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Introduction

Is there really any need for another study of Bach's Passions, particularly when these (and the Matthew Passion in particular) have inspired nearly two centuries of critical literature? When I first began to consider this project, the one approach that did not seem sufficiently explored was the detailed and comparative analysis of both Passions together. However, the customary methods of approaching Bach's choral works – surveying the compositional history, verbal texts, musical forms, styles and genres – soon seemed inadequate in light of the sheer emotional and narrative scale of the Passions. Perhaps this is partly because they relate to a story that is seminal to Western history. But this could hardly be the entire reason, given that the Gospel narratives have been set so many times to music. Bach's music interacts with the various levels of text in a way that seems to go beyond merely a successful presentation of the story and its attendant affects.

A complex of questions soon began to dominate my thought on the Passions: both of them originated in the relatively local purpose of furnishing the Leipzig liturgical year (they were heard in Leipzig only intermittently between 1724 and 1750), and the vast majority of recent research has centred on details of their composition and performance, together with issues of their original theological purpose and meaning. Yet both Passions have found a deep resonance in a wide range of historical and cultural contexts, most utterly foreign to Bach's Leipzig.[1] To many, this would be because they are of universal value, transcending their original,

[1] In this study I do not consider other Passions, such as the Luke Passion, that have at some point been attributed to Bach; nor those that undoubtedly existed but are largely lost, such as the Mark Passion, or an earlier Weimar Passion oratorio whose traces may survive in the two extant Passions. An examination of the way inauthentic works have been received as Bach's would be an extremely interesting study in itself, and some issues of this kind are already covered in Daniel R. Melamed's *Hearing Bach's Passions* (Oxford University Press, 2005); on the evidence for an earlier Weimar Passion oratorio, see Andreas Glöckner, 'Neue Spuren zu Bachs "Weimarer" Passion', *Bericht über die Wissenschaftliche Konferenz anlässlich des 69. Bach-Festes der Neuen Bachgesellschaft, Leipzig, 29. und 30. März 1994 – Passionsmusiken im Umfeld Johann Sebastian Bachs/Bach unter den Diktaturen 1933–1945 und 1945–1989*, ed. Hans-Joachim Schulze, Ulrich Leisinger and Peter Wollny (Hildesheim, Zürich, New York: Olms, 1995), pp. 33–46.

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local, purposes. But how then could one draw these works into a focus that reconciles their supposed universality with the local particulars of Bach's Leipzig, which remain the focus of so much scholarship? On the other hand, if the universalist thesis is simply mistaken, what remains as the motivation for the intensive scholarly interest in the historical details, something that is hardly evident in relation to the numerous Passion settings by Bach's contemporaries?

To begin with, simply decreeing that works such as Bach's Passions are 'universal' does not necessarily do them justice, even for their most fervent supporters. For the more universal a human artefact is purported to be, the closer it begins to seem to a phenomenon of natural science and thus something to be interpreted at one remove from human concerns. Seeing the Passions more as 'particulars' surely gives us more of a chance of learning how they might resonate with certain aspects of the human condition, shaded as these will inevitably be by a range of cultural and historical variables. Nevertheless, the habit of proclaiming works of this kind to be of universal significance might in itself be telling, as evidence of a particular culture, albeit one of very long duration and broad geographical application. The overall aim of this project – perhaps one that is impossibly ambitious – is to try and understand Bach's Passions in relation to the wider 'particular' field in which they have been attributed some degree of universal significance. This field is, I suggest, *modernity*, a broad mental and cultural attitude that – in some threads at least – links Bach's musical world to the present. My study is 'traditionally' historicist in assuming that Bach's music is best understood within its cultural context, but I am obviously interpreting the notion of 'cultural context' far more broadly and ambitiously than would normally seem sensible for music in the Western tradition. Although I am by no means ignoring the circumstances and presuppositions surrounding the composition, performance and reception of Bach's Passions in Leipzig, I suggest that the context that really matters relates to the mindset that would see these works as significant well beyond their original purposes. But even this wider context does not necessarily bring values that are relevant 'under any skies', even if it may well appear so at first sight.

Many would see the modern world as itself universal, because it has acquired a sort of timelessness through its obvious achievements in the progressive refinement and continuous expansion of knowledge. One fundamental tendency of modernity – to be sceptical towards past authority and to think of itself as always improving on the past – might well have led us to forget where its roots lay, how it is the product of various

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historical processes. Yet current threats to a development that has spread well beyond its origins in the Western world might encourage us to think again. Modernity – whether 'universal' or not – faces serious challenges from a number of angles: from cultures reacting against it with a pre-modern zeal (ones that could, ironically, only have been engendered within the context of encroaching modernity); or from the obvious decline in the natural environment that is caused by the excesses of the modern world. Moreover, there is also the question of modernity's own completion and success, evident in the fall of the Eastern bloc, the untrammelled flow of capital, and the ubiquity of the free market (the almost total breakdown of this system just as I finish this book does not necessarily mean that a new one is about to emerge). The dominance of free capitalism may – in some circumstances at least – have facilitated a transformation into what is sometimes termed a 'postmodern' condition, which shares much with its predecessor, but which distances itself from the values and dynamics of modernity proper in several major respects. After all, if certain traits of modernity become ubiquitous (such as a system whose values can only be measured in terms of market forces), perhaps its sense of restless enquiry and quest for transforming what is at hand begin to dissipate. Perhaps elements from the past and from diverse cultures are now so effortlessly accommodated within the system that they no longer provide any challenge to our assumptions; they are merely a selection of the many components of a self-regulating mass culture, their value entirely defined by their current price.[2] In such a context, Bach's Passions would no longer seem to possess any universal significance; they would merely represent a particular 'lifestyle choice', their validity defined entirely by their level of popularity. Such a situation is surely more than a mere possibility today. In all, then, I do not see any advantage in valuing any music on account of its 'universality', since even if a cultural product were somehow proved to be universal, this quality would by no means

[2] This is what Fredric Jameson calls the 'cultural logic of late capitalism'; see Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1991). As Charles Whitney suggests in his study of Francis Bacon and the beginnings of modernity, the very suggestion of a postmodern condition brings with it the possibility that modernity as an epoch may be passing away; see his *Francis Bacon and Modernity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 9. However, as Jameson later notes, many who approve of the 'completion' of modernity and glory in the dominance of mass culture, the information revolution and the globalized, free-market economy, do not use the term 'postmodernity' but merely distinguish their own modernity (one of many alternatives, in a world of unconstricted consumer choice) from the 'detestable older kind'; Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity – Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 12.

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guarantee its survival without some effort on our part. Indeed, it is fatally easy to forget the need to keep any of our 'universals' alive through continual attention to their implications and the cultivation of an ever-developing practice.

What is modernity?

The concept of modernity, which I am trying both to define and co-opt in analysing Bach's Passions, might seem unorthodox within the context of music history. Musicology has generally avoided the term as a broad historical category and tends to associate the 'modern' with the specific stylistic category of 'modernism', as applied to progressive music from the late nineteenth century to the last decades of the twentieth. The rest of music history often falls into the long-trusted art-historical categories of medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, Classical and Romantic, or, in more recent studies, simply into centuries.[3] Modernism is a highly important category of art, one that often seems to intensify aspects of the broader modernity (e.g. formalism, autonomy, a radical 'newness') but which can also take modernity's sceptical attitude towards the past to new extremes of negation. It may well be that musicologists have avoided engagement with 'modernity' and all the broader cultural issues that this implies precisely because of the autonomy that Western music has acquired through that very modernity – namely, a sense that music stands apart from all other considerations, that it is somehow more 'true' than the messy contingencies of politics, society and, specifically, cultural history.[4]

Historians, on the other hand, have long used the broad categorization by which the Ancient World is separated from the Modern World by the Middle Ages.[5] Modernity, in the broad and rather unspecific sense of a 'Modern Age' (which comes closer to the German concept of *Die Neuzeit* than *Die Moderne*, which is a later subset of the former), has its beginnings in the era of the Renaissance and Reformation and is fed by the scientific

[3] See Tim Carter and John Butt (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), Preface, pp. xv–xviii.

[4] See Karol Berger and Anthony Newcomb (eds.), *Music and the Aesthetics of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), Preface, p. ix.

[5] Jürgen Habermas traces this conception back to Hegel's designation of the 'new age' ('Neuzeit') coinciding with the Renaissance, Reformation and discovery of the New World, all straddling the years around 1500; Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity – Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity, 1987), pp. 5–6.

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revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[6] Culturally, it surely has some real presence in Montaigne, Shakespeare and Cervantes, and in the philosophy of Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza and Locke. It reaches both a peak and a crisis at the time of the Enlightenment and French Revolution and thereafter forges ahead with the Industrial Revolution and the increasing dominance of capitalism.[7] It is therefore tempting to divide it into three historical phases, the first dating from the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth; the second, from the time of the French Revolution to the late nineteenth century; and the final phase characterized by modernism (these latter two coincide with the German *Moderne*).[8] The second phase coincides with the type of music that is traditionally termed 'Classical' and 'Romantic'.[9]

However, it is impossible to give the concept of modernity hard and fast chronological markers. After all, is there really such a pronounced change at the time of the Renaissance and Reformation, and does this period really have more in common with, say, the nineteenth century (presumably within the same 'era') than it does with the world an equivalent amount of time before it (back in the 'Middle Ages')? Furthermore, different national traditions might prioritize different starting points: the Reformation, for instance,[10] or Descartes's concept of the self-conscious, reflexive ego, or the political revolutions of the late eighteenth century. The precise bounds of modernity are clearly dependent on the sort of narrative one adopts to explain it, as if it contains the seeds of a story that

[6] The notion that modernity began in the late fifteenth century has been a mainstream historical view in English-language history since at least the publication of Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*, vol. 8, *Heroic Ages* (Oxford University Press, 1954); see pp. 106–25, esp. pp. 115–16.

[7] For Karl Marx, modernity was simply capitalism itself; see Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 80.

[8] The model Michel Foucault consistently followed in his writings makes a further distinction between the Renaissance and the 'Classical age' (from c. 1650 to 1800), which is then followed by modernity proper. For a good survey of the ways in which modernity has been divided into periods or phases, see Barry Smart, 'Modernity, Postmodernity and the Present', in Bryan S. Turner (ed.), *Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity* (London: Sage, 1990), pp. 14–30.

[9] This is the music related to 'our modernity' by Karol Berger, *Bach's Cycle, Mozart's Arrow – An Essay on the Origins of Musical Modernity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 5, 14.

[10] The Reformation became a strong feature of German conceptions of modernity, under the influence of Hegel's philosophy of history, particularly in the way the latter is grounded on the transfer of spiritual authority from the church to the individual. This conception was soon taken further in German thought on art by the work of Jacob Burckhardt. See also Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 31.

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can be unfolded in several ways.[11] We should therefore beware of false continuities and also of the sense that each era must have a 'face' to which everything must conform.[12]

Modernity is perhaps better defined as a bundle of attitudes or mindsets that are only secondarily associated with specific eras and places. We might be able to recognize that elements of it might well appear in periods long before any putative 'Modern' age.[13] While the Renaissance, with its restoration of a lost antiquity, might not be considered 'modern' in itself, its new oppositional mechanism – beating the immediate past with the stick of the ancient world – could well have been significant, since this was something that was soon to be engaged against the very antiquity it previously envied. Moreover, pre-modern, anti-modern or simply non-modern attitudes might enjoy healthy traditions within any age or society categorized as 'modern'. I would suggest that modernity is most productive when it interacts with traditions that persist in the societies it affects or which it, in turn, discovers in other cultures. If there is any consistency in the mental conditions defining modernity, these could nonetheless produce entirely different results in different circumstances. While I suggest that chronological boundaries are only secondary in defining modernity, one of the foremost 'mental conditions' of modernity is the notion of progress and the development of human knowledge and society in earthly, chronological, time. Thus it is impossible to disassociate these conditions entirely from the periods in which they developed, since such conditions would have brought a renewed self-consciousness of time and historical change.

Well-worn theories associate the mindset of modernity with various developments in the way the cosmos is believed to cohere: foremost is perhaps the concept of 'disenchantment' (Max Weber's famous formulation), a retreat from the magical significance of the world and human

[11] Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, pp. 31–3. For Jameson, modernity is a narrative category rather than a concept as such: see p. 40.

[12] See Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 251, and Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (London: Routledge, 1972), p. 9.

[13] A classic example of this approach to modernity (or rather that which is termed 'Enlightenment') is Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (*Dialektic der Aufklärung*, 1944), translated by John Cumming (London and New York: Verso, 1997). The idea of modernity as an attitude was also something emerging in the late work of Foucault, something he characterized as an ironic heroization of the present. This means that the high valuation of the present in modernity is intimately tied to a desperate desire to imagine it other than it is. See Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves, 'Critique and Enlightenment: Michel Foucault on "Was ist Aufklärung"', in Norman Geras and Robert Wokler (eds.), *The Enlightenment and Modernity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 184–203, esp. p. 196.

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practices, the 'extirpation of animism'.[14] With this came the view that the cosmos was not necessarily constructed entirely for mankind's benefit, something that brought a reaction against customary beliefs, particularly against the Augustinian view (reinforced by Luther) that evil exists in the world entirely as a reflex of the original sin of mankind. Now a new form of human initiative would be required to render the natural world amenable to the purposes of the 'disembedded' human. For Hans Blumenberg, 'Die Neuzeit' began when Western man had to take up the 'burden of self-assertion'. With the new development of scientific method, it became necessary to adapt man to the impersonal reality uncovered by repeatable experimentation. The distinction between reality and the human condition also brought with it the contrary tendency: to adapt reality to the needs and purposes of man.[15]

If the pre-modern attitude would see human experience as subordinate to and dependent on a greater reality beyond the world, the modern will tend to associate the real with what is directly experienced and explicitly created within the world; any reality beyond what can be inferred through the emerging methodologies of science is simply unknowable. Moreover, any knowledge whatever remains provisional, to be improved and expanded *ad infinitum*. Progress has no absolute ends or limits in sight. Something of the excitement at the opening of new horizons is captured in the print of the Pillars of Hercules on the title page of Francis Bacon's *Instauratio Magna* of 1620, as Blumenberg notes.[16] One gets the sense of the possibility of breaking out of an enchanted circle of interconnected elements – the 'ready-made' quality of the pre-modern world[17] – and that, having chosen a direction in which to sail, the journey could be potentially endless.

Religious beliefs are not necessarily to be excluded within the modern mindset, rather they are no longer seamlessly connected with whatever happens in the empirical realm, and can inhere in a different sphere, even within personal experience. The fate of religion is symptomatic of a more general separation of the various forms of order, belief and specialization

[14] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 5.

[15] Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (*Die Legitimät der Neuzeit*, 2nd rev. edn 1976), trans. by Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 1983), pp. 137–8, 209. I borrow the term 'disembedding' from Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 49–67, where it is related particularly to the way the individual becomes distinct from received notions of community and society.

[16] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 340.

[17] See Andrew Bowie, *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 48.

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within modernity. Hence, in modernity, one could be active as a rational scientist while attuned to the feelings and traditional practice of religion, without necessarily feeling the need to reconcile the two; religion simply becomes a private matter, with its own rules and practices, which do not necessarily connect or interact with all other aspects of life. In Bach's time, the notion of religion and reason representing two separate spheres of knowledge and truth was already evident in Pascal's unfinished writings, and such a separation was recommended by Johannes Bredenburg as a way of protecting revealed religion from the threat of radical atheism that was inferred from Spinoza's writings. The most robust attempts at reconciliation were made by Gottfried Leibniz: to him (and perhaps Bach, too), all the contradictory elements would somehow cohere once they were viewed from God's point of view. Bach's Leipzig compatriot Johann Christoph Gottsched (who clearly embraced a much more fashionable aesthetic position than Bach) took a moderate stance that still left open the possibility of magic and the work of the Devil, but did not lay any particular stress on this.[18]

The coexistence of practices that are in their strongest sense contradictory – even within a single human subject – invariably gives each a new, specifically autonomous, quality. The ongoing, unlimited development of each could engender a new sense of openness in terms of both external reality and the human mind.[19] Pragmatically, the separation of activities could also be exercised in the name of efficiency, something most obviously demonstrated in the division of labour necessary for industrialized production. In such ways, modernity typically drives a wedge between the natural world and human civilization, by which humankind is progressively alienated from the secure and harmonious place in the natural order that our cultural memories always seem to evoke. Hans Robert Jauss usefully relates this line of thinking to a trajectory leading from Rousseau to Adorno, suggesting an intellectual epoch characterized by a profound ambivalence towards modernity (a dialectic that is born of nothing but modernity itself), stretching from the eighteenth to the twentieth century.[20] By this token, 'full' modernity would belong to the era beginning just after Bach. My approach is to suggest, rather,

[18] See Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment – Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. pp. 355, 372, 514.

[19] Eric Voegelin, *Collected Works*, vol. 23, *Religion and the Rise of Modernity*, vol. 5 of the *History of Political Ideas*, ed., with an introduction, by James L. Wiser (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1998), pp. 136–7.

[20] Hans Robert Jauss, 'Der literarische Prozess des Modernismus von Rousseau bis Adorno', in Reinhart Herzog and Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), *Epochenschwelle und Epochenbewußtsein* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987), pp. 243–68, trans. by Lisa C. Roetzel as 'The Literary Process of Modernism from Rousseau to Adorno', *Cultural Critique* 11 (1988–9), 27–61.

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that such chronological distinctions are not so absolute, and that Bach, and much of the environment to which he belongs, are of specific interest because of the way modern and pre-modern elements interact within them.

The critique that modernity continually turns upon itself partly derives from its ongoing suspicion of unquestioned reliance on past authority. If this represents an antipathy towards tradition in general it is also clear that modernity has spawned many of its own traditions (not least that of being suspicious towards the past).[21] This was certainly the case with the Reformation, which overthrew recent tradition in the process of attempting to restore what it saw as the worldview of early Christianity. Luther's turn against the established church and towards the self-assertion of the individual through personal faith was articulated in the service of the Augustinian doctrine of original sin and the sense that all that is wrong with the world stems from this.[22] Very few of the components of the Reformation (as a 'proto-modernity') were actually new – there had been many forms of anti-ecclesiastical spirituality before – but the fact that they rose to institutional level in their own right did indeed produce a new situation, one that established a pluralism that could become the bedrock for a diversity of beliefs and various degrees of scepticism.[23]

Roughly simultaneous with the type of self-assertion that was emerging with the Reformation was the breakdown of the medieval chivalric tradition and the complex customs and interactions of various classes, dominated by aristocratic and military etiquette. Cervantes' satire on the old order, *Don Quixote*, clearly demonstrates how this had irrevocably

[21] The suspicion of past authority is obvious throughout the work of Descartes and it is also strongly evident in the work of Thomas Hobbes; see his *Leviathan, or, Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil* (1651), ed. by Nelle Fuller (Chicago, Auckland, London: Encylopaedia Britannica, 2nd edn, 1990), especially Chapters 21 and 46. See also Robert P. Kraynak, *History and Modernity in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 28–31, and John J. Joughin, 'Shakespeare, Modernity and the Aesthetic: Art, Truth and Judgement in *The Winter's Tale*', in Hugh Grady (ed.), *Shakespeare and Modernity – Early Modern to Millennium* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 61–84, esp. p. 78. Eduardo Mendieta, paraphrasing Habermas, aptly suggests that 'the tradition of modernity is the critique of tradition for the sake of tradition'; see Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality – Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, edited, with an introduction, by Eduardo Mendieta (Oxford: Polity, 2002), pp. 16–17.

[22] The notion of humans as being guilty by virtue of their very existence is still very strongly evident in much of the text of the Matthew Passion, particularly in chorales stressing man's guilt, e.g. 'Ich bins, ich sollte büßen' (10); 'Was ist die Ursach aller solcher Plagen?' (19); 'O Mensch, bewein' (29).

[23] Voegelin, *Religion and the Rise of Modernity*, pp. 134–6.

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declined by the early seventeenth century.[24] What is less obvious is what the disintegration in this order actually led to, although it clearly left a space for new ways of defining the self. Some commentators point to the steady breakdown of the assumption of resemblance and interconnectedness between all facets and dimensions of the world and universe (a central target of Cervantes' satire). This has been most famously theorized by Foucault in recent times, but was already clearly central to Descartes's critique of inherited modes of thought: 'Whenever people notice some similarity between two things, they are in the habit of ascribing to the one what they find true of the other, even when the two are not in that respect similar.'[25] The issue of resemblance – and the interconnectedness of all elements of the world – is particularly important in relation to a study of the Bach Passions, since many analyses will claim specific connections between aspects of the music and theological concepts. If it is plausible that Bach intended or intuited such connections, this would imply a pronounced pre-modern attitude in his mindset. More significantly, the fact that many scholars so enthusiastically embrace such connections shows the extent to which pre-modern thinking is still an essential component of our contemporary world. Indeed, the concept of resemblance has undergone many forms of revival within even the strongest eras of modernity, most significantly in various forms of musical Romanticism.

If, in one sense, modernity led to the sense of independent development in an infinite number of directions, there was also the contrary tendency to imagine that all such diversity could be comprehended as a whole by being brought under a single, quasi-mathematical system. As Descartes suggested, if things can be represented by a system that no longer betrays any direct resemblance to that which it represents, then such a system could translate everything into a neutralized, objective form of representation.[26] Modernity is thus frequently related to the development of

[24] For an analysis of *Don Quixote* and its relation to modernity, see Anthony J. Cascardi, *The Subject of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 72–124.

[25] René Descartes, *Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii* (c. 1628), Rule 1, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 9. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things – An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (unattributed translation of *Les Mots et les choses*, 1966), (New York: Vintage, 1994). See also Dalia Judovitz, *Subjectivity and Representation in Descartes: the Origins of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 41. Judovitz is sceptical of reductionism on the part of both Foucault and Descartes, observing that writers from Plato to Montaigne were well aware of the way resemblance could produce illusion, and suggesting that Foucault merely relied on Descartes's approach, which itself lacked a systematic critique of resemblance.

[26] Judovitz, *Subjectivity and Representation*, p. 48.

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