

4.5 Charcot and the performance of hysteria

In the following example, we will try to apply Foucault's method to a particular example. Figure 1.8 shows a painting by André Brouillet of the famous French psychiatrist and neurologist, Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–93), lecturing on the subject of female hysteria to students in the lecture theatre of his famous Paris clinic at La Salpêtrière.

ACTIVITY 7

Look at Brouillet's painting (Figure 1.8). What does it reveal as a representation of the study of hysteria?

Brouillet shows a hysterical patient being supported by an assistant and attended by two women. For many years, hysteria had been traditionally identified as a female malady and although Charcot demonstrated conclusively that many hysterical symptoms were to be found in men, and a significant proportion of his patients were diagnosed male hysterics, Elaine Showalter observes that 'for Charcot, too, hysteria remains symbolically, if not medically, a female malady' (1987, p. 148). Charcot was a very humane man who took his patients' suffering seriously and treated them with dignity. He diagnosed hysteria as a genuine ailment rather than a malingerer's excuse (much as has happened, in our time, after many struggles, with other illnesses, like anorexia and ME). This painting represents a regular feature of Charcot's treatment regime, where hysterical female patients displayed before an audience of medical staff and students the symptoms of their malady, ending often with a full hysterical seizure.



FIGURE 1.8 André Brouillet, *A clinical lesson at La Salpêtrière (given by Charcot)*, 1887.

The painting could be said to capture and represent, visually, a discursive 'event' – the emergence of a new regime of knowledge. Charcot's great distinction, which drew students from far and wide to study with him (including, in 1885, the young Sigmund Freud from Vienna), was his demonstration 'that hysterical symptoms such as paralysis could be produced and relieved by hypnotic suggestion' (Showalter, 1987, p. 148). Here we see the practice of hypnosis being applied in practice.

Indeed, the image seems to capture *two* such moments of knowledge production. Charcot did not pay much attention to what the patients said (though he observed their actions and gestures meticulously). But Freud and his friend Breuer did. At first, in their work when they returned home, they used Charcot's hypnosis method, which had attracted such wide attention as a novel approach to treatment of hysteria at La Salpêtrière. But some years later they treated a young woman called Bertha Pappenheim for hysteria, and she, under the pseudonym 'Anna O', became the first case study written up in Freud and Breuer's path-breaking *Studies in Hysteria* (1974/1895). It was the 'loss of words', her failing grasp of the syntax of her own language (German), the silences and meaningless babble of this brilliantly intellectual, poetic and imaginative but rebellious young woman, which gave Breuer and Freud the first clue that her linguistic disturbance was related to her resentment at her 'place' as dutiful daughter of a decidedly patriarchal father, and thus deeply connected with her illness. After hypnosis, her capacity to speak coherently returned, and she spoke fluently in three other languages, though not in her native German. Through her dialogue with Breuer, and her ability to 'work through' her difficult relationship in relation to language, 'Anna O' gave the first example of the 'talking cure' which, of course, then provided the whole basis for Freud's subsequent development of the psychoanalytic method. So we are looking, in this image, at the 'birth' of two new psychiatric *epistemes*: Charcot's method of hypnosis, and the conditions which later produced psychoanalysis.

The example also has many connections with the question of *representation*. In the picture, the patient is performing or 'representing' with her body the hysterical symptoms from which she is 'suffering'. But these symptoms are also being 're-presented' – in the very different medical language of diagnosis and analysis – to her (his?) audience by the Professor: a relationship which involves *power*. Showalter notes that, in general, 'the representation of female hysteria was a central aspect of Charcot's work' (p.148). Indeed, the clinic was filled with lithographs and paintings. He had his assistants assemble a photographic album of nervous patients, a sort of visual inventory of the various 'types' of hysterical patient. He later employed a professional photographer to take charge of the service. His analysis of the displayed symptoms, which seems to be what is happening in the painting, accompanied the hysterical 'performance'. He did not flinch from the spectacular and theatrical aspects associated with his demonstrations of hypnosis as a treatment regime. Freud thought that 'Every one of his "fascinating lectures"' was 'a little work of art in construction and

composition'. Indeed, Freud noted, 'he never appeared greater to his listeners than after he had made the effort, by giving the most detailed account of his train of thought, by the greatest frankness about his doubts and hesitations, to reduce the gulf between teacher and pupil' (Gay, 1988, p. 49).

ACTIVITY 8

Now look carefully at the picture again and, bearing in mind what we have said about Foucault's method of and approach to representation, answer the following questions:

- 1 Who commands the centre of the picture?
- 2 Who or what is its 'subject'? Are (1) and (2) the same?
- 3 Can you tell that knowledge is being produced here? How?
- 4 What do you notice about relations of power in the picture? How are they represented? How does the *form* and *spatial relationships* of the picture represent this?
- 5 Describe the 'gaze' of the people in the image: who is looking at whom? What does *that* tell us?
- 6 What do the age and gender of the participants tell us?
- 7 What message does the patient's body convey?
- 8 Is there a *sexual* meaning in the image? If so, what?
- 9 What is the relationship of you, the viewer, to the image?
- 10 Do you notice anything else about the image which we have missed?

READING F

Now read the account of Charcot and La Salpêtrière offered by Elaine Showalter in 'The performance of hysteria' from *The Female Malady*, reproduced as Reading F at the end of this chapter. Look carefully at the two photographs of Charcot's hysterical women patients. What do you make of their captions?

5 Where is 'the subject'?

We have traced the shift in Foucault's work from language to discourse and knowledge, and their relation to questions of power. But where in all this, you might ask, is the subject? Saussure tended to abolish the subject from the question of representation. Language, he argued, speaks us. The subject appears in Saussure's schema as the author of individual speech-acts (*paroles*). But, as we have seen, Saussure did not think that the level of the *paroles* was one at which a 'scientific' analysis of language could be conducted. In one sense, Foucault shares this position. For him, it is *discourse*, not the subject, which produces knowledge. Discourse is enmeshed with power, but it is not necessary to find 'a subject' – the king, the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, the state, etc. – for *power/knowledge* to operate.

On the other hand, Foucault *did* include the subject in his theorizing, though he did not restore the subject to its position as the centre and author of representation. Indeed, as his work developed, he became more and more concerned with questions about 'the subject', and in his very late and unfinished work, he even went so far as to give the subject a certain reflexive awareness of his or her own conduct, though this still stopped short of restoring the subject to his/her full sovereignty.

Foucault was certainly deeply critical of what we might call the traditional conception of the subject. The conventional notion thinks of 'the subject' as an individual who is fully endowed with consciousness; an autonomous and stable entity, the 'core' of the self, and the independent, authentic source of action and meaning. According to this conception, when we hear ourselves speak, we feel we are identical with what has been said. And this identity of the subject with what is said gives him/her a privileged position in relation to meaning. It suggests that, although other people may misunderstand us, we always understand ourselves because *we were the source of meaning in the first place*.

However, as we have seen, the shift towards a constructionist conception of language and representation did a great deal to displace the subject from a privileged position in relation to knowledge and meaning. The same is true of Foucault's discursive approach. It is discourse, not the subjects who speak it, which produces knowledge. Subjects may produce particular texts, but they are operating within the limits of the *episteme*, the *discursive formation*, the *regime of truth*, of a particular period and culture. Indeed, this is one of Foucault's most radical propositions: the 'subject' is *produced within discourse*. This subject of discourse cannot be outside discourse, because it must be *subjected to* discourse. It must submit to its rules and conventions, to its dispositions of power/knowledge. The subject can become the bearer of the kind of knowledge which discourse produces. It can become the object through which power is relayed. But it cannot stand outside power/knowledge as its source and author. In 'The subject and power' (1982), Foucault writes that 'My objective ... has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects ... It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word *subject*: subject to someone else's control and dependence, and tied to his (*sic*) own identity by a conscience and self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to' (Foucault, 1982, pp. 208, 212). Making discourse and representation more historical has therefore been matched, in Foucault, by an equally radical historicization of *the subject*. 'One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework' (Foucault, 1980, p. 115).

Where, then, is 'the subject' in this more discursive approach to meaning, representation and power?

Foucault's 'subject' seems to be produced through discourse in *two* different senses or places. First, the discourse itself produces 'subjects' – figures who personify the particular forms of knowledge which the discourse produces. These subjects have the attributes we would expect as these are defined by the discourse: the madman, the hysterical woman, the homosexual, the individualized criminal, and so on. These figures are specific to specific discursive regimes and historical periods. But the discourse also produces a *place for the subject* (i.e. the reader or viewer, who is also 'subjected to' discourse) from which its particular knowledge and meaning most makes sense. It is not inevitable that all individuals in a particular period will become the subjects of a particular discourse in this sense, and thus the bearers of its power/knowledge. But for them – us – to do so, they – we – must locate themselves/ourselves in the *position* from which the discourse makes most sense, and thus become its 'subjects' by 'subjecting' ourselves to its meanings, power and regulation. All discourses, then, construct **subject-positions**, from which alone they make sense.

subject-positions

This approach has radical implications for a theory of representation. For it suggests that discourses themselves construct the subject-positions from which they become meaningful and have effects. Individuals may differ as to their social class, gendered, 'racial' and ethnic characteristics (among other factors), but they will not be able to take meaning until they have identified with those positions which the discourse constructs, *subjected* themselves to its rules, and hence become the *subjects of its power/knowledge*. For example, pornography produced for men will only 'work' for women, according to this theory, if in some sense women put themselves in the position of the 'desiring male voyeur' – which is the ideal subject-position which the discourse of male pornography constructs – and look at the models from this 'masculine' discursive position. This may seem, and is, a highly contestable proposition. But let us consider an example which illustrates the argument.

5.1 How to make sense of Velasquez' *Las Meninas*

Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1970) opens with a discussion of a painting by the famous Spanish painter, Velasquez, called *Las Meninas*. It has been a topic of considerable scholarly debate and controversy. The reason I am using it here is because, as all the critics agree, the painting itself does raise certain questions about the nature of *representation*, and Foucault himself uses it to talk about these wider issues of the subject. It is these arguments which interest us here, not the question of whether Foucault's is the 'true', correct or even the definitive reading of the painting's meaning. That the painting has no one, fixed or final meaning is, indeed, one of Foucault's most powerful arguments.

The painting is unique in Velasquez' work. It was part of the Spanish court's royal collection and hung in the palace in a room which was subsequently destroyed by fire. It was dated '1656' by Velasquez' successor as court

painter. It was originally called 'The Empress with her Ladies and a Dwarf'; but by the inventory of 1666, it had acquired the title of 'A Portrait of the Infanta of Spain with her Ladies In Waiting and Servants, by the Court Painter and Palace Chamberlain Diego Velasquez'. It was subsequently called *Las Meninas* – 'The Maids of Honour'. Some argue that the painting shows Velasquez working on *Las Meninas* itself and was painted with the aid of a mirror – but this now seems unlikely. The most widely held and convincing explanation is that Velasquez was working on a full-length portrait of the King and Queen, and that it is the royal couple who are reflected in the mirror on the back wall. It is at the couple that the princess and her attendants are looking and on them that the artist's gaze appears to rest as he steps back from his canvas. The reflection artfully includes the royal couple in the picture. This is essentially the account which Foucault accepts.

ACTIVITY 9

Look at the picture carefully, while we summarize Foucault's argument.

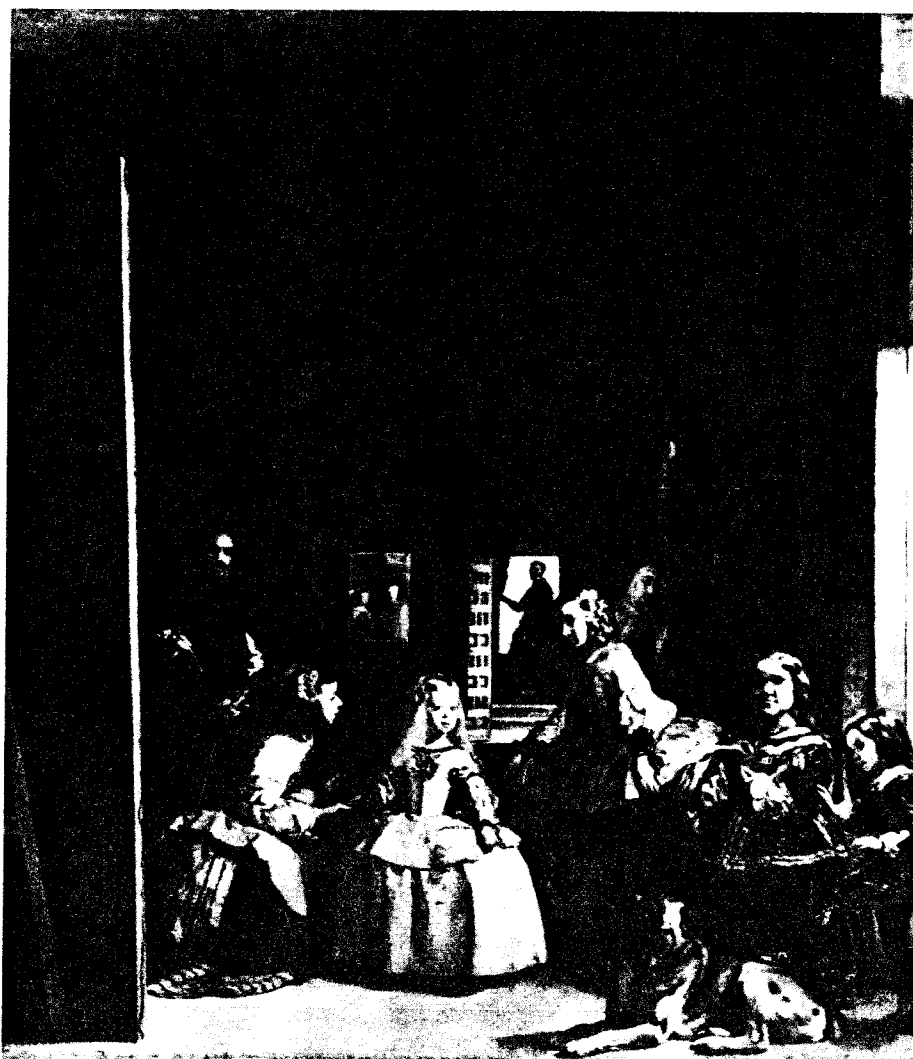


FIGURE 1.9
Diego Velasquez,
Las Meninas,
1656.

Las Meninas shows the interior of a room – perhaps the painter's studio or some other room in the Spanish Royal Palace, the Escorial. The scene, though in its deeper recesses rather dark, is bathed in light from a window on the right. 'We are looking at a picture in which the painter is in turn looking out at us,' says Foucault (1970, p. 4). To the left, looking forwards, is the painter himself, Velasquez. He is in the act of painting and his brush is raised, 'perhaps ... considering whether to add some finishing touch to the canvas' (p. 3). He is looking at his model, who is sitting in the place from which we are looking, but we cannot see who the model is because the canvas on which Velasquez is painting has its back to us, its face resolutely turned away from our gaze. In the centre of the painting stands what tradition recognizes as the little princess, the Infanta Maragarita, who has come to watch the proceedings. She is the centre of the picture we are looking at, but she is not the 'subject' of Velasquez' canvas. The Infanta has with her an 'entourage of duennas, maids of honour, courtiers and dwarfs' and her dog (p. 9). The courtiers stand behind, towards the back on the right. Her maids of honour stand on either side of her, framing her. To the right at the front are two dwarfs, one a famous court jester. The eyes of many of these figures, like that of the painter himself, are looking out towards the front of the picture at the sitters.

Who are they – the figures at whom everyone is looking but whom we cannot look at and whose portraits on the canvas we are forbidden to see? In fact, though at first we think we cannot see them, the picture tells us who they are because, behind the Infanta's head and a little to the left of the centre of the picture, surrounded by a heavy wooden frame, is a mirror; and in the mirror – at last – are reflected the sitters, who are in fact seated *in the position from which we are looking*: 'a reflection that shows us quite simply what is lacking in everyone's gaze' (p. 15). The figures reflected in the mirror are, in fact, the King, Philip IV, and his wife, Mariana. Beside the mirror, to the right of it, in the back wall, is another 'frame', but this is not a mirror reflecting forwards; it is a doorway leading *backwards* out of the room. On the stair, his feet placed on different steps, 'a man stands out in full-length silhouette'. He has just entered or is just leaving the scene and is looking at it from behind, observing what is going on in it but 'content to surprise those within without being seen himself' (p. 10).

5.2 The subject of/in representation

Who or what is *the subject* of this painting? In his comments, Foucault uses *Las Meninas* to make some general points about his theory of representation and specifically about the role of the subject:

1 'Foucault reads the painting in terms of representation and the subject' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p. 20). As well as being a painting which shows us (represents) a scene in which a portrait of the King and Queen of Spain is being painted, it is also a painting which *tells us something about how representation and the subject work*. It produces its own kind of knowledge.

Representation and the subject are the painting's underlying message – what it is about, its sub-text.

2 Clearly, representation here is *not* about a 'true' reflection or imitation of reality. Of course, the people in the painting may 'look like' the actual people in the Spanish court. But the discourse of painting in the picture is doing a great deal more than simply trying to mirror accurately what exists.

3 Everything in a sense is *visible* in the painting. And yet, what it is 'about' – its meaning – depends on how we 'read' it. *It is as much constructed around what you can't see as what you can.* You can't see what is being painted on the canvas, though this seems to be the point of the whole exercise. You can't see what everyone is looking at, which is the sitters, unless we assume it is a reflection of them in the mirror. They are both in and not in the picture. Or rather, they are present through a kind of substitution. We cannot see them because they are not directly represented: but their 'absence' is represented – *mirrored* through their reflection in the ~~mirror at the back~~. The meaning of the picture is produced, Foucault argues, through this complex inter-play between *presence* (what you see, the visible) and *absence* (what you can't see, what has displaced it within the frame). Representation works as much through what is *not* shown, as through what is.

4 In fact, a number of substitutions or displacements seem to be going on here. For example, the 'subject' and centre of the painting we are looking at seems to be the Infanta. But the 'subject' or centre is also, of course, the sitters – the King and Queen – whom we can't see but whom the others are looking at. You can tell this from the fact that the mirror on the wall in which the King and Queen are reflected is also almost exactly at the centre of the field of vision of the picture. So the Infanta and the Royal Couple, in a sense, share the place of the centre as the principal 'subjects' of the painting. It all depends on where you are looking from – in towards the scene from where you, the spectator, is sitting or outwards from the scene, from the position of the people in the picture. If you accept Foucault's argument, then there are *two* subjects to the painting and *two* centres. And the composition of the picture – its discourse – forces us to oscillate between these two 'subjects' without ever finally deciding which one to identify with. Representation in the painting seems firm and clear – everything in place. But our vision, the way we *look* at the picture, oscillates between two centres, two subjects, two positions of looking, two meanings. Far from being finally resolved into some absolute truth which is *the* meaning of the picture, the discourse of the painting quite deliberately keeps us in this state of suspended attention, in this oscillating process of looking. Its meaning is always in the process of emerging, yet any final meaning is constantly deferred.

5 You can tell a great deal about how the picture works as a discourse, and what it means, by following the orchestration of *looking* – who is looking at what or whom. *Our* look – the eyes of the person looking at the picture, the spectator – follows the relationships of looking as represented in the picture.

We know the figure of the Infanta is important because her attendants are looking at her. But we know that someone even more important is sitting in front of the scene whom we can't see, because many figures – the Infanta, the jester, the painter himself – are looking at them! So the spectator (who is also 'subjected' to the discourse of the painting) is doing two kinds of looking. Looking at the scene from the position outside, in front of, the picture. And at the same time, looking out of the scene, by *identifying with* the looking being done by the figures in the painting. Projecting ourselves into the subjects of the painting help us as spectators to see, to 'make sense' of it. We take up the positions indicated by the discourse, identify with them, subject ourselves to its meanings, and become its 'subjects'.

6 It is critical for Foucault's argument that the painting does not have a completed meaning. It only means something in relation to the spectator who is looking at it. The spectator completes the meaning of the picture. Meaning is therefore constructed in the dialogue between the painting and the spectator. Velasquez, of course, could not know who would subsequently occupy the position of the spectator. Nevertheless, the whole 'scene' of the painting had to be laid out in relation to that ideal point in front of the painting from which *any* spectator must look if the painting is to make sense. The spectator, we might say, is painted into position in front of the picture. In this sense, the discourse produces a *subject-position* for the spectator-subject. For the painting to work, the spectator, whoever he or she may be, must first 'subject' himself/herself to the painting's discourse and, in this way, become the painting's ideal viewer, the producer of its meanings – its 'subject'. This is what is meant by saying that the discourse constructs the spectator as a subject – by which we mean that it constructs a place for the subject-spectator who is looking at and making sense of it.

7 Representation therefore occurs from at least three positions in the painting. First of all there is us, the spectator, whose 'look' puts together and unifies the different elements and relationships in the picture into an overall meaning. This subject must be there for the painting to make sense, but he/she is not represented in the painting.

Then there is the painter who painted the scene. He is 'present' in two places at once, since he must at one time have been standing where we are now sitting, in order to paint the scene, but he has then put himself into (represented himself in) the picture, looking back towards that point of view where we, the spectator, have taken his place. We may also say that the scene makes sense and is pulled together in relation to the court figure standing on the stair at the back, since he too surveys it all but – like us and like the painter – from somewhat outside it.

8 Finally, consider the mirror on the back wall. If it were a 'real' mirror, it should now be representing or reflecting *us*, since we are standing in that position in front of the scene to which everyone is looking and from which everything makes sense. But it does not mirror us, it shows *in our place* the King and Queen of Spain. Somehow the discourse of the painting positions us

in the place of the Sovereign! You can imagine what fun Foucault had with this substitution.

Foucault argues that it is clear from the way the discourse of representation works in the painting that it *must* be looked at and made sense of from that one subject-position in front of it from which we, the spectators, are looking. This is also the point-of-view from which a camera would have to be positioned in order to film the scene. And, lo and behold, the person whom Velasquez chooses to 'represent' sitting in this position is The Sovereign – 'master of all he surveys' – who is both the 'subject of' the painting (what it is about) and the 'subject in' the painting – the one whom the discourse sets in place, but who, simultaneously, makes sense of it and understands it all by a look of supreme mastery.

6 Conclusion: representation, meaning and language reconsidered

We started with a fairly simple definition of representation. Representation is the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning. Already, this definition carries the important premise that things – objects, people, events, in the world – do not have in themselves any fixed, final or true meaning. It is us – in society, within human cultures – who make things mean, who signify. Meanings, consequently, will always change, from one culture or period to another. There is no guarantee that every object in one culture will have an equivalent meaning in another, precisely because cultures differ, sometimes radically, from one another in their codes – the ways they carve up, classify and assign meaning to the world. So one important idea about representation is the acceptance of a degree of *cultural relativism* between one culture and another, a certain lack of equivalence, and hence the need for *translation* as we move from the mind-set or conceptual universe of one culture or another.

We call this the *constructionist* approach to representation, contrasting it with both the *reflective* and the *intentional* approaches. Now, if culture is a process, a practice, how does it work? In the *constructionist perspective*, representation involves making meaning by forging links between three different orders of things: what we might broadly call the world of things, people, events and experiences; the conceptual world – the mental concepts we carry around in our heads; and the signs, arranged into languages, which 'stand for' or communicate these concepts. Now, if you have to make a link between systems which are not the same, and fix these at least for a time so that other people know what, in one system, corresponds to what in another system, then there must be something which allows us to translate between them – telling us what word to use for what concept, and so on. Hence the notion of *codes*.

Producing meaning depends on the practice of interpretation, and interpretation is sustained by us actively using the code – *encoding*, putting things into the code – and by the person at the other end interpreting or *decoding* the meaning (Hall, 1980). But note, that, because meanings are always changing and slipping, codes operate more like social conventions than like fixed laws or unbreakable rules. As meanings shift and slide, so inevitably the codes of a culture imperceptibly change. The great advantage of the concepts and classifications of the culture which we carry around with us in our heads is that they enable us to *think* about things, whether they are there, present, or not; indeed, whether they ever existed or not. There are concepts for our fantasies, desires and imaginings as well as for so-called 'real' objects in the material world. And the advantage of language is that our thoughts about the world need not remain exclusive to us, and silent. We can translate them into language, make them 'speak', through the use of signs which stand for them – and thus talk, write, communicate about them to others.

Gradually, then, we complexified what we meant by representation. It came to be less and less the straightforward thing we assumed it to be at first – which is why we need *theories* to explain it. We looked at two versions of constructionism – that which concentrated on how *language* and *signification* (the use of signs in language) works to produce *meanings*, which after Saussure and Barthes we called *semiotics*; and that, following Foucault, which concentrated on how *discourse* and *discursive practices* produce knowledge. I won't run through the finer points in these two approaches again, since you can go back to them in the main body of the chapter and refresh your memory. In semiotics, you will recall the importance of signifier/signified, *langue/parole* and 'myth', and how the marking of difference and binary oppositions are crucial for meaning. In the *discursive* approach, you will recall discursive formations, power/knowledge, the idea of a 'regime of truth', the way discourse also produces the subject and defines the *subject-positions* from which knowledge proceeds and indeed, the return of questions about 'the subject' to the field of representation. In several examples, we tried to get you to work with these theories and to apply them. There will be further debate about them in subsequent chapters.

Notice that the chapter does *not* argue that the *discursive* approach overturned everything in the *semiotic* approach. Theoretical development does not usually proceed in this linear way. There was much to learn from Saussure and Barthes, and we are still discovering ways of fruitfully applying their insights – without necessarily swallowing everything they said. We offered you some critical thoughts on the subject. There is a great deal to learn from Foucault and the *discursive* approach, but by no means everything it claims is correct and the theory is open to, and has attracted, many criticisms. Again, in later chapters, as we encounter further developments in the theory of representation, and see the strengths and weaknesses of these positions applied in practice, we will come to appreciate more fully that we are only at the beginning of the exciting task of exploring this process of meaning

construction, which is at the heart of culture, to its full depths. What we have offered here is, we hope, a relatively clear account of a set of complex, and as yet tentative, ideas in an unfinished project.

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READING A: Norman Bryson, 'Language, reflection and still life'

With Cotán, too, the images have as their immediate function the separation of the viewer from the previous mode of seeing [...]: they decondition the habitual and abolish the endless eclipsing and fatigue of worldly vision, replacing these with brilliance. The enemy is a mode of seeing which thinks it knows in advance what is worth looking at and what is not; against that, the image presents the constant surprise of things seen for the first time. Sight is taken back to a [primordial] stage before it learned how to scotomise [break up/divide] the visual field, how to screen out the unimportant and not see, but scan. In place of the abbreviated forms for which the world scans, Cotán supplies forms that are articulated at immense length, forms so copious or prolix that one cannot see where or how to begin to simplify them. They offer no inroads for reduction because they omit nothing. Just at the point where the eye thinks it knows the form and can afford to skip, the image proves that in fact the eye had not understood at all what it was about to discard.

The relation proposed in Cotán between the viewer and the foodstuffs so meticulously displayed seems to involve, paradoxically, no reference to appetite or to the function of sustenance which becomes coincidental; it might be described as anorexic, taking this word in its literal and Greek sense as meaning 'without desire'. All Cotán's still lifes are rooted in the outlook of monasticism, specifically the monasticism of the Carthusians [monks], whose order Cotán joined as a lay brother in Toledo in 1603. What distinguishes the Carthusian rule is its stress on solitude over communal life: the monks live in individual cells, where they pray, study – and eat – alone, meeting only for the night office, morning mass and afternoon vespers. There is total abstinence from meat, and on Fridays and other fast days the diet is bread and water. Absent from Cotán's work is any conception of nourishment as involving the conviviality of the meal – the sharing of hospitality [...]. The unvarying stage of his paintings is never the kitchen but always the *cantarero*, a cooling-space where for preservation the foods are often hung on strings (piled together,

or in contact with a surface, they would decay in quickly). Placed in a kitchen, next to plates and knives, bowls and pitchers, the objects would inevitably point towards their consumption at table, but the *cantarero* maintains the idea of the objects as separable from, dissociated from, their function as food. In *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* [Figure 1.3] no-one can touch the suspended quince or cabbage without disturbing them and setting them rocking in space; their motionlessness is the mark of human absence, distance from the hand that reaches to eat; and it renders them immaculate. Hanging on strings, the quince and the cabbage lack the weight known to the hand. Their weightlessness disowns such intimate knowledge. Having none of the familiarity that comes from touch, and divorced from the idea of consumption, the objects take on a value that is nothing to do with their role as nourishment.

What replaces their interest as sustenance is their interest as mathematical form. Like many painters of his period in Spain, Cotán has a highly developed sense of geometrical order; but where the ideas of sphere, ellipse and cone are used for example in El Greco to assist in organising pictorial composition, here they are explored almost for their own sake. One can think of *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* as an experiment in the kinds of transformations that are explored in the branch of mathematics known as topology. We begin on the left with the quince, a pure sphere revolving on its axis. Moving to the right, the sphere seems to peel off its boundary and disintegrate into a ball of concentric shells revolving around the same vertical axis. Moving to the melon the sphere becomes an ellipse, from which a segment has been cut; a part of the segment is independently shown as a continuous boundary in the corrugated form of the cucumber. The curve described by all these objects taken together is not at all informal but precisely logarithmic; it follows a series of harmonic or musical proportions with the vertical co-ordinate of the curve exactly marked by the strings. And it is a complex curve, not just the arc of a graph on two-dimensional surface. In relation to the quince the cabbage appears to come forward slightly; the melon is further forward than the quince, the melon slice projects out beyond the ledge, and the cucumber overhangs it still further. The arc is