

## MICHEL FOUCAULT AND *THE MATRYOSHKA* – THE RUSSIAN DOLL EFFECT

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### ABSTRACT.

THE PRESENT STUDY (AS A RESULT OF THE COMMUNICATION PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM «FOUCAULT POST MORTEM», STRASBOURG UNIVERSITY, 25-26 JUNE 2014) HOLDS THE CONVICTION THAT MICHEL FOUCAULT IS A POSTSTRUCTURALIST (WITH INFRASTRUCTURAL ACCENTS) DESPITE ALL THE RECYCLING/BORROWINGS HE OPERATED IN AND WITHIN POSTMODERNITY.

SUCH A STATEMENT IS BACKED BY THE LIMITS/EVIDENCE WHICH SHOWS THAT FOUCAULT IS NEITHER FOR NOR AGAINST EXPOSING THE SUPPRESSED DISCOURSE OF AND IN MODERNITY, IN THE SENSE OF A SEPARATION FROM THE TRUTH WITH THE AIM OF CONNECTING TO A DISCIPLINARY DEVICE WITH NODAL POINTS WITHIN THE ABNORMAL AND NORMALIZING ALTERITY. FROM THIS POINT OF VIEW A WHOLE FEMINIST, NEO-HISTORICAL AND/OR POST-COLONIAL RANGE OF CONCEPTS APPEARS, CONTAMINATING THE FOUCAULT-IAN ENDEAVOR AND MAKING IT VULNERABLE TO POSTMODERN LABELING.

WE CONSIDER THAT BEYOND A DUAL EXISTENCE, THE ENSIGN ONE CAN ATTRIBUTE TO FOUCAULT IN AN (NON)SYMBOLIC NOTE, IS THAT OF RUSSIAN DOLL (*MATRYOSHKA*).

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**KEYWORDS.** MICHEL FOUCAULT, POSTSTRUCTURALISM, POSTMODERNITY, MODERNITY, MATRYOSHKA EFFECT.

Any comments<sup>2</sup> pertaining to the (apparently) Foucaultian endeavour wishing to “index” certain canonical terms – such as *continuity, influence, tradition, author, work* – consider that the word *novelty* is impossible to include in such a series. In Foucault’s opinion, the term *novelty* remains active and self- preserving of its status as hard, dynamic, and integrated into the formal mechanisms of an autonomous discourse; thus, if one can still acknowledge the existence of a conservative, self-preservation resistance instinct in the case of any archaic discourse, then any denial of its sense/signification as a genesis for the up- and- coming synthesis becomes impossible.

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<sup>2</sup>The present study reaffirms ideas presented at the International Congress “Foucault Post Mortem”, and the *Cultures et Sociétés en Europe* Workshop, Strasbourg University, June 25-26, 2014; and a few notes presented under the title *A necessary commemoration; Michel Foucault and the Russian doll effect* within the www.estica.eu platform. The article has also some anticipatory notes on www.ispri.ro and inside the Institute of Political Sciences and International Relations` journals.

From the perspective of such an approach, one can affirm that novelty is fundamental; it preserves nothing, taking into account the divide engendered by any investigative agent of theoretical difficulties; modernity's *ethos* represents an attitude rather than a historical period, a way of relating to the world, a permanent and pertinent analysis of historical beings, *a public appeal to rationality*.

Based on these assignments one can trace a primary distancing from the rigorous registry which diagnosed – in the case of 60's - 70's modernism – an expired, discredited postmodern syndrome analysing the impossibility of placing it – as a reaction - between established landmarks and thus something to be invented (Kramer, 2006).

In Sloterdijk's<sup>3</sup> acceptance and taking into account the intensity of the agitation debates of the 60's, no (re)packaged theory/direction can constitute the *generic element of a novelty structure* such as postmodernism, even if *an immigration* of the term (in the late 70's) could be accepted; or its (pre)/(re) loading and valuation from the perspective of *positive connections with modernity* (a demonstration Lyotard incorporated into his *Condition of Postmodernity*).

The attaching attribute of any *postmodern particularity* was decisively conditioned by the way French theorists (Foucault, Lyotard, Baudrillard) were received, and also by the way they created and promoted, (preponderantly) in Germany, an ideatic context favouring the affirmation of the postmodern current of thought<sup>4</sup>.

Not by chance, Jürgen Habermas's<sup>5</sup> attack, from within German space, was aimed at French "poststructuralism" and targeted the excessively critical Foucaultian attitude towards *modernity – a reaction* one might consider suspect political and theoretical at the same time, as it relies less on solving the problems of modern society and more on a categorical denial of *modernity per se*.

According to Habermas, Foucault's postulates are just a theoretical base revealing his adherence to a tendency to anchor *subjectivity* in the metaphysical plane, a formulation launched by liberal philosophy as it rejected formalism without trying to anthropologize it, and refused mythologisation without subsequent demystification<sup>6</sup>; as a conclusion, one can talk about exposing the structural models offered by Heideggerian theories of being.

Habermas<sup>7</sup> was actually interested in establishing certain intellectual affinities, despite hostile political choices, with Nietzsche's authority in its role as landmark for a *certain discourse about modernity*'.

Although apparently complicated, this relationship only serves to confirm the polarity Frankfurt school/ *modernity – Foucault/postmodernity*; a dichotomy meant to clarify the normative platform/score of philosophic-political interpretation; Foucault purposefully ignores not only the contradiction *modern norm – modern reality*, but also modernity's constitutive elements<sup>8</sup>.

In such an ideatic context, the Lyotardian– type axiom stating that *modernism can be accepted as part of postmodernism and a work can become modern only if it is first postmodern*, can only be accepted and applied with reference to Foucault's established stages,

<sup>3</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (vol.1) (Iassy: Polirom Publishing House, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Dan Grigorescu, *From Hemlock to Coca-Cola* (Bucharest: Minerva Publishing House, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Questions and Counterquestions*, in *Habermas on Modernity*, edited by R. Bernstein (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 196-229.

<sup>6</sup> Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Bucharest: Univers, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Habermas, *Questions and Counterquestions*, 79-102.

<sup>8</sup> Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory* (Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991).

of *relating to modernity as a recent- date period* – an expression of our modern style of being/ *overriding* the limits of the present (*we note*).

*Introduction in Structuralism: Direction, Movement, Effect*

The present study will try to dismantle, even demolish any impediments able to a reading of Foucault's work in post-1989 Romanian space; the first impediment sees itself as resulting from a secondary circumstantial complex signalling the delayed Romanian contact with Foucaultian discourse, its *act of establishment* being signed in the late 90's; the second impediment will show Foucaultian creation's detachment from any type of *modernist reminiscences* and/or *postmodernist flirtations*.

An obvious note would refer to the prompt intervention, in the *Secolul XX (The 20<sup>th</sup> Century) magazine*, no. 5/1967 – an issue dedicated to “an introduction to structuralism” which published (without any synchronizing qualms) the polemic between Sartre's generation and that of the “new wave” already represented by Foucault – Lévi Strauss - Lacan, while noting the consequences that a popularization – or bringing into the light - of “thinking before thinking” could engender.

Not at all aleatory, it was in the same year that Alain Robbe- Grillet exposed, in Bucharest, his theoretical reflections underpinning the concept that *it is not the described object which is important*, but the – continuing and parallel – *movement* of the *description* itself; an imperative successfully illustrated by Foucault too (a Foucault open to the idea of visiting, soon after his *Les mots et les choses* was published, both Hungary and, without any media advertising whatsoever<sup>9</sup>, Romania<sup>10</sup>) when he stated that any reception of *modernity as a contradiction of the structured subject* – finite and overloaded – transcends into the infinite. In the same open circuit, R. Jakobson presented his general report on *Connections between Linguistics and other related disciplines* at the International Linguistics Congress, Bucharest, August 1967.

In fact, the successful investigation undertaken by the *Secolul XX magazine* was centred upon establishing a quotient of receptivity towards the structuralism movement, with the necessary assignation stating that, despite the fact that *60's and 70's modernism manifested itself/ was considered to be a delaying occurrence*, in 60's France an *intelligentsia* already familiar with any aesthetic- political explosion *fallout* already existed.

Any controversies, with their latent smouldering tentacles, served only to focus attention upon recent- date (1967) attempts to trigger a structuralism which already sent

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<sup>9</sup>Between the (few! made to justify an extreme lack of concrete data) arguments formulated by [Stefan Borbély](#) – “1968 - year of the agitated sun and its media reflections in Romania”, *Observator Cultural* 302- 303, 2006) we only mention those referencing, in a *light* key, the fact that both Foucault's visit to Romania and Sartre's engagement with Paris student protests were ignored by the Party newspapers, because they habitually did not report deviant radical group activities, often considered to be marginal and devoid of significance, but rather concentrated upon an atmosphere of normality (by protecting president De Gaulle, who visited Romania in May 1968, from any impromptu, uncomfortable interpellations).

<sup>10</sup>Upon examining the archives [Institutul Român pentru Relații Culturale cu Străinătatea (I.R.R.C.S) – The Romanian Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, 1947-1969, fond 1774, no. 1293; Service of Secretary dossier no. 1966, Notes of the External Section of CC of PCR, vol. VIII; 1963-1966, Direction II, Service II B; The Situation of the guests on 1966, with a table for 1963-1966; The rapports on 1966], we were unable to find any details regarding Michel Foucault's visit to Romania.

However, archives underline the presence of French intellectuals amongst local Academia – Pierre de Boisdeffre's conference or Claude Sernet's visit, Louis Michel's visits university professor, head of the Romanian Language Faculty, Montpellier University), Julien Cain (president of the UNESCO National French Commission), Ernest Kahane (Faculty of Sciences, Montpellier), Octav Nandris (head of the Romanian Language and Literature Faculty, University of Strasbourg) etc.

signals of its availability to tentacularly include all humanist sciences into its *general methodology, science of sciences and/ or vision of the world*.

Thus the hurried appearance of certain replies to the spectacular publishing, in 1966, of the *Les mots et les choses* can be explained – an proposed model for an universal ideology of time – considered to be the general philosophical justification of corrections previously applied to structuralism and lacking any exhaustive theoretical aspirations.

Michel Foucault's interview – recorded by the journalist Madeleine Chapsal and included in the *Secolul XX* summary – identifies a space with totally renewed intellectual potential, with cutting-edge ideas and opinions which finally marked a clear distancing from the opinions of previous generations through the discovery and launching of different objectives/directions – those of new concepts and systems.

In Foucault's acceptance, sense has a surface role, that of reflex, of froth, and the system includes levels of depth and assemblies of relationships which are maintained and transformed, becoming the mission of an exploded Ego, distanced from its own self, which includes abandoning any overdose of humanism and demands to be included in the same categories that the scientific and technical world operate with.

In answer to this, Jean- Paul Sartre invests Foucault with the status of *geologist* (despite his archaeologising way of working), an explorer of successive strata who is still reluctant to accept a praxis (that is, *history*) and who uses a modifying factor that Sartre called *expectant thinking* (in the sense of an eclectic, Robbe-Grilletian merging of structuralism, linguistics, Lacan and the magazine *Tel-Quel*) illustrating the sudden (pell-mell) effervescence of an attitudinal reaction reclaiming (new) idols.

Willingly eluding the American “new criticism” files in order to be able to return to the French model, the 5/1967 issue of the *Secolul XX magazine* reproduces acute fragments by Michel Foucault, Lévi Strauss, Jacques Lacan and Jean-Paul Sartre, with the idea of connecting to an explosive formulation of another type of *fashion* (resembling existentialism) with the founding axiom *there are as many structuralisms as there are structuralists*.

While noting that “we would be wrong to consider structuralism to be an unitary current” and “we should not credit every structuralist endeavour with the intention of founding a new philosophy”, the *Secolul XX* (1967: 69-71) introductory note focuses upon Michel Foucault, seen as an exponent of that option “decidedly aimed towards a dis-ideologising vision, positivism- oriented, relativistic and desperately at once.”

Sorin Alexandrescu notes, in *Perspectives of structural literary research*<sup>11</sup> the moderate attitude of our exegetes towards European- approved intellectual values (and not only those) and confirms the fact that, until the aforementioned polemic was published (1967), Romanian research temporarily limited itself to general observations/ partial analyses, manifesting timidity and caution when approaching the integrality of a writer's work.

Beyond a certain provincial complex, the domain of Romanian reflective space seemed cumulatively ready to develop a structural research and/or intuitive, aesthetic criticism. The conclusions of the first and second volume of the *Poetics and Stylistics studies*, the articles published in *Cahiers de linguistique théorique et appliquée*, the activity of the Poets Circle of the RSR Academy, M. Nasta's volumes, *Structuralism*, anthologies and studies by Nemoianu, Sorin Alexandrescu or I. Rotaru bear this out.

Thus, any research projects and developments were subsumed under a *structural two-direction bearing* – the first tendency considered the work to be a “system of systems”, an architectural model with levels designed respecting the rules of a certain system; the second tendency banked upon a rejection and overtaking of shelved compartment techniques

<sup>11</sup> See in this sense, “Secolul 20” Magazine, edited by the Writers Union from the Socialist Republic Romania, 5, 1967, 176.

(contaminated by structuralist principles) and engendered a direct attack upon the unique structure of the work.

Romanian reactions are gathered under the syntagm “a discussion occurred” – they acknowledge all difficulties linked to memories and/or implicit senses, and accept any connection to challenging and thought- provoking interactions between linguistics and technology, while abandoning the idea which considered structural linguistics to be a non-malleable, inflexible, stony form<sup>12</sup>.

The communist newspaper *Scanteia Tineretului –The Sparkle of Youth* – published on June 1, 1968 (as a recourse to the transparent strategy of presenting articles from within the Western cultural sphere by printing them in central newspapers) a reloaded version – in a serious thematic bundle – of the *Introduction to Structuralism* file, with interpretations offered/comments written by the Academician Grigore C. Moisil, Dr. Sorin Stati, aestheticist Ion Pascadi and anglicist V. Nemoianu conclusively stating that structuralism can plausibly be included into the humanities, as a primarily a-historical method; without forgetting to mention its faults and deficiencies, which a “historicist vision”, Marxist, healthy, supple and responsible was obliged to denounce.

On an ideologising plane, state power felt forced to place itself within the flow by acting and reacting synchronously to the “burning debates” of the moment, and, as a consequence, to use diluted censorship methods in order to control them.

In this sense, one should re-examine the temperate, system- linked affirmations made by V. Nemoianu who stated that “structuralism opposes almost no one” being in fact a “calm, modest movement which travels its own road”, without leaning either towards the left or the right. The same interpreter considered that at present there exists a “school of new converts, fanatical as all new adepts are”, based in France, which promotes a (politely called) rhetorical/ demagogical structuralism.

Without “trying to deny the high intellectual qualities of some representatives of the French school (particularly Levi-Strauss)”, Nemoianu was able to resist the mystifying temptation (*sic!*) of acknowledging that “all these Barthes, Lacan, Foucault” are more than critics of structuralism, invested with the mission of building a “false structuralist ideology”, of a reactionary kind, at the beck and call of a possible totalitarian technocratic regime<sup>13</sup>.

#### *A refired pipe: shared effects on the pressure of post-*

Reclaiming the hesitatingly wavering process of placing Foucault within different contrasting categories and reassessing, in the light of recent triple- partition developments (in the period 2000- 2011) the efforts his exegetes made in order to affix his life and work to a certain flow (while willingly eluding Bogdan Ghiu, a translator and commentator already specialized in the Foucaultian idiom) an immediate- order observation would be based upon the obvious idea that no trial<sup>14</sup> is able to offer a perspective effect (that we call the *matryoshka - Russian doll effect*).

On the contrary...

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<sup>12</sup> Grigore C. Moisil, “Secolul 20” Magazine, 1967, 102.

<sup>13</sup> Ștefan Borbély, 1968 - *Year of the agitated sun* and its media reflections in Romania. *Observator Cultural*, 2006, 302-303.

<sup>14</sup>Under the sign of blocking any reception of texts focused upon the Foucaultian idiom, one has to note certain pseudo- scientific reactions decreeing that the present analysis has little to do with any kind of politics and just deepens the illegibility of ideas (such remarks should be read, in the key of Jean Luc Nancy, as *a bad interpretation of the premise of interpretation*). A possible punctual answer (even in the absence of a premise) would take into account the fact that according to the same Bogdan Ghiu, in his postscriptum to the *Les anormaux* volume (Bucharest: Univers) Foucault’s structuralism is both political and genealogical in form.

Any solutions offered by different comments hurry to label report/ place Foucault at/ in the situation of *critic of modernism/Enlightenment* – of an *adept/explorer of alternative modernity* [taking into consideration the attack he launched upon the concept of modern rationality – oppressive, reductive and coercive; or upon the idea of progress - in the sense of unmasking its impartiality and universality – Mihaela Czobor Lupp] – of a *counter- modern exponent flaunting an attitude of critical resistance, characteristic of postmodernism* [with the common Foucault – Rorty analysis inside the critical fold of Continental philosophical postmodernism as opposed to its American counterpart – Irina Stănciugelu], of an *intellectual brand*, difficult to analyse, marked by scriptic dandyism, suspected of philosophical abuse and/of being an *artisan of a politics of writing* [we consider that, upon a background of discontinuous knowledge, the myth of postmodern Foucault is false, synthesizing theses and antitheses which are nothing more than expressions of style in the context of the fact that Foucault was never a postmodern – Lucian Popescu].

Our conviction is, therefore, that Foucault remains a poststructuralist (with infrastructural accents) despite any borrowings/ recycling operated in/within postmodernity itself. Such a statement is maintained by *evidence- to- the – limit*, according to which, neither *for* nor *against*, Foucault denounces any *discourse already suppressed by/in modernity*, in the sense of abandoning truth, but affirms his intention of adhering to a disciplinarian device with nodal points in the abnormal and a normalization of alterity.

From this point of view one can anticipate a whole feminist, neo-historical and/ or post- colonial armoury which contaminates the Foucaultian discourse at the point where it becomes vulnerable to postmodern labelling.

If writing is accepted as a creation of modernity and a denial of rhetoric, post-structuralism opposes those Deleuzian philosophies of the *surface* and notes that the writer's ethics braves discourse, indirectly denying any pact with power, within the compensating frame of modern writing reflected in (re)loaded humanistic messages of its old discourse.

This advocacy extracts its arguments from within the obsessive power of language and its equivalent overlapping in *work, text, sign, discipline – conceptual* post-structuralist elements with effects upon the mixture *language- power- subject*, imposing, in a Foucaultian way (through *Les mots et les choses*) a replacement of *discourse* with *savoir*, with effects in a weakening of the terms but not a weakening of its discursive reflections.

In fact, the *matryoshka - Russian doll effect* is proved by the Foucaultian option of abandoning the archaeologically- structural centrality of the *hard* discursive model, in order to orient itself towards *discursive forms and practices; thresholds, dispersion, regularity, episteme, discipline, author, positivity, inter- discourse configurations*.

#### *The matryoshka – Russian Doll Effect*

The (im)mediate conclusion of the present study confirms the fact that an analysed course of structuralism cannot resist the temptation of departing from a (poetic) guide of postmodernism, which coincidentally announces, in a Derridian manner, “the free play of significant” with all re-filtered reclaiming of the *écrivain*, textuality, “metaphysics of absence” or detested binary oppositions.

In Liviu Petrescu's<sup>15</sup> opinion, a poetics of post-structuralism exists, as a type of recycling postmodernisms subsumed to the imperative of valorification, which they considered to be strikingly actual/attractive.

<sup>15</sup> Liviu Petrescu, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, second edition (Pitești: Paralela 45 Publishing House, 2011).

In a profoundly inspired move, Bernard Pingaud<sup>16</sup> banked upon a decidedly adequate profile – before and after praxis - able to recompose an image of Sartre 1 totally different from that of Sartre 2.

Applying such a synthesis to the case of Foucault and accessing cutting connections-modern/postmodern (see in this sense the Habermasian allegations reflected in the radical separation gestures of modernity and revolutionary renewal of premodern energies; or, at the limit, typical postmodern paradoxes - infinite regresses - deciphered by Foucault within Magritte's paintings) structuralism/ post-structuralism (with all subsequent history/subject crisis immersions), philosopher/ post philosopher (Sartre was emphatically known as the last philosopher), we can conclude that, beyond any dual, metaphorical existence, the effect one can attribute to Foucault in a (non)symbolic note is the matryoshka – Russian doll effect.

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<sup>16</sup>Bernard Pingaud, "Secolul 20" Magazine, 1967, 90-91.

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