

METADATA OF  
THE ORDER OF THINGS  
(PREFACE, PP. XVII–XXVII)

# QUANTATATIVE METADATA

TITLE	The Order of Things (Preface, pp. xvi-xxvi)
AUTHOR	Michel Foucault
DATE OF RE- PUBLISHING	2001
TEXT TYPE	Preface
LENGTH	10 pages (xvii-xxvii)
STRUCTURE	Continuous prose with embedded quotations

# DESCRIPTIVE METADATA

TOPIC	The limits of systems of order and classification.
MAIN SOURCE REFERENCED	Borges, “The Chinese Encyclopaedia”
SUPPORTING MOTIFS	Table (tabula), language, heterotopia, epistemic rupture.
TONE	Analytical, ironic, self-aware.
VOICE	First-person reflection, abstract theorizing.
INTERTEXTUALITY	Borges, Roussel, Chinese encyclopaedia, aphasiac example.

# INTERPRETIVE METADATA

## EXPLICIT AIM

To question the “naturalness” of our systems of order.

## IMPLICIT AIM

To destabilize Western epistemic confidence; expose the constructedness of rationality.

## PHILOSOPHICAL POSITION

Anti-humanist; structuralist; skeptical of universality.

## SPATIAL METAPHOR

“Table” as surface where knowledge is organized.

## IMPLICIT ANXIETY

The fear of disorder, aphasia, and meaning collapse.

# INTERPRETIVE METADATA

CULTURAL  
PROJECTION

“China” as Western fantasy of  
spatial order and otherness.

MEDIUM  
AWARENESS

Written language as both tool  
and trap of thought.

# IMPLICIT METADATA

“...the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the **exotic charm** of another system of thought, is the **limitation of our own**, the stark impossibility of thinking that.” (Foucault, 2001, p. xvii).

## WESTERN SELF- REFLECTION AND EXOTICISM

Foucault’s description of the “Chinese encyclopaedia” as a civilisation moulded by rigid spatiality and ritual order exemplifies the lure of Orientalism, capturing the gaze of Western readers through the spectacle of an exotic world.

This rhetorical device illustrates the core of Foucault’s critique. Its absurd taxonomy of animals reveals that the classification of knowledge relies on arbitrary conventions, projected here onto a supposedly “mysterious” Chinese culture, rather than on the universal logic that Western readers tend to assume to be self-evident.

# IMPLICIT METADATA

“*Yet, though language can spread them before us, it can do so only in **an unthinkable space.***”  
(Foucault, 2001, p. xviii).

## COLLAPSE OF REPRESENTATION

In Foucault’s view, the act of naming no longer guarantees knowledge of the world it describes; words have become detached from things, leaving only a surface of signs that endlessly refer to one another.

The bridge that once connected thought and being has collapsed into what he calls an “unthinkable space”, a realm where order disintegrates and meaning hovers, suspended without foundation.

# IMPLICIT METADATA

*“It appears that certain **aphasiacs**, ...splitting up things that are identical, superimposing different criteria, frenziedly beginning all over again, becoming more and more disturbed, and **teetering** finally on the **brink of anxiety**.”* (Foucault, 2001, p. xviii).

## VIOLENCE OF ORDER

For Foucault, the inability of the aphasiac to arrange differently coloured skeins of wool into patterns reveals the fragility of the very structures that make meaning possible. Classification is not a neutral instrument of understanding but a disciplinary act that draws invisible boundaries between the normal and the abnormal, the same and the heterogeneous.

In the attempt to restore order, the violent gesture ultimately crystallises into anxiety. Madness is not the failure of reason but a by-product of the very impulse that drives classification.

# IMPLICIT METADATA

*“...man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and that he will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form.” (Foucault, 2001, p. xxvi).*

## BIRTH OF ‘MAN’ AS EPISTEMIC CONSTRUCT

Human subjectivity is a product of modernity rather than an eternal truth. Foucault observes that “man” is a contingent construct within the history of knowledge, emerging only when the foundations of thought were reorganised in the modern era as objects of reflection.

Humanity is far from being the origin of meaning; it is instead the effect of epistemic structures that make meaning thinkable. As these structures evolve, the image of “man” will inevitably dissolve.

# MATERIAL METADATA

## TYPOGRAPHY

Dense paragraphs, italicized terms (*tabula, episteme*)

## ENUMERATIONS

(a)-(n) list from Borges

## PARENTHESES & FOOTNOTES

e.g. (and juxtaposing them to)  
(p. xvii)

## QUOTATIONS

Saying from Eusthenes

## REFERENCE

Foucault, M. (2001) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Routledge. (Originally published in 1966)