁹ Therefore, the dream,

Like every imaginary experience, is thus a specific form of experience which cannot be wholly reconstituted by psychological analysis, one whose content points to man as transcendent being. The imaginary, sign of transcendence; the dream, experience of this transcendence under the sign of the imaginary.⁵⁰

In this transcendence lies the proof of the essential freedom of human existence encountered only in dreams, and only in dreams he encounters “what he is and what he will be, what he has done and what he is going to do, discovering there the knot that ties his freedom to the necessity of the world.”⁵¹ What has changed from antiquity to other epochs has not been the reading of destiny in dreams, but “justification of this relation of dream to the world, and the way of conceiving how the truth of the world can anticipate itself and gather together its future in an image capable only of reconstituting it in a murky form.”⁵² Following Franz von Baader, who has defined the dream by the luminosity of intuition,⁵³ Foucault concludes,

the privilege that tradition accords to waking consciousness and its knowledge is “but uncertainty and prejudice.” In the darkest night the glow of the dream is more luminous than the light of day, and the intuition borne with it is the most elevated form of knowledge.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, pp.45.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, pp.47.

⁵² *Ibid*.

⁵³ “Inner and objective vision” which “is not mediated by the external senses.”
Ibid, pp.48.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

Foucault reminds us of Heraclitus' famous words (cited by Binswanger as well), that "we share a world when we are awake; each sleeper is in a world of his own," underlying the fact that the dream should be seen as an anthropological index of transcendence, transcendence that marks the state of radical freedom of existence:

By breaking with the objectivity which fascinates waking consciousness and by reinstating the human subject in its radical freedom, the dream discloses paradoxically the movement of freedom toward the world. The point of origin from which freedom makes itself world. The cosmogony of the dream is the origination itself of existence.⁵⁵

In contrast to Freudian assumptions,

What is indicated... by this depth of the spirit, these "abysses of the soul" whose emergence is described in the dream, is not the biological equipment of the libidinal instinct; it is the originitive movement of freedom, the birth of the world in the very movement of existence.⁵⁶

This experience of the individual world of radical freedom, paradoxically, is something we all have in common, while the shared world of reality presents itself with obstacles and demands, limitations to our freedom that will further have different impacts on individual existences. In some cases, the existence will find its realization in the waking reality while, in others, it will experience its alienation. What dream brings to light is:

The freedom of man in its most original form. (...)
The dream world is not the inner garden of

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, pp.51.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*.

fantasy. If the dreamer meets there a world of its own, this is because he can recognize there the fact of his own destiny: he finds there the original movement of his existence and his freedom, in its achievement or in its alienation.⁵⁷

For Foucault, the dream is the “absolute disclosure of the ethical content, the heart shown naked.”⁵⁸ The repetition of a dream “declares some destiny... bewailing a freedom which has lost itself.”⁵⁹

In the following segment, Foucault will examine the relationship between the sleep and the dream: “If consciousness sleeps during sleep, existence awakens in the dream.”⁶⁰ Their relationship is one of opposite directions: “The dream is no accomplice of sleep. It ascends against the slope that sleep descends, towards life, it goes toward existence, and there, in full light, it sees death as the destiny of freedom.”⁶¹ For Foucault, dreams about death are to be considered “the most important dreams available to individuals, because instead of being about life in its various interpretations, they are about the fulfillment of existence, the moment in which life reaches its fulfillment:”⁶² “Death is the absolute meaning of the dream.”⁶³ If the body, during sleep, “plays dead,” it is “from fear of death.”⁶⁴ The dream will make sleep impossible by “waking it to the light of death,”⁶⁵ testifying to (human) “need for a dialectic.”⁶⁶

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.53-54.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.52.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.53.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.54.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² “Foucault, Michel” in: James R. Lewis, Evelyn Dorothy Oliver, *The Dream Encyclopedia*. Visible Ink Press, 2009, pp.86.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp.55.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.54.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.55.

IV

[Subjectivity]

In the next part, Foucault invites for an anthropological dream analysis that would uncover the layers of significance neglected or censored by psychoanalysis. One of the problems of psychoanalytic approach is that its symbolic vocabulary “from beginning to end transmutes a determining past into a present that symbolizes it.”⁶⁷ The inevitable question here is what kind of subjectivity is being constructed? Foucault believes that Freud’s method has proven to be inadequate because it extracts only one dimension of meanings of subjectivity: “A method of this sort presupposes a radical objectification of the dreaming subject, which comes to play its role among other personages in a setting where it takes on a symbolic character.”⁶⁸ Freud’s dreaming subject is suspended in the play of the Other, “somewhere between the dreamer and what he dreams.”⁶⁹ Instead, according to Foucault, the dreaming subject

Is not characterized as one of the possible meanings of one of the personages of the dream, but as the foundation of all its eventual meanings. To that extent, the dream-subject is not a later edition of a previous form, or an archaic stage of personality. It manifests itself as the coming-to-be and the totality of existence itself.⁷⁰

The essential point of the dream should be seen not in its revival of the past, but its declarations about the future: “The dream anticipates the moment of liberation. It is a prefiguring of history even more than an obligatory repetition of the traumatic past.”⁷¹

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, pp.56.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, pp.57.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, pp.58.

Foucault stresses the fact that the subject of the dream cannot be this “quasi-objectified subject of that past history,”⁷² its constituting moment is the existence that makes itself through time, in its movement toward the future: “The dream is already this future making itself, the first moment of freedom freeing itself, the still secret jarring of an existence which is taking hold of itself again in the whole of its becoming.”⁷³

In a dream, we encounter the moment before the birth of the subject:

The subject of the dream, the first person of the dream, is the dream itself, the whole dream. In the dream, everything says, “I”, even the things and the animals, even the empty space, even objects distant and strange which populate the phantasmagoria. The dream is an existence carving itself out in barren space, shattering chaotically, exploding noisily, netting itself, a scarcely breathing animal, in the webs of death. It is the world at the dawn of its first explosion when the world is still existence itself and is not yet the universe of objectivity. To dream is not another way of experiencing another world, it is for the dreaming subject the radical way of experiencing its own world. (...) The dream is situated in that ultimate moment in which existence still is its world; once beyond, at the dawn of wakefulness, already it is no longer its world.⁷⁴

In this fact Foucault sees the major importance of dream analysis: it is “decisive for bringing to light the fundamental meanings of existence.”⁷⁵

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.59.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

[The ascent and fall]

One of the main elements that can help us understand the fundamental meanings of existence as experienced in a dream is through the topology of space. The essential directions of existence, according to Foucault, are the oppositions of ascent and fall. What is the anthropological privilege of this vertical dimension? First of all, it brings out the structures of temporality: “Horizontal oppositions of the near and far exhibits time only in the chronology of spatial progression.”⁷⁶ In a dream, we deal with a scene or a landscape, a scene which is “paradoxically closed by the infinite openness of the horizon.”⁷⁷ The elements are either near or far, and through the displacement, the dream space loses its secure character—it becomes “filled with stifling threats and sudden dangers, is furrowed by irruptive forces... Space, sign of my weakness.”⁷⁸ Nevertheless, from its side, the upward movement in the vertical direction of existence “does not imply only an existence transcending itself in enthusiasm. (...) The vertical axis can also be the vector of an existence that has lost its place on earth and... is going to resume, up above its dialogue with God.”⁷⁹ Nevertheless, “from such summits, one returns only in a vertiginous fall.”⁸⁰

[The anthropology of art]

Almost like a side-note, Foucault will make a break here and use the opportunity to situate his anthropology of art in relation to the axes of existence. He propagates the notion of an anthropology of art that does not interpret and refer expressive structures back to unconscious motivations, “but reinstate them the whole length of

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.60.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.61.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.62.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

that line along which human freedom moves.”⁸¹ Hence, according to Foucault, epic expression should be seen as the basic structure of the expressive, “on those “great cloths woven of the dreamed and the real.””⁸² From its side, lyrical expression is possible only in the “alternation of light and darkness where existence plays itself out. (...) The lyrical does not traverse distances, it is always the others who depart. There is no return from exile, because its own land is already exile.”⁸³ On the other hand, the axis of tragic expression is located along the vertical axis of existence, it is always of the order of ascent and fall: “That is why tragedy hardly needs time and space in which to extend itself, nor foreign lands, not even the surcease of the night, for it sets itself the task of manifesting the vertical transcendence of destiny.”⁸⁴

It is along this vertical direction of existence that the authentic and inauthentic forms of existence can best be allocated:

This self-transcendence of the existent in its temporal movements, this transcendence designated by the vertical axis of the imaginary, can be lived as a wrenching away from the bases of the existence itself. Then we can see crystalizing all those themes of immortality, of survival, of pure love, of unmediated communication between minds. Or it can be lived, on the contrary, as “transcendence,” as an imminent plunge from the dangerous pinnacle of the present. Then the imaginary elaborates itself into a fantastic world of disaster. The universe is but the moment of its own annihilation: this is the constitutive moment of those deliriums of “the end of the world.”⁸⁵

⁸¹ *Ibid*, pp.63.

⁸² *Ibid*.

⁸³ *Ibid*.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, pp.65.

It is through analyzing the vertical axes that one can distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic forms of existence. What is important to note is that the “temporality’s movement of transcendence can likewise be covered over and hidden by a pseudo-transcendence of space,” the vertical axis is then wholly absorbed “into the horizontal trajectory of existence. The future lies in the spatially distant.”⁸⁶

The inauthentic mode of existence will be “absorbed into the inner history of its delirium,”⁸⁷ pointing to a complete alienation of its original freedom. In this case, “existence comes to inscribe itself in this determinism of its illness.”⁸⁸ The one who diagnoses, the psychiatrist, sees,

In this state of affairs a verification of his own diagnosis, which justifies him in considering the illness as an “objective process,” and the patient as an inert thing where the process is running its course according to an inner determinism. The psychiatrist forgets that it is existence itself which constitutes the natural history of the illness as an inauthentic form of its historicity.⁸⁹

Only by granting the absolute privilege to the signifying dimension of ascent and fall it becomes possible to determine the temporality, the authenticity, and the historicity of existence. Only by turning to the vertical dimension, we can “grasp existence making itself,”⁹⁰ where we encounter “that form of absolutely original presence in which *Dasein* is defined.”⁹¹ By following this path, one will abandon the anthropological reflection which

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.66.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

analyzes “man as man within his human world” and open up the “ontological reflection which concerns the mode of being of an existence as presence to the world. (...) It is existence itself indicating, in the fundamental direction of the imagination, its own ontological foundation.”⁹² It is to this vertical anthropology, or to the anthropology of the vertical, that we should direct our attention to.

V

An important fact to take into account when examining Foucault’s dialectics of dream and existence is the insertion of the third term between Binswanger’s original dialectical couple: that of imagination. Perhaps the most crucial point of this whole treatise, it inevitably leads us further to the discussion on what imagination is, as well as to what is its relation to the image. Foucault rejects the notion that dream points to an archaic image, a phantasm, or a hereditary myth as its constitutive elements. They are neither its prime matter nor its ultimate significance. On the contrary, every act of imagination points implicitly to the dream: “The dream is not a modality of imagination, the dream is the first condition of its possibility.”⁹³ We might even state that, following this, if the dream was already there, even before the birth of the subject, its realization as an actual existence will depend on the power of imagination; hence the question of the role of images in this very process.

Throughout history, the image was always defined in reference to the real, interpreting the origin and “positivistic truth” of an image as “residues of perception,”⁹⁴ defining the essence of image negatively (as an imprint, one could add). For instance, the image of Peter is “the perception of Peter invoked,” taking place and exhausting itself in “the irreality where Peter presents himself as absent”:

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp.66-67.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

To imagine is not to actualize the fable of the little mouse, it is not to transport oneself into the world of Peter. It is to become the world where he is: I am the letter he is reading; I conjure myself from that look of attentive reader; I am the walls of his room that watch him from all sides and hence do not “see” him. [...] I am not only absolute master of what he is doing, I am what he is doing, I am what he is. [...] The imaginary is transcendent. [...] Even in imagination, or rather, especially in imagination, I do not obey myself, I am not my own master, for the sole reason that I prey upon myself. [...] And it is because I rediscover and recognize myself everywhere that I can decipher in this imagining the law of my heart, and read my destiny there: these feelings, this desire, this drive to spoil the simplest things, necessarily means my solitariness, at the very instant in which I try, in imagination, to dispel it. Consequently, to imagine is not so much a behavior towards others which intends them as quasi-presences on an essential ground of absence; it is rather to intent oneself as a movement of freedom which makes itself world and finally anchors itself in this world as its destiny. Through what it imagines, therefore, consciousness aims at the original movement which discloses itself in dreams. Thus, dreaming is not a singularly powerful and vivid way of imagining. On the contrary, imagining is to take aim at oneself in the moment of dreaming; it is to dream oneself dreaming.⁹⁵

Before pursuing the analysis of the images and imagination, Foucault makes a brief stop to include the question of

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, pp.68.

suicide in the discussion on imagination. In the movement of imagination, Foucault believes, one always derealizes his or her own presence to this very world, and experiences this world “as penetrated by my presence, as belonging to me as mine.”⁹⁶ The connection with suicide is established with the inscription of happiness and unhappiness (not duty and virtue) in the imagination’s register, hence the alignment of major forms of imagination with suicide:

The suicide appears as the absolute of imaginary behaviors: every suicidal desire is filed by that world in which I would no longer be present here, or there, but everywhere, in every sector. (...) Suicide is not a way of cancelling the world or myself, or the two together, but a way of rediscovering the original moment in which I make myself world. (...) To commit suicide is the ultimate mode of imagining; to try to characterize suicide in the realistic terms of suppression is to doom oneself to misunderstanding it.⁹⁷

In other words—the suicide, a radical response to an experience of existence of total alienation, when the alienated world becomes mine, becomes me again. For Foucault, the imaginary, “this conversation I am now having with Peter”⁹⁸ should not be seen as false, nor illusory: “The imaginary is not a mode of unreality, but indeed a mode of actuality, a way of approaching presence obliquely to bring out its primordial dimensions.”⁹⁹ Hence, the inevitable question if the images should be understood as a way of bringing out the primordial dimensions of existence, in this process of approaching presence.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, pp.69.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, pp.70.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*.

[The image]

In the final part of his discussion, Foucault sketches out the difference between image and imagination, since the image “does not seem to be made of the same stuff as the imagination”: image has been historically always defined by reference to the real, takes shape as a crystalized form, borrows its vivacity from memory, and plays “the part of a substitute for the reality, functioning as the *analogon* which we earlier denied to imagination.”¹⁰⁰ Should we understand the image as the fulfillment of what the imagination was lacking, as the completion of the movement of imagination? Foucault is very clear on this—absolutely not:

The image is not given at the culminating moment of imagination, but at the moment of its alteration. The image mimes the presence of Peter, the imagination goes forth to encounter him. To have an image is therefore to leave off imagining. (...) The image is impure, therefore, and precarious.¹⁰¹

The role of the image will be to elude the real task of imagination, the “as if” of the image turns “the authentic freedom of the imagination into the fantasy of desire. Just as it mimes perception by way of quasi-presence, so the image mimes freedom by a quasi-satisfaction of the desire.”¹⁰² Foucault underlines the essentially iconoclastic nature of imagination, “if it is true that the imagination circulates through a universe of images, it does not move to the extent that it promotes or reunites the images, but to the extent that it destroys and consumes them. The imagination is in essence iconoclastic.”¹⁰³ In this same domain, the true poet “denies himself the accomplishment of desire in the image, because the freedom of imagination imposes itself on him as a task of refusal,” while “the value of a poetic imagination is to be

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp.71.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp.72

measured by the inner destructive power of the image.”¹⁰⁴

On the opposite side of this we find morbid fantasy and certain crude forms of hallucination, where the imagination is completely enmeshed in the image: “The dimension of the imaginary has collapsed. The patient is left only with the capacity to have images, images all the more forceful, all the more tightly knit as the iconoclastic imagination is alienated in them.”¹⁰⁵ Hence, “the aim of psychotherapy should be to free the imaginary that is trapped in the image.”¹⁰⁶

The answer to the question if the dream is a rhapsody of images, as psychoanalytic tradition assumes, is both yes and no: although we become conscious of a dream only by way of images, they are themselves “given only fragmentary and choppily... a suddenly interrupted dream always ends on a thoroughly crystalized image.”¹⁰⁷ Our task should be to bridge the distance between image and imagination.

As a conclusion, Foucault invites us to continue with the examination of the movement of imagination, as his analysis aimed to retrace the line that connects it to the dream as its origin and truth. We should keep in mind that the moment of dream is not the definitive form in which imagination takes shape:

All imagination, to be authentic, must once more learn to dream and “*ars poetica*” has no meaning unless it teaches us to break with the fascination of images and to reopen, for imagination, its path of freedom toward the dream that offers it, as its absolute truth, the “unshatterable kernel of night.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.73-74.

Only in that way, the image can “come forward again, no longer as imagination renounced, but on the contrary as its fulfillment.”¹⁰⁹ Instead of simply being the image of something, projected toward an absence which it replaces, the image “is gathered into itself and is given as the fullness of a presence, it is addressed to someone. (...) Purified in the fire of the dream, what in the dream was only alienation of the imaginative, becomes ashes, but the fire itself finds its fulfillment in the flame.”¹¹⁰ For Foucault, only by placing the meaning of the dream at the heart of imagination can we restore the fundamental forms of existence and reveal the freedom. Through this anthropology of imagination, one should also be able to “designate its happiness and its unhappiness, since the unhappiness of existence is always writ in alienation, and happiness, in the empirical order, can only be the happiness of expression.”¹¹¹ And it is perhaps in this happiness of expression that we find the key for the need, for the impulse of artistic creation.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² “The image, created in reflection and recollection, does not present us with truth, rather it isolates us from the expressive authenticity of the structured associations of the imagination. For truth we must turn to poetry, art, and the imaginative play of the id.” Vessey, David and Stephen H. Watson, *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*, pp.243.

Artists, Authors, Cynics, and the Coordinates of Existence

“What pleases me precisely in painting is that one is truly constrained to look at it. There it is, it is my rest. It is one of the rare things on which I write with pleasure and without fighting with what it is. I believe that I have no tactical or strategic relation with painting. (...) I was suddenly struck by my pleasure in looking and at the pleasure of viewers. It was a joy! A current passed around bodily and sexually.”

Michel Foucault, *What Do Philosophers Dream Of?* (1975)

The importance of art or, more precisely, of paintings in the work of Michel Foucault represents yet another rather neglected aspect of it, both in terms of his writing style and as his research methodology. As the philosopher Gilles Deleuze writes, “The relation between visual display and discursive articulation is a constant theme of Foucault’s work.”¹¹³ Furthermore, Gary Shapiro, one of the rare researchers of this, notices, “it is also a question of how thought proceeds. Foucault’s juxtaposition of the visible and the linguistic might be as significant for his way of thinking as are Plato’s use of the dialogue form, Descartes’ sequences of meditations, or Hegel’s dialectical structuring of a series of positions of thought.”¹¹⁴ The place of art seems to be crucial in understanding the rest of Foucault’s critical project—it has already been noticed that Foucault’s transgressive concept of art as well as its critical potential “could be argued to be unifying features of Foucault’s work as a whole.”¹¹⁵ One of the most striking facts is that Foucault,

Who has had such an enormous effect on literary studies but a rather negligible one with respect to the history of art, confesses that he finds painting

¹¹³ In Gary Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 2003, pp.198.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Gearhart, Suzanne. “Foucault’s response to Freud: Sado-masochism and the aestheticization of power.” *Style*, vol.29, No. 3, *Psychoanalysis: Theory and Practice*, Fall 1995, pp.395.

so much more affecting than literature. (...) Foucault tends either to contrast literature with painting, so as to suggest the greater strength of visual art, or to read literature as itself a radiant source of images.¹¹⁶

The final paragraphs of Foucault's dream essay end on a short discussion of the potential of art, or *ars poetica*, whose task should be to teach us to "break with the fascination of images and to reopen, for imagination, its path of freedom toward the dream."¹¹⁷ In other words, art should reestablish the lost connection between dream and imagination, insist on the inner destructive power of the image, and refuse to be the substitute for reality, opening up the path for the experience of fundamental freedom of individual existence. It even becomes possible to claim that Foucault sees the dream as a "very much like a work of art,"¹¹⁸ while "a number of Foucault's accounts of painting and other works of art read as essays in discovering the dream behind the image."¹¹⁹ Like dreams, he considered art to be

An essential component in understanding who we are, what constitutes our present, and how both might be transformed. (...) Foucault understood art, modern art in particular, as an anticultural force, one that harbored the capacity to oppose unwarranted consensus, question our habits, and posit new values.¹²⁰

According to Joseph Tanke, the main question Foucault poses when encountering a work of art is: what does this work of art do? His examinations are diagnostic, and his focus is on the artworks as events—as moments of historical rupture, as the

¹¹⁶ Shapiro, *Ibid*, pp.195.

¹¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Dream, Imagination and Existence*, pp.73-74.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, pp.204.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp.206.

¹²⁰ Tanke, *Ibid*, pp.4.

reversal of a relationship of forces after which it became impossible to “practice a knowledge in the same manner.”¹²¹ For instance, the most famous example of this procedure, Foucault’s analysis of Velasquez’s *Las Meninas*, “serves as a guiding image throughout *The Order of Things* because it enables Foucault to present in visual form the transformations taking place within Western knowledge as it approaches the threshold of modernity.”¹²² He identified in some of the works of painters crucial points where new positions and definitions of ontology, subjectivity and politics were publicly formulated in Western history, in some cases centuries before those same questions and positions are to be identified in literature and written tradition.¹²³ For him, artworks are not simply objects that have their place in the museum or galleries; they are dynamic, active and, in some instances, aggressive beings, responding “to a field that conditions their appearance, and which they serve to transform”¹²⁴.

For Foucault, *poiēsis*, generally speaking, is the introduction of a foreign element into a new domain. It is a type of crossing of registers whereby something—an idea, an image, a practice, a word—is introduced into a different field, destabilizing the new field and the element itself. Foucault presents creative practice as a “combative” relationship with history, where

¹²¹ *Ibid*, pp.7.

¹²² Joseph J. Tanke, *Foucault’s Philosophy of Art: A Genealogy of Modernity*. Continuum Books, New York & London, 2009, pp.8.

¹²³ “But more importantly, in their exemplary status, these texts reveal not that which is at the heart of each *episteme*, but the cracks, instabilities, and tectonic shifts within and between them—in the periods between the Renaissance, the Classical Age, and Modernity—exposing their limits and transformations.” Susan van Zyl and Ulrike Kistner, “Introduction: Literature and Art as Diagnosis and Dissent in the Work of Michel Foucault.” *Journal of Literary Studies*, 22:3-4, 2006, pp.201.

¹²⁴ Tanke, *Ibid*, pp.8.

history is the history of one's own medium or discipline.¹²⁵

The reason for literature and paintings to occupy a privileged position in Foucault's work seems to be in their capacity to "establish both systematic and symptomatic links between knowledge and art."¹²⁶ According to van Zyl and Kistner, Foucault values aesthetic work not only for its diagnostic power, but also for "its capacity not just to argue for, but to instantiate dissent or radical critique."¹²⁷ The transgression of prevailing orders of knowledge and discourse, as well as the capacity to embody dissent on the level of form, is what Foucault seems to value the most, risking to be labeled a formalist, something he actually never fully rejected.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, it is important to underline the difference between Foucault's formalism and the one normally practiced in the field of aesthetic theory and art history. While the traditional formalism focuses on the examination of formal elements of a painting (form, color, canvas,...) as a method to interpret it, it often neglects "the social contexts to which these works belong, and fail to produce an account of how the works in question differ from those which precede and follow it in the history of art."¹²⁹ On the other hand, Foucault "contends that formalism never accounts for why a statement or painting occurs when and where it does,"¹³⁰ and his archeology "attempts to show "why [a discourse] could not be other than it was, in what respect it is exclusive of any other, how it assumes, in the midst of others and in relation to them, a place no

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.35.

¹²⁶ van Zyl and Kistner, *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ "This stance, considered more widely, has variously earned Foucault the epithet of formalist (which he did not reject) or "structuralism" (which he did reject). While Foucault unabashedly upheld his preoccupation with the formal as a matter of his allegiance and affinity with aesthetic modernism, happily "deserted by discourse," he emphatically rejects structuralism's transcendentalist gestures." *Ibid.*, pp.207-208.

¹²⁹ Joseph J. Tanke, "On the Powers of the False: Foucault's Engagements with the Arts," in: Christopher Falzon, Timothy O'Leary and Jana Sawicki eds., *A Companion to Foucault*. Wiley-Blackwell, West Sussex, UK, 2013 pp.126.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.127.

other could occupy.”¹³¹ Whereas formalists such as Greenberg strive “to create a narrative of continuity between two different periods, Foucault’s archaeologies attempt to establish how these periods are shaped by different rules of formation. (...) This leads to an unconventional grouping of artists and styles, one at odds with many art-historical narratives.”¹³²

Foucault was drawn to the artworks with ethical or political relevance; he was interested in art’s capacity “to move from a narrowly defined aesthetic sphere to impact society at large,”¹³³ as a place of eruption, as a possibility of expressing that what cannot be expressed elsewhere. His anti-Platonic stance does not grant a special privilege to formal elements of the artwork, but recognizes that “each work is potentially unstable and capable of overturning what has come before it, both in the world of art and culture at large”¹³⁴:

Anti-Platonism of art as the place of eruption of the elementary, the stripping nude of existence (*mise à nu de l’existence*); and by that, art establishes in culture, establishes with social norms, with values and aesthetic canons a polemical relation of reduction, of refusal and aggression.¹³⁵

The uniqueness of Foucault’s thought, when it comes to the visual, is in granting it “a certain amount of autonomy. It attempts to isolate the regularities operative in our ways of seeing, while recognizing that the relationship between the visual and the discursive is shifting,”¹³⁶ warning us not to equate the visual with

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Tanke, *Foucault’s Philosophy of Art*, pp. 182.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Michel Foucault, “Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres: le courage de la vérité” (1984), unpublished transcript of course at the Collège de France, prepared by Michael Behrent, quoted in: Tanke, *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.126.

the discursive. In Foucault's words,

The relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. 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.¹³⁷

As we learned, those thoughts are a clear resonance of the interpretation of dreams that, according to Foucault, likewise should not be reduced to the linguistic level of interpretation, as it has been normally done in traditional psychoanalysis.

Not all dreams are suitable for interpretation, hence we encounter in Foucault's work a limited number of works of art that could be categorized as the "morning dreams" of our culture: paintings by Goya, Van Gogh, Bosch, Breughel, and a few others who treat the theme of the ship of fools in *The History of Madness*; Goya, Gericault, Delacroix in *The Birth of the Clinic* in relation to the development of a particular kind of medical gaze; Velasquez's *Las Meninas* in *The Order of Things*; a planned but never written book on Manet, for which we only have some of the notes of the lectures he gave in Tunisia; an essay on Magritte's *This is Not a Pipe*, with whom he also had an active correspondence until the end of the painter's life; a review of Erwin Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology*; a paragraph on Andy Warhol, implementing Gilles Deleuze's ideas on the concept of simulacrum; texts on Gerard Fromanger and Duane Michals, whose works blurred the division between painting and photography; a study of Klossowski, and essays on Paul Rebeyrolle and Maxim Defert.¹³⁸

Through his choice of artworks, Foucault seems to develop

¹³⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. Routledge, London and New York, 2005, pp.10.

¹³⁸ For more details, see: Gary Shapiro, *Archelologies of Vision*, pp.196-197.

a philosophy of art “that celebrates the irreality of images.”¹³⁹ For him, perception is never neutral, but always already coded, dependent upon the operations of the imagination, for these systems “establish for every man... the empirical order with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home.”¹⁴⁰ Hence his focus on this “already coded eye” (*le regard déjà codé*), or the already coded gaze, which he explored in the fields such as clinical medicine and avant-garde literature, primarily as an analytic tool that summarizes organizing principle of knowledge of that particular era.¹⁴¹ Foucault therefore locates paintings and texts that do not fit “into any of the orders and which demand a radically different “theory” and critical strategy of analysis.”¹⁴² Nevertheless,

There is little or no security to be found in these paintings and texts, for they provide no principle or rules in terms of which one can evaluate and explain them. Analysis itself is at risk when confronted with them, threatened by this disorder, illogic, or even madness they are “rooted in.”¹⁴³

Artworks are seen as symptoms of cultural ruptures, as riddles of thoughts to be deciphered, as being a part of Foucault’s main interest to analyze all that ““contains thought in a culture,” be it in philosophy, or a novel, in jurisprudence, in an administrative system, or in a prison.”¹⁴⁴

Another productive link that can be established between Foucault’s dream essay and his later writings is his interest into the topology of space and architecture. Just like he stressed the

¹³⁹ Tanke, *Ibid*, pp.11.

¹⁴⁰ Foucault, “Preface.” *The Order of Things*, pp.XXII.

¹⁴¹ “The Renaissance is the age of resemblance, the Classical age that of representation, and modernity the age of man.” Tanke, *Ibid*, pp.23.

¹⁴² David Carroll, *Paraesthetics. Foucault, Lyotard. Derrida*. Routledge, London and New York, 1987, pp.58.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴⁴ van Zyl and Kistner, *Ibid*, pp.200.

importance of the topology of a dream experience as a necessary element for dream interpretation, his “books devoted to madness, the clinic, and to Surveillance and Punishment are marked by a concern with architecture and the spatial organization of experience.”¹⁴⁵ We find this aspect present in his writing on art as well: his interest in architectural structures and direction of the gaze is, for instance, particularly important in his thesis on Manet’s paintings. Through these elements we seem to begin to grasp the importance of politics and the ideology of space: a spatial construction that creates a particular kind of experience, a translation and an embodiment of a particular ideology, a bodily experience of someone else’s imagination, of someone else’s dream, directing us to behave in a certain manner, training our eyes to see reality in a certain way.

As a side-note, it is perhaps important here to add one more concept when discussing the role of art and dreams in Foucault’s work—that of productive repression which, according to some, is in the root of both the concept of sado-masochism and of art in his overall work. As Suzanne Gearhart notices, many “if not all, of Foucault’s texts where art is in question” contain the concept of productive repression in an implicit way.¹⁴⁶ In this light, the dream essay seems to have a crucial significance as it already articulates the concept of productive repression by linking it

To an unconscious “art”—the creation of dream symbols. Foucault’s argument in this essay is in effect that Freud denied the productive nature of repression by reducing dream-images to the role of merely expressing dream-thoughts. In contrast, Foucault insist on the irreducibility of image to thought or discourse, on the “density” of the image as image. (...) Foucault attempts to grasp the (psychic) significance of art in relation to its pure expressivity, that is, in relation to itself as a

¹⁴⁵ Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision*, pp.197.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

productive art.¹⁴⁷

Over the span of thirty years, between Foucault's dream essay and his last works, we can notice an evidently radicalized stance he developed towards Freud and his legacy. While in the beginning Foucault invites for the creation of a "grammar" of the image that would complement Freud's hermeneutics, defending the validity of Freud's results, in his final work, *The History of Sexuality*, he "defends a mode of analysis that he implicitly claims breaks totally with the interpretative model of Freud."¹⁴⁸ In *The Care of the Self*, Foucault will present his radical opposition through the analysis of the *Interpretation of Dreams* by the Greek Artemidorus, bringing him as an example of dream analysis which functioned as one of the techniques of existence in antiquity. The difference to the Freudian approach, of revealing the secrets of a repressed sexuality in the depths of one's unconscious, was in the fact that dream interpretation enabled the Greek to "situate himself better and more surely within his society and to master social relations."¹⁴⁹ According to this, dreams have no hidden meaning and their practical dimension is of crucial importance. On this stage of social relations, Artemidorus defines the sexual act as a game of superiority and inferiority while, for Foucault, the Greek unconscious seems structured as a "tableau or theater in which the sado-masochistic spectacle of domination and submission, humiliation and pleasure has become wholly visible—and wholly productive."¹⁵⁰ In its Greek form, sado-masochism has become totally aestheticized, as it was presented as an art—a creative activity and a work of art, ceasing to have any negative dimension. Nevertheless, according to Gearhart, Foucault did not manage to demonstrate a totally productive character of repression, "because he was unable to neutralize totally the ambiguity of even aestheticized forms of sado-masochism and of the "spectacles" in

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

which, throughout his work, they are enacted.”¹⁵¹

[The Authors]

We shall focus more on Foucault’s notion of art as a technique of existence in the next segment, but let us first recall briefly some of his thoughts on the issues of authors and authorship. The discussion on authorship to which Foucault’s essay “What is an Author” (1969) originally referred to took place in the field of literature and philosophy.¹⁵² Nevertheless, it is possible to relate certain elements to the painters and artists in general, such as when Foucault defines the “birth” of the author as a “privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas,”¹⁵³ and sees authors as the “founders of discursivity.”¹⁵⁴ The author is a product of specific historic circumstances and, in the same way, the artists as we know them today, are a product of particular social, juridical, economic, ideological, and aesthetic constellations. The author will have a function to unify a body of work as an *oeuvre*, guaranteeing the unity of the discourse. When it comes to the author (-function),

We are accustomed, as we have seen earlier, to saying that the author is the genial creator of a work in which he deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Foucault’s essay is an implicit response to Ronald Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” (1967), and those two essays are considered the most influential ones on issues of authorship in twentieth-century criticism. “For Barthes, the author is a ‘modern figure’ that emerges out of the Middle Ages, with ‘English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation,’ and it is bound up with the more general ‘ideology’ of capitalism. Since capitalism is intellectually and ideologically grounded in the autonomy and self-fulfillment of the humanist conception of the individual, the ascription of meaning to the author can be seen as part of a wider historical privileging of subjectivity.” Andrew Bennett, *The Author*. Routledge, London and New York, 2005, pp.16.

¹⁵³ Michel Foucault, “What is an Author.” *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume Two*. The New Press, New York, 1998, pp.205.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.217.

significations. We are used to thinking that the author is so different from all other men, and so transcendent with regard to all languages that, as soon as he speaks, meaning begins to proliferate, to proliferate indefinitely. (...) The truth is quite the contrary: the author is not an indefinite source of significations that fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. (...) The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning.¹⁵⁵

Within those constellations, an author becomes implicit in the operation of the control of the proliferation of meaning, as well as of juridical responsibility for any potential transgression that might occur in his or her work. On the other hand, Foucault rejects the romantic notion of a culture in which “the fictive would operate in an absolutely free state”¹⁵⁶ and speculates that

If the author-function disappears in the future, it will be replaced by another “system of constraint.” In this regard, he both argues for and warns against the idea of the disappearance or “death” of the author. (...) As Foucault famously declares elsewhere, “power is everywhere,” even in the disappearing author.¹⁵⁷

His approach to those issues when writing about painters becomes very particular: for instance, in his lecture on Manet, even

¹⁵⁵ Foucault, *Ibid*, pp.221-222.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, pp.222.

¹⁵⁷ Bennett, *Ibid*, pp.28.

though he deals almost exclusively with his paintings, Foucault “avoids treating it as a stable entity, preferring comparisons between individual canvases and the historical conventions from which they depart.”¹⁵⁸ By shifting his focus on some other ways in which artists could contribute to the ruptures in the existing power relations and discourses, Foucault points out the fact of the separation of life and art, or of the “compartmentalization of aesthetics”¹⁵⁹ in our culture:

What strikes me is the fact that, in our society, art has become something that is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life. That art is something which is specialized or done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life?¹⁶⁰

[The Cynics]

In order to solve this riddle of separation of life and art, Foucault finds the most relevant example to be the practice of the self as done by the Cynics—in the Cynic style of philosophical life and public truth-telling:¹⁶¹ “Just as the Cynic’s *parrhēsia* is secured by ethical work, so too with modern art: critical, frank, and true “speech” is the product of a life fashioned as critical, frank, and

¹⁵⁸ Tanke, *Foucault's Philosophy of Art*, pp.56.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.170.

¹⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics.” *Ethics – Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume One*. Penguin Books, London and New York, 2000, pp. 261.

¹⁶¹ “Foucault’s main examples of Cynic legacies... are the lifestyle of the itinerant mendicant medieval preaching orders—and of the heretic preachers whom they combated—and the lifestyles of revolutionaries and modern artists. One of the leitmotifs of the Cynic theme and its Christian and Western sequels in Foucault’s final lecture series is the involvement of the idea of a true (because truth-telling) life—which makes the Cynic philosopher an alternative ruler of the world—with the ideas of “other life” and “other world.”” Colin Gordon, “History of Madness,” in: Christopher Falzon, Timothy O’Leary, and Jana Sawicki eds., *A Companion to Foucault*. Blackwell Publishing, Hoboken, New Jersey, 2013, pp.100.

true.”¹⁶² Foucault’s last lectures were devoted exactly to those issues, to the introduction of the concept of the aesthetics of existence—the practices of subjectivity in which every action is directed to transforming oneself, turning one’s life into an *oeuvre*, where beautiful existence is composed by the act of speaking the truth. When it comes to the Cynics, they take these themes “to their very limits, issuing philosophy a defiant challenge: put up or shut up.”¹⁶³ Their life is a life lived at the limits, as well as in rupture with traditional forms of existence, evaluating and changing “the customs, habits, and laws of society at large”¹⁶⁴:

We are dealing here with much the same movement by which the artistic rules of formation are called into question by a work or artist. The addition or subtraction of a given element operates a work of destructuring upon the regularity of an artistic practice, at the same time as it contains the rules for a new formation. Foucault thus understands the addition of the Cynical economic principle in much the same way as the work of Manet. It is an active extrapolation that carries the regularity of a practice to its limits and exposes those limits.¹⁶⁵

Cynic’s life is actually a life lived in public view and this radically different subjectivity testifies, “In its being, to the

¹⁶² Tanke, *Ibid*, pp.163.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, pp.172.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, pp.173.

¹⁶⁵ “This cornerstone of the Cynical tradition is based upon a series of events in the life of Diogenes of Sinope (400–325 B.C.E.). Diogenes’ father was a moneychanger. After counterfeiting charges were brought against him, both father and son were exiled. The young Diogenes traveled to the Oracle at Delphi, where he received this command: ‘Change the value of money.’ Foucault, highlighting the similarity between the Greek words for money (*noumisma*) and law (*nomos*), suggests: “‘Change the value of money,’ it is also “take a certain attitude with regard to what is convention, what is rule, what is law.”” Tanke, *Ibid*.

possibility of a different world (*monde autre*).”¹⁶⁶ As Foucault notices, the idea of the artistic life was born in the Renaissance introducing the idea that,

The life of an artist must in some way be eminent, or “not wholly commensurable with those of others.” Within modernity, however, this idea is radicalized such that the artist’s life must not only be singular, but also “constitute in the very form that it takes a certain witness to what art is in its truth.” (...) Distinguishing modernity’s demands from those of the Renaissance, Foucault explains, “Not only must the life of the artist be sufficiently singular so that he may create his work (*oeuvre*), but his life must be, in some way, a manifestation of art itself in its truth.” That is to say, the artist’s life must itself become a work of art and bear witness—much like the Cynic’s body, doubled cloak, and staff—to the creation and transmission of truth.¹⁶⁷

In one of the late interviews, Foucault reflects on his own *askēsis*, of him working “like a dog” as a way to transform himself, “hijacking” the definition of what an artwork could be from the field of aesthetic tradition and inserting it (back) into the field of life:¹⁶⁸ “This transformation of one’s self by one’s own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, pp.176.

¹⁶⁷ Foucault in Tanke, *Ibid*, pp.180-181.

¹⁶⁸ “You see, that’s why I really work like a dog, and I worked like a dog all my life. I am not interested in the academic status of what I am doing because my problem is my own transformation. That’s the reason also why, when people say, “Well, you thought this a few years ago and now... you say something else,” my answer is . . . [Laughs] “Well, do you think I have worked like that all those years to say the same thing and not to be changed?”” Michel Foucault, “Michel Foucault: An Interview by Stephen Riggins,” in *Ethics – Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume One*. Penguin Books, London and New York, 2000, pp.131.

should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting?”¹⁶⁹ The question that inevitably comes to one’s mind here is if Foucault here argues for a romanticized version of the life of the artist, he who was so suspicious of the “author-function”? Joseph Tanke offers his view and says, no, the point is in something else: “It is the recognition of the distinctly modern way in which the cultural spheres we inhabit make demands upon our subjectivity. To neglect this functioning of art would be to pose the aesthetic question merely from the perspective of the spectator.”¹⁷⁰ In other words, the aesthetic experience happens on the other side as well, during the creative process of the ones making art, something we often easily forget. Following this, anyone could and should become a composer of her or his life, of her or his existence in truth. The practice of composing one’s life as carefully as a piece of music is not an easy task, and it surely demands from the one to work “like a dog”:

As Baudelaire had pointed out a century before, the man who wishes to probe the limits of experience needs “a system of gymnastics designed to fortify the will and discipline the soul,” for only a strict ethos, a singular “cult of the self,” could create a form of life both sturdy enough and flexible enough “to survive the pursuit of happiness.”¹⁷¹

One of the characteristics of modernity, according to Foucault, is placing a high value on the present as

Indissociable from “a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying but by grasping it in what it is.” Foucault describes modern man “not as

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Tanke, *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁷¹ James Miller, “Michel Foucault: The Heart Laid Bare.” *Grand Street*, No.39, 1991, pp.63.

one who sets out “to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth”; on the contrary, “he is the man who tries to invent himself.” Modernity does not “liberate man in his own being; it compels him to face the task of producing itself.”¹⁷²

Hence, the transfiguration of self and of society becomes integral to the notion of modernity, and ““can only be produced in another, a different place, which Baudelaire calls art.” (...) Art is an essential component in understanding who we are, what constitutes our present, and how both might be transformed.”¹⁷³ As we have learned, Foucault’s dream essay is in direct debt to Nietzsche’s thought that a primary experience of being an artist we all have in our dreams—in dreams, every man is truly an artist, while dream worlds are prerequisite of all plastic art.¹⁷⁴

One of the main criticisms of Foucault, of this “Nietzschean Communist’s”¹⁷⁵ position on art is related to his views on its political capacities: “For a practitioner of genealogy, he is here strangely devoid of all suspicion concerning painting’s possible complicity in structures of power.”¹⁷⁶ Nevertheless, it seems to us that Foucault did respond to this in an indirect manner—by deciding not to write about paintings and art in general, and instead focusing on the particular works which point

¹⁷² Foucault in: van Zyl and Kistner, “Introduction: Literature and Art as Diagnosis and Dissent in the Work of Michel Foucault,” pp.209.

¹⁷³ Tanke, *Ibid*, pp.4.

¹⁷⁴ “...and the Hellenic poet, if questioned about the mysteries of poetic inspiration, would likewise have suggested dreams. (...) The beautiful *Schein* of the dream worlds, in which every man is truly an artist, is prerequisite of all plastic art, and, as we shall see, of an important part of poetry also.” Friedrich Nietzsche in Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision*, pp.202.

¹⁷⁵ Interestingly, Foucault’s decision to leave the Communist Party seems to have had been related to an incident involving art and the rules of artistic expression: “The young Foucault seems to have been disturbed by the French Communist Party’s condemnation of Louis Aragon for publishing Picasso’s portrait of Stalin in violation of the canons of socialist realism; he apparently let his party membership lapse shortly after this incident.” Shapiro, *Ibid*, pp.195-196.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pp.194.

at the possibility of rupture in the dominant visual regimes and rules of form they are subjected to. On the other hand, he also examined the conditions for the personal to become political: namely, Foucault's question in front of each of the works of art was not only "what does this work of art do?" but also "what does this work of art do to me"? Following this, we might even consider his writing on art to be a record of his personal experiences in front of particular works of art, starting from the examination of his privileged position to be able to see and appreciate them in the first place. By examining what the paintings did to his own thought and to his own understanding of the world as he has been trained to see it, he was able to locate the most efficient points and methods for shifting the reigning orders of power relations. Foucault learned from art that there is a way of transforming one's medium as well as the conditions of its production, something he tried to implement in the field of politics, not through art, but through direct activism. If anything, it would be rather naïve to claim that Foucault was not able to see the power relations at play in the field of art—nevertheless, he still argued for the importance of appreciating this domain of delegated production of images: seeing it as a valuable dream-space in which we are to learn who we truly are and where we are heading to. In other words, to paraphrase Foucault, why should a spectator look at the painting if he is not transformed by it?

According to Foucault, the techniques of existence to be learned from art and which should be practiced by anyone, artists included, require a life of danger, dedication, self-discipline and risk. Knowing oneself is just one side of the coin—the full expression of one's true existence in the world is far from being an easy task. Following his invitation to include both the horizontal and vertical axes of existence, as learned from dreams, the self turns into everything but a fixed entity; instead, we are dealing here with constantly shifting coordinates of existence, with a self that demands a permanent re-evaluation. We encounter a strategy of change without destruction, pointing to the duality of sources of the intervention upon existence: the internal forces of imagination, and

the external pressures of power relations. Hence the importance of recognizing the difference between self-chosen tortures, or self-made transformations of one's own coordinates of existence, and the ones forced upon by someone else. Or, in Nietzsche's words:

He resists this, pricks up his ears, and decides: "I want to remain my own person!" It is a terrible decision; he grasps this only gradually. For now he must descend into the depths of existence with a series of unusual questions on his lips: "Why am I alive? What lesson is life supposed to teach me? How did I become what I am, and why do I suffer from being what I am?" He torments himself, and he sees that no one else torments himself in this way...¹⁷⁷

The art of life demands a permanent resistance, accompanied by a permanent reshuffling of strategies in this process of reconnecting imagination with life, of turning dreams into lived experience. As we have learned, following Foucault, parallel to our Western culture's deeply rooted misunderstanding of dreams and dream interpretation in the context of human existence, we might be suffering from a centuries-long misunderstanding of art and its potentials as well: to teach us the ethics of integrity at the threshold of existence—in imagination, in dreams. Luckily, we still seem able to dream in (moving) images.

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¹⁷⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator." *Unfashionable Observations, Volume 2*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1995, pp.205.

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