

CEREMONIES, RITUALS, DRAMATICS A THEATRICAL “ETHNOLOGY” OF POWER

On April 7, 1972, during the fourth annual Conference of 17th Century French Literature at the University of Minnesota, Michel Foucault delivered a lecture whose French title was: “Cérémonie, théâtre, et politique au dix-septième siècle” (“Ceremony, Theatre and Politics in the 17th century”). Unfortunately, we do not possess the original text of this lecture. However, an English summary of it, written by Stephen Davidson, was published in the proceedings of the Conference the same year.¹

Although the lecture is thus accessible only in an indirect form, its subject is fascinating. It casts unusual light on both the analyses of power and juridical practices which Foucault carries out in the 1970s, and the project of an “ethnology of truth,”² which he formulates in the 1980s by means of concepts such as “alethurgy,” “parrhesia”, and, more generally, the political “drama of discourse”: the idea of a “dramatic,” theatrical relation between veridiction, power and the construction of subjectivity.³

The 1972 lecture is actually one of the few textual *loci* where Foucault refers directly to a connection between power and theatre. Foucault extensively exploits theatrical references (Shakespeare, Racine, Sophocles, Euripides, etc.) in his gene-

alogies. In an important interview with the philosopher Watanabe, given in Japan in 1978, he reflects upon the use of theatrical concepts in history and philosophy.⁴ But the relation between theatre, power and genealogy is for him more a recurrent intuition than an explicit theme of critical reflection. In this sense, the lecture at the University of Minnesota provides some important clues as to how to penetrate the Foucauldian discourse on power in an original and fruitful way.

Foucault states that his presentation will focus on political ceremony in the 17th century, that is to say: the extremely codified rites, formulas and procedures which constituted the etiquette of power in the "Grand Siècle." According to him, this ceremonial can be analysed on three levels: 1. the established and foreordained *rituals* of power; 2. the *theatrical* expression of discourses in these rites, allowing a certain degree of creativity and freedom in their manifestation; 3. the confrontation and *struggle* between different actors on the political stage.

Foucault provides the example of an important revolt in French history: the "Révolte des Nu-pieds," which took place in 1639 in Normandy against the fiscal policy of the monarchy. In the 17th century, French sovereignty was transforming itself into a centralized, expansionistic and absolute form of power. This redistribution of power required an increase in fiscal pressure—a need which grew exponentially during the Thirty Years' War. In 1639, the decision to introduce a tax on salt provoked the violent reaction of the Normand *Nu-pieds* (bare feet), the barefooted workmen who manufactured salt. Five thousand rebels attacked the royal tax collectors, and a few local gentry joined the peasants in the riot, whose heart was the

city of Rouen. Cardinal Richelieu's counterattack was merciless. The royal army, led first by Jean de Gassion and then by Chancellor Pierre Séguier, repressed the riot by means of summary and mass executions and the introduction of a form of martial law. This episode is particularly important in the history of modern France since it shows the mechanisms and forces of resistance at work in the constitution of absolute monarchy: the stage of transition between feudal realms and the modern nation state.

According to Foucault, this political transition is clearly represented in the ceremony reestablishing monarchical power which took place after the revolt. Each part of this ceremony was carefully and strategically elaborated: it had to reestablish the supremacy and the legitimacy of the king's power. The ceremony "represented the *mise en jeu* of fundamental theories of political authority"⁵ which would find their complete realisation in the absolutism of Louis XIV.

Now, to describe this ceremony Foucault chooses an original scheme of analysis, an *unicum* among his works. He structures his own portrayal in the form of a play, divided into acts.

"Act. I: Military Repression (before the ceremony itself)"

"Act II: The Last Judgment" (the restoration of justice; as the King's will embodies God's will, the king's justice is the manifestation of God's justice on earth)

"Act III: Chancellor Séguier's entrance into Rouen"

“Act IV: Two of Séguiers’ acts after making his entrance”

“Act V: The underlying [political] strategy”⁶

Besides the detailed historical analyses these acts provide, I think the most important point is to highlight the Foucauldian “underlying political strategy” at work in this kind of description of power. It is noteworthy that Foucault’s concern with the ceremonies of power has nothing to do with an aesthetic or merely intellectual approach to cultural history. He clearly explains at the beginning of his lecture that his aim is a broader analysis of the ceremonies of political power from classical Antiquity to the end of the Eighteenth Century, from Greek *agoras* to the Revolutions which shaped modern Western civilization. Foucault seems to envisage an extensive study of the way in which “power takes on visible or theatrical forms and imprints itself on the imagination or behaviour of a people. It would be a veritable ethnology of the manifestations of political power, a study of the system of demarcation of power within a society.”⁷ Although the idea of a power which imprints itself on the imagination of people seems still influenced by an ideological conception of power (subsequently rejected by Foucault), the exploration of political rituals is clearly a way to disassociate himself from a traditional and merely juridical analysis of power. Foucault perceives power not only as a set of laws, institutions, authoritarian practice, but as a theatrical set of forces; not simply a battleground, but a “drama”: the concrete manifestation of historical political devices, discourses and truths, and the relations which can be established between these political games of truth and the subjects they involve and shape. I think it is important to rethink the Foucauldian analyses of

penal practices, for example, which belong more or less to the same period as the Minnesota lecture, within the frame of this general project of a larger study of the theatrical features of power.

From Ancient Greece to (at least) the 17th and 18th centuries, Foucault states in his 1981 course at the Catholic University of Louvain, *Mal faire, dire vrai*,⁸ theatre is a way in which Western societies represent and at the same time challenge their conceptions and practices of truth. Theatre constitutes in particular a cultural and political reflection on the processes of the foundation of law. The tragedies of Shakespeare, Corneille and Racine, for example, but also those of Schiller, call into question the modern form of the State—monarchic power and public law—which emerges at the beginning of the sixteenth century and which will go on to characterize successive European and Western history. I would like to recall the definition of drama that Foucault gives in the same course: “We may say that ‘drama’ is not just an ornamental extra, but any element in a scene which reveals the foundation of legitimacy and the sense of what is happening there.”⁹ Reading the history of power and truth within a “dramatic” frame, by means of the concepts and the history of theatre, might therefore be a fruitful way to highlight “the foundation of legitimacy and the sense” of multiple political/juridical scenarios throughout history.

NOTES

- 1 Stephen Davidson, "Michel Foucault. Cérémonie, Théâtre, et Politique au XVIII^e siècle", in *Acta I: Proceedings of the fourth annual Conference of XVIIth Century French Literature*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1972, pp. 22-23. The text is available online: <http://progressivegeographies.com/2013/10/10/foucaults-1972-lecture-at-minnesota-summary-now-available/>
- 2 "On peut aussi étudier le dire vrai d'une façon en quelque sorte ethnologique, je veux dire le dire vrai comme pratique sociale – l'étudier comme arme dans les relations entre individus, l'étudier comme modificateur de puissance chez ceux qui parlent, et enfin comme élément à l'intérieur d'une structure institutionnelle." M. Foucault, *Mal faire, dire vrai. Fonction de l'aveu en justice*, Louvain and Chicago, Presses universitaires de Louvain and University of Chicago Press, 2012, p. 18.
- 3 "The analysis of these facts of discourse, which show how the very event of the enunciation may affect the enunciator's being, is what we could call—removing all pathos from the word—the "dramatics" of discourse. [...] Taking the philosophical question of the relationship between the obligation of truth and the practice of truth as the general background, and taking what could be called the general dramatics of true discourse as the methodological point of view, I would like to see whether, from this double, philosophical and methodological point of view, we might not undertake the history, the genealogy, etcetera, of what could be called political discourse. Is there a political dramatics of true discourse, and what different forms, what different structures of the dramatics of political discourse might there be?" M. Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others, Lectures at the Collège de France (1982-1983)*, trans. by G. Burchell, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 68, 70.
- 4 Cf. M. Foucault, "The stage of philosophy" (interview with Moriaki Watanabe, 22nd April 1978), *Sekai*, July 1978, pp. 312-332; trans. by R. Eidelpes and K. Kennedy, *New York Magazine of Contemporary Art and Philosophy*, Issue 1.5.
- 5 Stephen Davidson, "Michel Foucault. Cérémonie, Théâtre, et Politique au XVIII^e siècle", art. cit., p. 22.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 8 “On a un peu l’impression – enfin, il me semble, ce serait une piste à étudier – que, depuis le théâtre grec jusqu’au moins à la fin du XVIII^e siècle, le théâtre dans les sociétés européennes a eu, non pas pour fonction unique, mais pour une de ses fonctions, de devenir le lieu, de donner une scène à un débat autour du problème du droit.” M. Foucault, *Mal faire dire vrai*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
- 9 “On peut appeler « dramatique » non pas une addition ornementale quelconque, mais tout élément qui, dans une scène, fait apparaître le fondement de légitimité et de sens de ce qui s’y déroule.” M. Foucault, *Mal faire dire vrai*, *op. cit.*, p. 210; my translation.