

An explication and
excavation of
foucault's
archaeological
method in sections i
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Throughout “The Prose of the World,” Michel Foucault establishes himself as a conceptual archaeologist, one who seeks to uncover the history and theories behind what he calls “the human sciences.” It is a method in which Foucault reexamines previously accepted patterns in the formation of systems of knowledge, and pieces together the existing evidence of these systems to formulate his own historical theories behind the emergence of such systems. In this archaeological method, Foucault makes the conscious decision not to analyze humans or objects as a means of understanding the progression of knowledge, but chooses instead to focus on concepts, examining them with an archaeological rigor which treats these concepts like isolated artifacts, giving them a distinctly physical quality. In his discussion of the similitudes and signatures in “The Prose of the World,” Foucault aligns his method of analysis to the practice of archaeology through the use of figurative language, the motif of archaeological imagery, and the layered structure of the text. By employing these devices, Foucault uncovers, examines, and exhibits pieces of evidence to establish the nature of the four similitudes, as well as the signatures that mark their existence.

The practice of archaeology, in the traditional sense, relies on objects that can be concretely experienced. Within the text however, Foucault is more concerned with ideas. He underscores the preeminence of discourse, an intangible concept, as the generator of knowledge. This emphasis on abstract concepts, which are devoid of materiality, may at first seem to defy the utility of an archaeological method. However, though the idea of discourse is intangible, Foucault uses figurative language as a tool for bringing abstract concepts into the realm of the tangible, allowing them to

be examined and exhibited in the manner of artifacts. Foucault begins the chapter by asserting that there are four types of resemblance that he will discuss, the first of which is *convenientia*. Using a metaphor, Foucault gives form to the concept of *convenientia* by comparing it to a “hinge,” in which “between two things a resemblance appears” (18). By labeling *convenientia* as a hinge, Foucault gives the concept a physical form, one that can be observed and opened. In an additional extended metaphor, Foucault further states that the world of connections created by *convenientia* is “an immense, taught, vibrating chain” (19). This objectification of the abstract, the comparison of connections created by *convenientia* to those of a chain, establishes these connections as a system of mutually dependent pieces. The pieces of this chain are linked together by proximity, which binds its furthest members together while, through the nature of being “taut” simultaneously holds them apart. The connections of *convenientia*, previously confined to the realm of the invisible and intangible, like an artifact buried underground, is in this way brought to the surface as the physical object of a chain, one which can be studied. Towards a similar end, the additional similitudes of *aemulatio*, analogy, and sympathy are compared to a mirror, bonds and joints, and a thunderbolt, respectively. In Sections I and II of “The Prose of the World,” the primary utility of figurative language is that these comparisons give concepts a concrete form, and this provides the reader with a new dimension with which to understand them.

Foucault further directly ties his method of understanding the history of knowledge to the practice of archaeology through the motif of archaeological imagery in the text. Progressing from his discussion of the similitudes to the

concept of signatures, Foucault asserts that signatures are markers which enable us to recognize the existence of the similitudes, stating that “ These buried similitudes must be indicated on the surface of things; there must be visible marks for the invisible analogies” (26). Here again, Foucault comments on the relationship between the tangible and intangible, asserting that there must be some way to reveal what was previously hidden, so that it may be fully understood. However, more notable in the excerpt is Foucault’s direct use of language associated with the practice of archaeology itself. The similitudes are “ buried” with signs of their presence only at first visible on the level of the surface. Understanding the nature of these surface signs leads to the discovery of the connections that they identify. Foucault expands upon this idea, stating that “ A knowledge of similitudes is founded upon the unearthing and decipherment of these signatures” (26). Foucault aligns the practice of understanding the similitudes to the practice of archaeology through the deliberate use of the verbs “ unearthing” and “ decipherment.” Foucault further reinforces the archaeological motif in illustrating his argument by asserting that “ Resemblance was the invisible form of that which, from the depths of the world, made things visible; but in order that this form may be brought out into the light in its turn there must be a visible figure that will draw it out from its profound invisibility” (26). This description again highlights the idea that the similitudes are buried in “ the depths of the world,” a realm which obscures them from view. In the following sentence, Foucault establishes that there must necessarily be “ a visible figure” to bring them to light, to the realm of the visible. This figure could refer to the visible signs, the signatures, which indicate the presence of the similitudes, or to the archaeologist who brings them to the surface. In <https://assignbuster.com/an-explication-and-excavation-of-foucaults-archaeological-method-in-sections-i-and-ii-of-the-prose-of-the-world/>

the preceding section of the text, Foucault employs figurative language to describe the similitudes, allowing the concepts of *convenientia*, *aemulatio*, analogy, and sympathy to become objects, or archaeological artifacts to be studied. In this section, Foucault uses archaeological language to show that signatures provide the method for uncovering “ these buried similitudes,” by revealing markers of the connections between them. In this way, Foucault uses language to reinforce that the similitudes function as the artifacts, while the signatures provide a means of discovering and deciphering their inherent connections.

In addition to illustrating his claims with figurative language and archeological imagery, Foucault also organizes the evidence of his claims through extensive cataloguing. In the same way that archaeologists catalogue artifacts in order to gather and display evidence of past civilizations, Foucault catalogues evidence of his own concepts that he observes in the real world. For instance, in his description of *convenientia*, Foucault catalogues ways in which place and similitude become intertwined, saying “ we see mosses growing on the outside of shells, plants in the antlers of stags, a sort of grass on the faces of men; and the strange zoophyte, by mingling together and the properties that make it similar to plants as well as animals, also juxtaposes them (3). All so many signs of ‘ convenience’ ” (18). In this way, Foucault creates a list of instances of *convenientia*, a list which provides evidence for his assertion of this conceptual framework. In the following paragraphs, Foucault again catalogues instances of analogy, in a use of parallel structure. Foucault states that an example of analogy includes “ the relation of the starts to the

sky in which they shine” which “ may also be found: between plants and the earth, between living beings and the globe they inhabit, between minerals such as diamonds and the rocks in which they are buried, between sense organs and the face they animate, between skin moles and the body of which they are secret marks” (21). Through the use of cataloguing, Foucault again brings the abstract nature of similitudes into the realm of the tangible. However, he also arranges his evidence in the manner of artifacts, as individual fragments of ideas which together illustrate the larger meanings of these concepts. Foucault uses a series of comparisons to liken his concepts to objects and align them with archaeological artifacts.

Throughout these sections, Foucault also conceptually ties the experience of reading his argument to the experience of archaeology through the manner in which he structures the text. In the chapter, Foucault layers his conceptual points so that the reader must uncover and sift through them. Often, the thesis of the argument is placed in the middle or at the end of a given section, requiring the reader to grasp all of the fragments of the conceptual artifacts before they may be pieced together into a coherent whole. For example, Foucault begins the chapter by stating that there are four similitudes that govern our knowledge of resemblance. In each of the successive sections, these four similitudes (convenientia, aemulatio, analogy, and sympathy) are consecutively revealed in a series of textual layers in which each section builds upon the others. Only after the discussion of convenientia, aemulatio, and analogy does Foucault reveal that the final similitude, sympathy, is the generator of the previous three. Foucault states that “ The whole volume of the world, all of the adjacencies of ‘

convenience', all of the echoes of emulation, all of the linkages of analogy, are supported, maintained, and doubled by this space governed by sympathy and antipathy, which are ceaselessly drawing things together and holding them apart" (25). Through this structure, Foucault forgoes a conceptual framework in which the reader is made aware of this relationship at the beginning of the text in an opening thesis. Instead, Foucault only allows this overarching interaction between the similitudes to be gradually uncovered, as the deepest layer of the argument. Throughout the chapter, Foucault establishes himself as a conceptual archaeologist, uncovering and reorganizing previously accepted theories of knowledge. In the structure of the text, Foucault similarly forces the reader to take on this role, uncovering the pieces of his arguments to understand the larger underlying connections.

In the first two sections of "The Prose of the World," Foucault relates his method of analysis to the practice of archaeology through the use of figurative language, archaeological imagery, and the layered structure of the text. Foucault utilizes these devices to illustrate how the four similitudes function, as well as the way in which signatures reveal their interactions. By comparing the similitudes to objects, Foucault converts abstract concepts into artifacts, bringing them into the realm of the tangible. By incorporating archaeological imagery, Foucault conveys that signatures function as the means for uncovering and understanding the similitudes. Finally, by structuring the text as a series of conceptual layers, Foucault compels the reader to accept the role of an archaeologist, unearthing the concepts in order to decipher the connections between them. In this way, the practice of archaeology not only bears a relationship to the concepts that Foucault

describes, but also to the devices and structure of the text with which he endeavors to describe them.

Works Cited

Foucault, M. (1994). *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences*. New York: Random House.