

This is Not Foucault's Head

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Heads or tales?

In Paris, he could not venture out at night without being mobbed by fans. And even in America, he had become a star of sorts, particularly on college campuses. Students weaned on the Talking Heads and David Lynch flocked to his public appearances, cherishing the bald savant as a kind of postmodernist sphinx, a metaphysical Eraserhead whose demeanor was weird, whose utterances were cryptic....(Miller 320-1, discussing Foucault as perceived circa 1980)

The irony is, of course, delicious. That the figure noted for critiquing the "author function" and for writing "in order to have no face" (Foucault, *Archeology* 17), should be a star, should have spawned three biographies, should be re-faced on cover after cover, suggests a delightfully amusing contradiction inherent in the man and the myth, Michel Foucault. James Miller, author of the notorious biography *The Passion of Michel Foucault*,¹ writes in his postscript,

And my head was now spinning with...improbable stories about Foucault, a great many of them revolving around his fondness for sado-masochistic forms of eroticism....So I consulted several academic experts on Foucault, often talking to people who had known him personally. More than one reminded me that Foucault himself had attacked the myth of the "author." Most warned me that pursuing my curiosity about the man would violate the spirit of his philosophy. Almost everyone, nevertheless, volunteered still more stories about him. (Miller 376-7)

Like the temptations Foucault himself, through stories, biographies like Miller's, and even his physical appearance, has come to embody, many have been unable to resist the temptation to transgress the author's own articulated desires by reviewing his history and psychoanalyzing his work,

¹ Miller's text frequently has been assailed as sensationalist in nature. Critics charge that Miller muckrakes by focusing throughout on Foucault's homosexuality and S/M predilection, as well as Foucault's "unrelenting preoccupation with suicide and death" (Miller 194).

It is precisely because Miller's text can be read as contributing to and constructing certain "myths" of Foucault as "deviant," as "exotic," as other, that I have employed it in this essay, which attempts to explore the manner in which Foucault has been

in the attempt to explain one in terms of the other. The same academics who warn Miller off of the project are then just as quick to provide more grist for the mill.

Foucault fascinates. The lurid details of his life upon which many have dwelt—the suicide attempts of his youth, his political activism, his embracement of the bathhouse and S/M subcultures of San Francisco, his death from AIDS—and the subject matter of his work—insanity, murder, punishment, sexuality—in short, his pursuit of “limit-experiences” as Miller puts it, both empirically and intellectually, construct a figure irresistible to a certain segment of the public’s voyeuristic gaze. Foucault’s “lifelong fascination with ‘the overwhelming, the unspeakable, the creepy, the stupefying, the ecstatic’” (Miller 27) translates into the public’s intense fascination, in turn, with him.

Yet others have addressed the same subject matter, taken equally provocative stances, been associated with scandalous activities. Why is Foucault’s *image*, the presentation of his *physical* body, so recognizable, and not that of, say, Bataille, or Baudelaire, or Artaud? The fact of the matter is that, unlike most or perhaps all other theorists and philosophers, Foucault’s body is as familiar to many as is his body of work.² There is, of course, no single answer to the question of Foucault’s recognizability.³ However, a major component, without a doubt, is his self-styled refusal to conform to conventional fashion mandates. Foucault’s flamboyance, be it in the form of a green wool cape, a black velour suit, a kimono, or S/M leather apparel, attracted attention. However, we must acknowledge that sartorial extravagance is secondary to Foucault’s most readily identifiable fashion statement, indeed to what in the eyes of many makes Foucault Foucault—I mean, of course, his “elegant shaved skull” (Miller 13).

The “elegance” of the head may be an historical imposition on the part of Miller—to what extent Foucault’s “skinhead” status suggested refinement in contrast to resistance and deviance in the France of the early 1970s is a question that I will not be able to address here. Nor will I attempt to answer what his motivation was for baring his brow. Rather, the intention of this paper is to explore the construction and reception of a particular bodily represen-

constructed in just these ways.

² For instance, Why doesn’t Roland Barthes stare out at us from the covers of his many texts? Where are the three biographies of Lacan and Bakhtin? How many can recognize Irigaray or Kristeva at a glance?

³ In addition to Foucault’s self-styled “otherness” which I discuss in this paper, one would also have to consider historical context and socioeconomic factors, including the taking of photographs and their availability for reproduction as marketing techniques in France and the United States.

tation of Foucault—the ways in which his image has been appropriated for marketing purposes and, rather than as a symbol of elegance, the way his shaved head has become iconic of Foucault as “the high priest of a blasphemous new cult” (Miller 129).

I. The Myth of Foucault’s Head

In *Image—Music—Text*, Roland Barthes analyzes what he refers to as “press photographs” and “advertising images.” Press photographs are those images that, as per the name, generally appear in newspapers. Ostensibly unposed and lacking “style,” the press photograph presents itself as a transmission of a literal reality. It claims to be purely “denotative,” i.e. without a “second-order message” (Barthes 18).

In actual fact, there is every possibility that the press photograph is “connotative” as well, that it resonates beyond its literal message, suggesting certain other concepts.⁴ According to Barthes, the connotations of the press photograph are experienced as “natural,” as essential ideas connected to the photograph which occur naturally to the viewer. The press photograph thus acts to “naturalize” the cultural, for, as Barthes observes, this seemingly natural experience of connotation is, in fact, historical; reading the photograph depends on the reader’s knowledge and cultural experience⁵ (*Image* 29). In this way, the press photograph has every possibility of acting in the manner of a Barthesian “myth.”

Myth for Barthes is a *type* of speech, a *mode* of signification in which there are two semiological systems: an initial linguistic system and a metalanguage in which one speaks about the first one (Barthes, *Mythologies* 115). The manifest meaning of the initial linguistic system, of the sign, is subordinated to the imposed metalanguage of the concept. As Barthes explains, the meaning, the first sign, is emptied of history and becomes the form on the level of the myth. Myth thus functions insidiously according to Barthes to “naturalize” the concept. It “transforms history into nature” by making it seem as if the sign naturally conjured up the concept, “as if the signifier gave a foundation to the signified” (*Mythologies* 130).⁶

⁴ As Barthes observes, the connotations of the photograph may not be readily graspable at the level of the message itself, but “can be inferred from certain phenomena which occur at the levels of the production and reception of the message” (*Image* 19). Barthes explains that: ...on the one hand, the press photograph is an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms which are so many factors of connotation; while on the other, this same photograph is not only perceived, received, it is *read*, connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs....The

Michael Moriarty explains in his monograph on Barthes that, by turning history into essence and culture into nature, myth obscures the roles humans play in producing the structures they inhabit and thus restricts possibilities of change (28). Barthes finds myth ethically objectionable in this way and, as a “mythologist,” sets out, as Dick Hebdige details, to

...expose the *arbitrary* nature of cultural phenomena, to uncover the latent meanings of an everyday life which, to all intents and purposes, was ‘perfectly natural’...[to show] how *all* the apparently spontaneous forms and rituals of contemporary bourgeois societies are subject to a systematic distortion, liable at any moment to be dehistoricized, ‘naturalized’, converted into myth. (9)

Using Barthes’s conception of myth, photographs of Foucault which grace the covers of the texts by and about him can now be analyzed to reveal the ways in which they function to propagate certain related mythologies, including: the myth of the author as “genial creator” of a work endowed with infinite significations, a particular naturalized construction of Foucault’s body, and the concomitant myth of the “eclectic *artiste*.”

As Foucault himself details in his essay “What is an Author?”⁷ the idea of the author is an historical construction characterizing different modes of discourse at different points in history. The notion of an author does not affect all discourses in a “universal and constant way” (109); rather, “the author’s name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of [a] discourse within a society and a culture” (107). Thus, certain discourses at certain times are endowed with what Foucault dubs an “author function,” and, furthermore, the relation of a discourse to the author function may change over time.⁸

The author function, according to Foucault, serves a restrictive ideological function as a tool by which to classify and to fix the meaning of texts. Once the notion of an author is imposed upon a text, one can refer to notions of “authorial intent” as an interpretive method. Foucault thus

photographic paradox can then be seen as the co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the ‘art’, or treatment, or the ‘writing’, or the rhetoric, of the photograph. (19)

⁵ For more on the “historical situatedness” of the image, see W. J. T. Mitchell’s *Picture Theory: Essays on Visual and Verbal Representation* (48 and *passim*).

⁶ A clear example of Barthesian myth is the iconography of the swastika—although the swastika has a long history and is associated with many groups and cultures, it now seems naturally and irrevocably linked to Nazism, as if its very presence naturally suggested Nazism to the mind, when this connection is, in fact, entirely historical. The actual sign, swastika, is effaced by the overlaid concept, Nazism. My thanks to Beth Kaminow for this lucid example.

⁷ Hereafter to be designated within the text as “Author.”

⁸ According to Foucault, prior to a certain point in history (sometime in the seventeenth or eighteenth century), scientific discourses were only accepted as “true” when marked with the name of an author, while “literary” texts were accepted in their anonymity, with their “ancientness” serving as the mark of their legitimacy (“Author” 109). This relationship has been reversed, of course, in contemporary society, in which scientific discourses are received for themselves, “in the anonymity of an established or always redemonstrable truth” (“Author” 109), while literary discourses are accepted only when endowed with an author function.

describes the author function as “a certain principle by which...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” (“Author” 119). Foucault prefers to eschew the constraining figure of the author, (or so he professes). It thus becomes especially ironic that his face graces the cover of so many of his texts. Foucault’s picture links him as author to the text, and proposes that by recourse to the figure Foucault, we can explain the text, the very assumption that Foucault so vigorously contests in “What is an Author?”

Foucault himself points out that the author should not be confused with “the real writer” (“Author” 112). The author, according to Foucault, is a sort of “alter ego” of the writer, who will always maintain a certain “distance” from the text itself. One can never presume to “get back to” the writer from the text; any notion of the actual writer gleaned from the text will always be both reductive and open to dispute.

However, the “press” photograph on the cover of Foucault’s text, already misleading in that it naturalizes the construction of the image itself (i.e. presents itself as candid, as unconstructed), proposes to provide the essence of Foucault the man. The text and the author are equated by the unwritten subtext, “this is Foucault.” In contrast to Foucault’s explication of the author function, the photo on the cover seems to define the text by the spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer. Furthermore, it seems to refer “pure and simply to a real individual” (“Author” 113), the “real Foucault”—a figure that, on the contrary, cannot be isolated in the text.

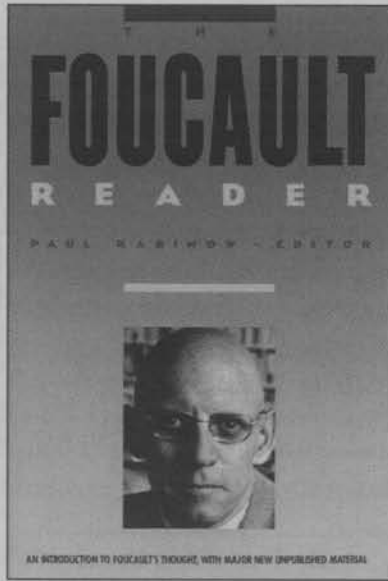
In addition, the photograph serves to naturalize the author in another way: it presents a construction of Foucault’s appearance as if it were the “natural” body of Foucault. Foucault, in much of his work, explores the manners in which the physical body, in all its stylistic manifestations, is not a natural production, but rather, as Judith Butler notes, “[is] constituted within the specific nexus of culture or discourse/power regimes, and...there is no materiality or ontological independence of the body outside

of any one of those specific regimes”⁹ (Butler 602). As Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish*, “The body is thus involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (25).

The press photograph on the cover, however, works against any notion of the constructedness of the body by naturalizing a certain physical presentation of the author. The cover to *The Foucault Reader* suggests to the consumer not just that “this is Foucault’s head,” but that “this is the eternal and natural appearance of Foucault,” and, furthermore, that “this head is the externalization of the internal essence of the man Foucault.” A Barthesian mythological reading reveals the picture to be a constructed representation of a man called Foucault, whose body has been constructed by relations of power and is open to culturally contested meanings, and whose body has been appropriated and reconstructed on the cover of the text to suggest certain connotations in order to sell the product.

Finally, the connotative power of the bald head and the photograph converge to reify the myth of the artist/author as eclectic genius. Barthes elaborates within *Mythologies* certain rhetorical figures that myth employs in order to effect its naturalizing function. One such figure is “identification”; this rhetorical structure reduces otherness either to fundamental identity or exoticizes the other into an alien essence, a pure object, a spectacle (152). In neither case does one have to understand the mythified ob-

⁹ Butler here sums up what she takes Foucault’s intent to be. She then goes on to problematize Foucault’s realization of this intention by exploring how the mechanism of “cultural inscription” necessitates the notion of a pre-given site available for inscription. I find her analysis convincing.



The Foucault Reader. Paul Rabinow, ed. Used by permission of Pantheon.

¹⁰ The connotations of the bald head in contemporary American culture are complex, but tend to reflect either a hyper-masculinity, e.g. sports stars, Kojak, Mr. Clean, or a “deviant” or “questionable/perverse” sexuality, e.g. The Adam’s Family’s Uncle Fester and the prominence of the shaved head as one stereotype of S/M homosexual subculture.

ject; instead, in the words of Moriarty, “we can either assimilate it or gawp at it” (27). The profusion of pictures of Foucault’s gleaming bald head, with all its connotations,¹⁰ play into the myth of the “eclectic genius” and perform just such an exoticizing function. Like Barthes’ account of the myth of the brain of Einstein, the photograph of the author effaces the work involved in the production of the text. Rather, Foucault’s otherness is foregrounded; his deviance is suggested by his baldness, rectangular glasses, and stern demeanor; he is exoticized as the figure of the mystical *artiste*, living some romantic tortured existence sequestered in a Parisian garret, indulging in lascivious pastimes, and producing philosophical treatises parthenogenetically, off the brow, emerging brilliant and complete.

The cover photograph, by naturalizing the historical constructions of authorship, of the body, and of the *artiste* as eclectic genius, thus drains history away from these concepts and participates in the production of myth. Unlike certain intellectuals such as Maurice Blanchot, Foucault never prohibited photographs or interviews. Thus paradoxically, this “virtuoso of self-effacement” (Miller 19) simultaneously reconstituted himself as a world famous and eminently recognizable intellectual.

II. This is not Foucault’s head, nor is this, nor is this...or is it? Reflections on Mirrors

Much of the preceding discussion converges in the striking photograph serving as the cover to Miller’s biography, taken by Foucault’s close friend Hervé Guibert. Miller himself provides a description of the photograph within the text, writing

It shows Foucault dressed in a kimono, a faint smile on his face, a brilliantly illuminated space behind him, standing at a threshold. His figure is flanked by an open door and polished dark panels, his image doubled and redoubled on the flat angled ebony surfaces in a distorted reflection of the man who wordlessly beckons from beyond. (357)

Before even beginning to analyze the details of the photograph itself, it is evident that we do not here have a Barthesian “press photograph.” This photograph quite

explicitly aims to be artistic, to evince a certain style, to suggest certain connotations about the man. The photograph rather falls on the side of what Barthes classifies as an "advertising image," an image containing intentional signification. The conjunction of the photograph and the linguistic message, the title *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, refers beyond itself to Miller's biographical text. A certain degree of cultural knowledge is required to "read" the cover: to begin with, one "instinctually" knows to relate the name Michel Foucault to the



The Passion of Michel Foucault. James Miller. Used by permission of Doubleday.

pictured figure in the photograph.¹¹ Furthermore, one "naturally" makes an additional leap and concludes that the text itself will indeed explain or address this "passion" of the figure we see depicted on the cover. Without knowing anything more about Foucault than what we learn from the cover, we learn what he looks like and that he has a certain "passion." Our entry into the body of Miller's text and, through Miller, the body of Foucault's work, is the image of Foucault's body as presented on the cover. The advertising image titillates, it constructs a desire to know the passion of the striking figure depicted on the cover. The photograph of Foucault, "naturally" appearing on the cover of his biography, *sells us* the text. It is, as we are distantly aware in the back of our minds, a marketing strategy.

A closer examination of the cover beings to reveal the ways in which the linguistic message of the title serves to "anchor" the image. According to Barthes, "all images are polysemous; they imply, underlying their signifiers, a 'floating chain' of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others" (*Image* 39). The linguistic message of the title is one way to fix the floating chain of signifieds; it functions (as does Foucault's notion of the author itself)

¹¹ The cover, taken as a whole, constitutes what W. J. T. Mitchell would refer to as an "imagetext," a composite of image and text. In fundamental agreement with Barthes, Mitchell observes the ways in which the "image-text relation," the relation between the visual and the verbal is not ahistorical or "natural," but the product of learned visual and verbal "literacies" embedded in "specific discourses, disciplines, and regimes of knowledge." See *Picture Theory* 48, 89 n. 9 and *passim*.

to limit the proliferation of meaning. The cover to the Miller biography limits the play of signification by branding the depicted figure with the name "Michel Foucault." Indeed, Foucault's image is trapped in the gap between the converging *Michel* and *Foucault*, as if at any minute the two names could come together, crushing the image out of existence. Furthermore, the spacing of the individual letters and the stylistic severity of their elongated and streamlined form stretch across the gap of the photograph from top to bottom like bars, linking Michel inextricably to Foucault and trapping the image behind the ponderous weight of the name.

However, the image does provide Foucault and the reader with a way out, which is also a way in. Foucault is barred from transgressing the text; Foucault's cropped legs cannot hurdle the closing jaws of the name. Yet, the door is open, he can retreat inward. And we as well, as readers, can accompany Foucault through the door, can get "behind" the name. Miller's text promises us the "true" man, the "essence" of the body we see before us, detached from the name.

This notion of getting at the "truth of the man," is further highlighted by the details of the photograph. The space across which Foucault stares out at the reader is a gulf of darkness, a bizarre and frightening space of multiple distorted reflections. Foucault stands at the edge of this emptiness, the ironic author who "wordlessly beckons from beyond." We meet Foucault at this edge of darkness, at the limit-experiences of death and madness that Miller again and again will paint him as skirting. In this space of confusion, coherent identity slips away, the self fragments into the endless darkness that floods in from the edges. Paradoxically, it is here, in this space of fragments, that we find the *singular* "passion" of the man, the obsession with limit-experiences, with death, eroticism, madness. The vista across which Foucault stares is the perpetual gloom of the tortured genius living "on the edge." Here we find reified for us the myth of the eclectic genius, the Byronic figure indulging forbidden vices, confronting the borders of reason. And here, at the portal into nothingness, we find Foucault, head gleaming, standing monk-

like in his kimono, a figure not fully of our normal, everyday world. The exotic other, the transgressive priest (or, as Miller describes him, the “postmodernist sphinx, a metaphysical Eraserhead” [321]), gazes out, bold and unflinching. This is the Foucault that spurns the necktie and business suit in favor of the sensuousness and exoticness, not to mention the hints of sexual deviance, of the kimono. We may wonder if he is barefoot, or if he is in fact on the way to the baths. The photograph supports the myth of the natural presentation of the body, unshaped by webs of power and culture by projecting an image of the “essential Foucault.”

Yet, the photograph, as noted, provides an escape from the dark void into which Foucault stares. The world behind the doorway in which Foucault stands is bright, white, and secure. The ground is firm—we can see the floor. The space is bounded—we can see where the floor meets the hygienic whiteness of the unsullied wall. Through the door is day, reason, serenity. It is rather as though we are looking back at the world from the reverse side of one of Magritte’s dresser doors that open into infinity. Against this light, Foucault is backlit. As long as he remains framed by the lit doorway, there is no danger of losing him amidst the wilderness of mirrors. Rather, it is Foucault who remains safe and we who are in danger—after all, it is we who are lost in the darkness into which Foucault stares. Foucault himself shows us the way out, the door amidst the mirrors, our exit from the funhouse. He stands waiting, the door opening inward towards the light, towards the truth of the text, towards the biography that will make sense of the man, that will organize the many distorted images reflected to the left and the right into the truth of a coherent identity. Miller’s text will explain Foucault the man, which will then allow us to explain Foucault the author. Our knowledge of the man will unlock the “correct” reading of his texts. Body, author, text merge into one identity that is the author function Foucault, pictured for us on the cover.

And yet, the picture turns back upon itself, undermines its own reification of the “myth” of coherent identity. The mystery of the photograph is the multiple reflections of

Foucault. If Foucault is indeed standing in the doorway, how is it that he is reflected in panels immediately to his left and right? The only answer is that rather than an unbounded space opposite him, there must be more mirrors. The reflections adjacent to him then are the reflections of reflections. This being the case, however, where is the place of the *viewer*? Rather than images of Foucault, it is the *reader* who should be reflected in mirrors coincidental with Foucault. It is we then who are Foucault's reflection. Or rather, the distorted images in mirrors to Foucault's left and right are a combination, an overlapping of Foucault and reader, a merger of self and other. The problematic reflections destabilize the affirmation of coherent identity and possibility of truth suggested by the purity of the world beyond the doorway. Miller's text, despite its intention to get at the truth of the man, must always remain a distorted reflection in a mirror, an overlapping of Miller and Foucault, the mutual composition of a single image, true perhaps only to itself.

At the center of the darkness across which Foucault stares is the point at which his and the viewer's gazes converge. This circular room of mirrors, with Foucault staring out from a backlit cell, is Bentham's Panopticon, and yet at the center is not a tower housing power, but a lack, a void. No one looks out unseen from the center; it is the inmates who, staring across empty space, can see one another and return each other's gazes. Awareness of the other thus plays into the construction of the self. Foucault cannot see his own head except in the mirror of the other.

Thus, Guibert's photograph simultaneously projects and undermines the affirmation of a core persona. On the one hand, it plays into the myths of the author, the body, and the eclectic genius that I have tried to outline in this essay. It seems to suggest, via the imagery of the open door, an inroad into the life and psyche of the "essential" Foucault. And yet, at the same time, the multiple distorted reflections and the confusion/conflation of the viewer with Foucault seem to suggest otherwise, to propose that Foucault and the reader mutually constitute one another and that any notion of an essential Foucault, of the "truth" of the man, by necessity must remain ambiguous. In this

manner, considering the mirror image as an overlapping of self and other acts as the quintessential deconstructive gesture, displacing the self/other and true/false dichotomies entirely. As with Magritte's "*Les trahison des images*" painting of 1929 with its famous pronouncement, "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*," the options to say that the photographs of Foucault's head which adorn so many covers either are or are not Foucault's head are equally unsatisfactory. As I hope to have shown through this essay, however, to affirm the picture as the author, and to conflate the two into the truth of the man, is to buy into and propagate certain myths—the mythology of Foucault's head.

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