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# The materiality of the immaterial

## Foucault, against the return of idealisms and new vitalisms

**Judith Revel**

For some years, philosophical thinking has seemed to revolve around themes and terms whose centrality merits consideration – so much more so, probably, in that this debate has been formulated from positions and questions that are moreover very heterogeneous. I am especially thinking of a whole series of considerations found at the crossroads of two fields of enquiry that the tradition of the history of philosophy has nevertheless sought to oppose: on the one hand, an extraordinary renewal of problematics arising not so much from aesthetics as from artists and art critics themselves; and, on the other, paths opened up by a reformulation of categories of political economy and the sociology of work. At the intersection of these two spaces of reflection are to be found a certain number of notions – ‘art’, ‘creation’, ‘invention’, ‘production’, ‘technique’, ‘work’, ‘materiality’ and ‘immateriality’ – which undoubtedly merit attention. To participate in this day devoted to ‘Art and Immaterial Labour’ is in this sense to seek to problematize something which cannot be taken for granted and which represents for so many among us the heart of our own thinking and practice.

I would like to begin with the different meanings Michel Foucault successively gave to the notion of ‘art’ in order to try to show the extent to which the concepts of creation, innovation, production and work can be seen as linked together and how far they also imply, in their way, at once a relation to the powers and strategies of resistance. I will equally try to show an essential element of Foucauldian analysis, namely that what is produced – the production of value or the production of subjectivity, the production of forms or languages or the production of political action – totally deconstructs the old metaphysical opposition between the ‘material’ and the ‘immaterial’, or more exactly that it displaces and reformulates their criteria. For

Foucault, as we know, the challenge is to describe ‘a history of systems of thought’, to recall the title of his chair at the Collège de France; but it is also, in an immediate and inseparable way, the will to say and put into practice possible resistances to historically determined systems of knowledge/power.

There is a strong temptation to imagine that the only conceivable resistance would be from an *outside* of powers, forms of knowledge or history itself. This is what I will call the new metaphysical ‘temptation’, which is precisely that: the idea that an ‘outside’ is possible, that there are at least margins in which to take refuge. In the end, it is the idea that materiality – that of bodies and signs, of work and suffering, of conflict and desires, in sum of the life of men and women in history – is the sign of our confinement and subjection. Against this, I will try to show that for Foucault it is from within the materiality of life – as a historical production, within the very meshes of power – that resistance is possible. Freedom is not a ghostly *outside* but the material concretizing of ‘inside’, reconstituted as weapon of war – in other words, as a creative, incommensurable, excessive (*excédante*) matrix.

Consequently, it will be a question of avoiding the dangers of a fascination for ‘archaeological’ materiality – for example that of the old Fordist paradigm of work, or that of a direct opposition between technique and art – just as it will also be a question (and here there is no doubt a polemical element which I absolutely maintain) of avoiding, due to new theorizations of ‘immateriality’, being reduced to recycling a certain ‘idealist temptation’, residues of metaphysics or that vitalist irrationalism, which as we know was so historically powerful a century ago on the intellectual scene; or, more generally, a whole series of theories which would forget that nothing escapes history and

its material, social, economic and epistemological determinations. It will then be necessary to ask in what manner it is today possible to think at once of creation and historical determination, immateriality and materiality, resistance and powers, resistance and capitalism, art and labour, the production of value and the production of the self; and in what ways this stake probably represents the essential element of all political and aesthetic thought.

### The problematization of art

In thirty years of research, Foucault developed three different formulations of the question of art. The first, which is important even if not greatly thematized, corresponds to the omnipresence (in particular in the texts of the 1960s) of references to literature and painting, as well as, to a minor extent, music. Depending on the case, the reference to art can be used in a strategic way, either as the example of an act of resistance against the devices (*dispositifs*) of established power – by accentuating the critical dimension of the creative act, as is generally the case in the analysis of the ‘speech’ (*parole*) of certain authors, a sort of war-machine flung against notions of the work and the author, of which Raymond Roussel is the clearest example – or, on the contrary, in order to show how the *épistémè* of an age is concentrated and rendered tangible (and by that fact made readable) in it – as for example is the case of the analysis of *Las Meninas* by Velásquez which opens *Les Mots et les choses*<sup>1</sup> or, later, by way of Manet’s *Bar des Folies-Bergères*, during a memorable conference, given in Tunisia in 1971.<sup>2</sup> Let’s call this first formulation ‘linguistic’ in the widest sense, to the extent to which it works on expressive forms – in other words, those which reveal signs and produce meanings.

What is immediately striking, when one looks at these texts, is the omnipresence of materiality. There is in Foucault a reflection about art as, at once, a registration of instituted signs and forms and a resistant counter-production of signs, or rather a counter-signifying or hetero-signifying production (I am here borrowing the beautiful expression Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari uses in *Mille Plateaux*<sup>3</sup>). It is thus really a question for Foucault of describing the spaces of dominant representation and intelligibility characteristic of a given period (for example, the painting by Velásquez as a representation of the space of intelligibility of the classical age; or that of Manet as a figuration of the emergence of a new epistemic space in the nineteenth century); but there is *also, still*, a question of imagining the forms that ‘regimes of counter-signifying signs’ could take; in other words, of

posing the question of the conditions of the possibility and modalities of a resistance which would choose as its battlefield heterodox expression, what Foucault still sometimes called ‘structural esotericism’. What is fascinating is that Foucault considered this resistance only because it was given as a strategy of displacement in the direction of the materiality of signs.

I will give only one example, in the literary field, since it was there that, at the beginning of the 1960s, Foucauldian discourse found its most resonant formulations. In Raymond Roussel, as well as (to various extents and with some differences) in Louis Wolfson or Jean-Pierre Brisset, literary production and resistance to the instituted order of language were assessed in accordance with the extraordinary capacity to invent, from the very interior of language, an innovating language. I stress: not another language outside of that which is ours, but rather a distortion of the existing language, a bending, an unveiling, an endless return of language. This twisting, which turns the reassuring stability of language inside out, like a glove, is possible only because Roussel, Brisset and Wolfson (and before them, Foucault said, were Nerval, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and so many others) displaced the privilege of meaning towards the very substance of the sign. They reconstituted the linguistic link (the account arising from it) beginning with the homophones, assonances, wonders of echoes and sonorous mimesis, the rhythms and acoustic mirrors, and from this ‘speech’ (*parole*) rendered in its pure materiality, brought to life the most powerful of war-machines against the old idea of language as signifying representation of (and, if possible, truth to) the existent. Here, then, literature and poetry paradoxically found their creative impetus – their possibility for invention, for divergence, for difference: in short an exit from the institution of signs – to the extent that they chose to play matter against the hegemony of meaning. And it produced meaning only because they unpacked the exorbitant privilege beforehand. If we did not today have among us one of the most brilliant Matisse specialists, and if I did not risk making a fool of myself, I would refer you to another image: one of the collages<sup>3</sup> of Matisse – directly cutting into the blue of the matter so as not to have to trace (in other words, to divide) the signs from what precedes their signification. This is another way of saying that matter does not always flow into categories of meaning – as though the materiality of the world should always be overdetermined by the immateriality of the mind – but that, at times, it produces exactly the opposite effect. It is matter, how we work it and bend it to our desire, to our imagination and to our

power of creation, which innovates the meaning of the world. It can thus be seen, from Foucault's work in the 1960s, how strongly the direct opposition between materiality and immateriality is at once at the centre of Foucauldian thinking and at the same time entirely rearticulated, in order to allow resistance to be thought as a creative difference.

The second problematization of the notion of 'art' concerns, from the time of *La volonté de savoir*, the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1976),<sup>4</sup> the opposition Foucault effected between *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis* as two different modalities of organizing the relations between power, truth and pleasure.



As Foucault introduces it,

two principal regimes can be distinguished. One is that of *art érotique*. Its truth is extracted from pleasure itself gathered as experience, analysed according to its quality... and this refined knowledge is, under the seal of the secret, transmitted by magisterial initiation to those who have demonstrated that they are worthy of it... Western civilization, for centuries in any case, has barely understood *art érotique*: it has entered into relations of power, pleasure and truth, in a completely different way: that of a 'science of sex'.<sup>5</sup>

The opposition, structured at the start from what was placed between the Greek world and pastoral Christianity, interests us because it does not simply involve a division into periods. Or, rather, behind such a division there is, on the one hand, an art, in other words, as Foucault tells us, at once a practice (in the case of *l'ars erotica*, a practice of the body), an

experience (of pleasures) and a relation to truth; and, on the other hand, knowledge, codes and conduct. In the first case, it is really a question of an aesthetic, and one that is inseparable from an ethic (since I take it to myself, or decide to follow rules of behaviour). In the second case, it is a system of forms of knowledge that are inseparable from a prescriptive morality – in other words, also from a codification of the fair and the unfair, the licit and the illicit, of good and bad, whose source must not only be external to the individuals over which it legislates but transcendent and immaterial.

I do not want to return here to the detail of Foucault's analysis. Let us limit ourselves to mentioning that the fundamental difference between *ars* and *scientia*, between art and knowledge, holds to the fact that if knowledge is a 'thing', an 'object', art in contrast is a practice, an experience, an action in movement. And where knowledge is an established discourse, experience implies on the contrary a transformation – of this 'self' that Foucault began at the time to think of as an unceasingly revived production, as experimentation of ways of life (*modes de vie*) and as subjectivation. If there is resistance, then, it is in the disproportion which appears between the institution and the movement, between morality and ethics, between objectivation and subjectivation, between reproduction and invention, and between the transition to the outside and the enfolding of the inside.

The third problematization arises out of the analysis Foucault developed in the second half of the 1970s, in particular with the course at the Collège de France in 1977–78, of the 'arts of government': the way in which the pure transcendent singularity of power – that of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, for example – is transformed into a complex economy of forms of government, which, in its turn, was the object of reformulations between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That could perhaps appear to be far from what we are concerned with, were it not the occasion in which Foucault stressed two points born of his two preceding explorations, to which we would like in our turn to return.

The first point is that there exists no 'outside' if this is understood as something external to history, or to the epistemic, economic and social determinations which cause us to be what we are, or to the relations of power in which we are entangled and engaged, no matter what we do. There is no exteriority to the powers, just as there is no exteriority to history: this might be a dreadful statement of impotence and despair, but on the contrary for Foucault it is the occasion to redefine completely what can be understood

by resistance. The 'arts of government' and the possibilities of resistance to new strategies of government are given together, in a connected way: some relate to others that are themselves echoes of the first. To pose the question of knowledge, power or resistance, what comes first is really of no significance: the question of origin and foundation is a metaphysic which does not in fact interest us very much. On the other hand, it seems to us rather more important to underline that the 'arts' *also* play a role among the relations of power and the techniques of government.

The second point is that the appearances of the 'arts of government' correspond to the passage from an idea of power defined by its transcendence and uniqueness to one of multiple and immanent relations and defined by their mastery and efficacy over the material conditions of people's lives, or over those, also completely material, of the production and accumulation of wealth. What counts from then on is no longer so much the foundation of authority as the manner in which it is used.

I insist on these two points because they seem to me essential both to rethinking completely what an artistic act can be and to restore content to the very idea of resistance. In the first case, if there is also an 'art' (in other words, skill, shrewdness and innovation) at the side of power, it is necessary to ask ourselves what distinguishes the arts of government from an ethical and aesthetic relation to the self: what is the difference between the arts of government and the project of producing oneself in relation to oneself and others, as the Greeks sought to do? To create oneself as subject – what, with reference to both Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, Foucault sometimes called 'dandyism' – is 'to make one's own life a work of art', in other words to delineate the space of a subjectivation, an invention of the self by the self and a freedom, within the systems of knowledge, methods of subjection and relations of power. But, inversely, to apply oneself to developing the arts of government is to include the management of these processes of subjection in the new economy of powers, seeking not to deny or prohibit them but to control and guide them. This is what Foucault called 'governmentality': at once the idea of a subjectivation defined as an action of creation (of the subject by itself), and that of a new rationality allowing the governing of this process. Far from directly opposing it, intransitive freedom (of subjectivation extended as creation and as *ars*) and the determinations of knowledges/powers thereby intersect in a complex and intimate way.

If it is not, then, possible to oppose power to resistance in the name of another, more profound, oppo-

sition, between transcendence and materiality; if power has become material, effective and multiple, and is deployed in an infinity of ways, how can it be imagined that something like a resistance, a torsion, can emerge at the heart of this very material, in the very meshes of power? In short, how can materiality and creativity be taken into account if they have in their turn become the ground for the deployment of power?

### **The vitalist temptation**

On this point, thinking in both political economy and the sociology of work can be useful for us. In descriptions of how the production of the value and organization of work have changed during the past twenty-five years, or in the passage from 'Fordism' to 'post-Fordism' that some describe, we find the same questions. To say today that the production of value is no longer founded so much (as was the case in the past) in the value of trade goods – in other words, on a logic which sought to augment the number of goods produced while reducing their costs of production – but in the innovative and creative character of this production, or to say that what had been excluded by the process of economic development – the subjectivity of the worker, his life – is rediscovered, not just included in the process but at its very centre, is, in a certain way, to pose the question of difference, of the dissymmetry between art and production, or, if you like, between subjective resistance and its inveiglement by capital. I intentionally leave aside, for the moment, the question of materiality on which I would like to end my account.

What is the dissymmetry between art and capital, between the subjectivation of matter, and the way in which capital itself today uses this subjectivation to produce value, between resistance and the relations of power, between the ethical invention of ways of life and forms instituted and constrained by the dominant morality? This is, I believe, the question that haunted the final years of Michel Foucault's research. It is also, to a great extent, the question that traverses the work of many of us today. The response is undoubtedly not easy: in proportion that the relations of power have invested in what used to be unimportant and external for them (subjectivity, life, desires, languages, art); in proportion that they have finally integrated and 'devoured' what, for centuries, represented an area of recess, refuge and resistance, then the question of the space of possible resistance has recurrently been raised in more forceful ways. Today, if powers have become bio-powers and the economy a bio-economy – in other words, if the paradigm of work is henceforth founded

on the inveiglement of processes of subjectivation and the innovation of life itself to produce value – what space remains for resistance? What difference can resistance still offer?

It is in response to this question, I believe, that some people have given way to a kind of neo-metaphysical idealist or vitalist temptation. It was necessary to find a difference. They thought they could locate it in a return to something that would mark its divergence in relation to the materiality and historicity of relations of power. I will take a couple of examples, among many others, in a very cursory way.

My first example is the way Giorgio Agamben uses the concept of 'bare life'. 'Bare life' is never clearly defined by Agamben, except as what remains once power has totally invested, subjected and destroyed the lives of individuals. And the context in which Agamben places himself is then a 'saturated' context, that of the Nazi concentration and/or extermination (the point is quite ambiguous in Agamben's thought) camps. What remains is not a surplus, not an affirmative and positive difference in relation to power, but a remainder. And again: if power seeks to destroy our subjective singularity, then, Agamben tells us, what remains and resists is necessarily what is most impersonal and inappropriate within us, in other words paradoxically what carries in itself a universal value, what renders universal resistance for all people. And, as it is only with great difficulty that this impersonal universality can be defined, and good that Agamben carefully distinguished at the beginning *Bios* and *Zoè*, political life and biological life, and that he chose from the beginning to place his own thinking in the field of *Bios* (*bio-politique*), he ends by defining what resists in its impropriety as natural life, biological life. *Bare* life. Resistance is no longer a political and social construction of strategies of struggle, but a withdrawal into naturalness, life delivered up to its own improper universal and biological nature. It is a process without subjects or subjectivation, without conflict or antagonism. It is what remains: the remains of a process of subtraction. It is in some way 'human nature', the foundation, the essence and quintessence, the substratum of a desingularized humanity. And when one has at hand the tremendous pages Foucault devoted to the way in which power in the nineteenth century entirely reinvested the field of pseudo-naturalness to make it an instrument in the management of populations, one feels one's blood run cold on reading the pages of Agamben... The resistance of life cannot be the naturalness of life. Resistance is always already political because life is always already within history, because

it is the product of determinations which make it what it is. Bare life does not exist.

In my second example, the illusion consists in saying that it will be possible to resist power to the extent that we would be capable of finding a way out of its range. It is then necessary to seek an 'outside' of power and, if this 'outside' cannot be found, to be content with the margins. Theories of the margins, of marginality, of the remainder, moreover ignore precisely what is most characteristic of the bio-political configuration: the relations of power have from that point invested the whole field of existence. Ideas of 'outside' or 'margins' are fantasies, at least unless, once again, a way out of history is found. I have an immense admiration for – and a fundamental debt to – the work of Jacques Derrida. But I also believe that his entire thought is made possible by the exclusion of history – a refusal of history which he not only does not conceal but openly demands. To come out of history in order to find a way out of power, this is what all thought of the margins is founded upon. This is as true for Derrida as it was in the past for Blanchot – the former having become a metaphysician even while trying to destroy metaphysics; the latter as the reactionary he was, the aesthetic providing him with a flight outside politics, something undoubtedly also the case today for Agamben, who is good at thinking about the time to come and the breathtaking messianism of Walter Benjamin, but who does so only because it paradoxically allows him not to think about history – in other words, about the materiality of the relations of power.

Against this, how can we remain in history and in the political field in order to define resistance? The dissymmetry we seek must be played out elsewhere, and otherwise than has been suggested by Agamben and Derrida. And I believe Foucault himself has supplied the response. In Foucault, there exists a very simple definition of what relations of power are. A relation of power is, Foucault says, 'an action over the action of people', which means that the relations of power are the inveiglement, the management and the directing of people's free activity. This means at least two essential things. The first is that power is the management and exploitation of freedom. It is not opposed to freedom, since it has a need for it, but exploits it. As Foucault quite rightly commented, when the relations of power are glutted, there is no longer power but domination. There is thus no power without freedom. This is the first element of dissymmetry.

Second, power is *action over action*: thus it always comes second – logically, ontologically and chronologically. Freedom is intransitive but power is not.

The transitivity of power is the necessity for it to apply itself to something that is, from the beginning, heterogeneous. In this sense, power nourishes itself on its other, upon which it is dependent. Power does not invent anything but applies itself. It does not create but manages. It does not produce but reproduces. From this double finding, the dissymmetry we seek undoubtedly begins to take shape. If resistance is possible, it is precisely through the intransitivity of freedom, from its capacity to create, invent and produce, from its *potentia* (English possesses only one word for the two distinct terms of *potentia* and *potestas*. I will therefore use the Latin terms). *Potentia* supports the innovation of the world, not its reproduction. It supports a political ethic conceived as an aesthetic of existence: remember the beautiful incitement Foucault underlined on many occasions, 'To make oneself a work of art', in other words literally to make one's life the ground of one's own resistance. It thus supports subjectivation, desires, languages and ways of life, quality and not forced objectivation, claims to universality, the order of discourse, quantity and economic moderation. Resistance is a creative development of life, art understood as a political paradigm as it puts its stake on the invention of existence against the reproduction of goods, the intransitive affirmation of freedom against the transitive management of subjection and exploitation. Resistance is an ontology.

### The immaterial

There remains the question of the immaterial, and I would like to close on this point. Remember the three fields in which Foucault successively deployed his own use of the notion of art: invention of languages of resistance (the counter-signifying semantics), the invention of the self (the aesthetic of existence), and the invention of modalities of resistance within the meshes of that other art which is the art of government (biopolitics). In all three cases, it is a matter of inventing what is at once extraordinarily impalpable and concrete, immaterial and material: signs, structures and expressive forms; singular and common subjectivity; desires, pleasures and ways of life; strategies of struggle, of conflictuality and antagonism. In all three cases, nothing can resist without *potentia*, without an innovation, without an opening up of being (*ouverture de l'être*); in other words, without an affirmation of the ontological dimension of political acts of resistance. And yet this ontology is completely material: it is *in* history and is the product of a history in which it sinks its own incommensurability; it works bodies and relations, desires and actions, life understood

as social and political life, struggle and institutions, practices and discourses. This immateriality is that of matter itself. Inversely, the very matter of resistance is its immaterial capacity to produce: an ontological creation of new being. In this respect, no doubt, art has opened the way to philosophical and political reflection: plunging its hands into the world to knead its flesh, because only materiality paradoxically allows the invention of new horizons on the edge of being – what Antonio Negri described some years ago both as *kairòs* and as *désutopie*: political resistance as the only possible ontology for our present, and the will of better worlds, here and now.

Translated by Michael Richardson

### Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), Tavistock, London, 1970.
2. Michel Foucault, *La peinture de Manet*, Seuil, Paris, 2004.
3. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), trans. Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, ch. 5.
4. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Pantheon, New York, 1978.
5. 'L'Occident et la vérité du sexe', *Le Monde*, 5 November 1976, p. 24; reprinted in M. Foucault, *Dits et Écrits*, vol. 3, text 181, Gallimard, Paris, 1994, p. 104.

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