

# Theatre as Counter-Discourse: Disrupting Institutional Truth in Fo's Accidental Death of an Anarchist

Ramiza Aslam<sup>1\*\*</sup> and Hafiz Muhammad Usman Dar<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This study presents a Foucauldian interpretation of Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, focusing on the interplay of power and truth within modern institutional frameworks. Focusing on Michel Foucault's theories of power and knowledge, disciplinary practices, and the genealogy of truth, this research paper investigates how the play critiques state institutions particularly the police and judiciary as mechanisms of ideological domination and producers of "official" narratives. The central character's use of theatrical impersonation serves to disrupt authoritative discourses, reveals how truth is strategically constructed, manipulated for political ends. Through detailed textual analysis and theoretical engagement with Foucault's works, especially *Discipline and Punish* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, this research highlights the irrationality and contradictions inherent in bureaucratic systems that assert objectivity while enacting systemic violence. Ultimately, this paper contends that Fo's play operates as a form of theatrical dissent, using satire to confront institutional truth-making and to expose the performative and unstable nature of justice under authoritarian regimes.

**Keywords:** Power/knowledge, truth construction, state violence, political theatre

## Introduction

In the intricate landscape of contemporary political theatre, Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* stands out as a landmark piece that describes the concept of truth and the operations of institutional authority. Inspired by the suspicious custodial death of an Italian anarchist, this play presents a fictionalized investigation led by a character known only as the Maniac, who adopts various official identities

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<sup>1-2</sup> School of English, Minhaj University, Lahore – Pakistan

to reveal the inconsistencies and fabrications within the state's narrative. What appears on the surface to be a comedic satire is, in fact, a powerful critique of how power distorts truth. Michel Foucault's theories especially his exploration of power-knowledge relations offer a compelling lens through which Fo's work may be interpreted. He argues that truth is not an objective, unchanging reality, but is shaped by power structures and discursive practices that benefit dominant institutions.

Fo's play builds on this premise, illustrating how authorities particularly the police and judicial systems do not aim to uncover truth, but rather to construct it in ways that align with their strategic goals. Foucault's concept of 'regimes of truth' socially sanctioned narratives that uphold existing power hierarchies sheds light on the play's core message. In this play, *The Maniac to the police*: "You can't even keep your lies straight. First, he fell while leaning, then he jumped, then he fainted. Which version of the truth should we believe?"

This highlights the constructed, unstable truth produced by the regime of police power. The contradictory versions of how the anarchist supposedly died reflect the malleability of truth under institutional influence. *The Maniac*, one of the main protagonists through his disruptive impersonations and probing questions, challenges and dismantles these constructed truths. In doing so, he becomes both a jester and a critical thinker who exposes the theatricality and manipulation behind official discourse, aligning closely with Foucault's insights in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), where disciplinary systems are shown to shape not only behavior but perception and knowledge itself.

Foucault's notion of power as dispersed within routine social practices rather than centralized in a single authority mirrors the disordered yet revealing exchanges in Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. The police officers are not depicted as all-powerful agents of state control; instead, they participate in constructing a fragmented yet purposeful version of the truth. The police station, in this context, operates as a symbol of what Foucault describes as the "carceral network" a system where observation, record-keeping, and fabricated investigations are tools used to silence opposition and maintain dominance.

Crucially, this critique extends beyond the police force, exposing how the entire judicial and bureaucratic machinery relies on a discursive structure that values

narrative consistency and perceived legitimacy over actual truth. In this framework, the process of interrogation whether legal or journalistic serves more as a ritual of institutional reinforcement than a search for genuine justice. The character of the Maniac exemplifies Foucault's idea of 'counter-conduct' a form of resistance against the mechanisms of normalization. Through his satirical use of legal and psychological language, the Maniac disrupts dominant modes of knowledge production and allows for alternative perspectives to emerge. While his behavior is comedic as it carries a deeper purpose to expose how truth is less about objective discovery and more about performance and manipulation.

Foucault emphasizes that truth should be viewed not as an absolute, but as a strategic component within complex power relations. This multiplicity of perspectives unsettles the audience's desire for a definitive moral conclusion, drawing them into the very power structures that shape how truth is produced and perceived. When situated within the political upheaval of 1960s and 70s in Italy, an era defined by state repression, violent crackdowns on dissent, and media manipulation, the relevance of a Foucauldian analysis becomes even more pronounced. The "Years of Lead" refers to a turbulent period in Italy from the late 1960s through the 1980s marked by political extremism, terrorism, assassinations, and the vilification of left-wing movements. The Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan on 12 December 1969 (17 dead, 88 injured), often considered the symbolic start of the Years of Lead.

Within this volatile context, Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* extends beyond satire to act as a form of political critique. Foucault's concept that "power is everywhere" finds expression in Fo's portrayal of interactions among the police, media, and public, each laden with ideological tension and driven by a struggle over narrative dominance. The state's effort to stabilize and define the "truth" surrounding the anarchist's death exemplifies a wider political maneuver discrediting revolutionary actors and reasserting control through performative legal processes.

The play also engages with Foucault's notion of the subject, particularly how individuals are constructed through institutional discourse. The anarchist, conspicuously absent from the stage, is pieced together through the contradictory testimonies of the authorities. His personality, motives, and his psychological state, are invented to align with the state's preferred storyline. He is transformed from a

living person into a textual artifact shaped by institutional power. His absence on stage parallels the broader historical silencing of marginalized groups, a recurring concern in Foucault's genealogical critiques.

Fo's use of the Maniac to manipulate and reframe these narratives dramatizes the idea that truth is always contingent upon who is granted the right to speak and from what institutional position they speak. Additionally, the play's absurdist humor and exaggerated performances reflect Foucault's belief that resistance need not be direct or confrontational; it can also take the form of parody, irony, and subversive rearticulating. The Maniac's impersonation of officials, rich in legal jargon and bureaucratic speech, unveils the emptiness and artifice behind institutional authority. This echoes Foucault's argument that power-laden discourses often mask their constructed nature behind a facade of neutrality and truth.

Through this method, Fo does more than ridicule authority, he exposes its precarious foundations. His theatrical style thus operates as a Foucauldian act of counter-discourse, challenging state-sanctioned narratives and reclaiming the power to define truth.

#### ❖ **Significance of the study**

Michel Foucault's philosophical exploration reveals a deep connection between power and truth, particularly emphasizing how institutions shape accepted realities through discourse. In his 1980 work, "Power/ knowledge, Foucault asserted that truth is not universal or fixed but rather constructed through networks of power that determine what knowledge is deemed valid or legitimate. Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, rooted in the real-life case of Giuseppe Pinelli's suspicious death in police custody, provides a compelling dramatic lens through which to explore these Foucauldian insights.

Fo's play satirizes how institutional bodies especially the police and judiciary, reconstruct narratives to preserve their authority. Instead of presenting a straightforward account of events, the play unfolds through a series of ever-changing stories, each crafted to shield the institution from accountability. This narrative instability mirrors Foucault's concept of "regimes of truth" systems through which dominant forces construct and impose accepted versions of reality.

The character of the Maniac serves as a catalyst for disruption, posing as various officials and exposing the inconsistencies in the police's account. His impersonations unveil the performative nature of institutional power and challenge the illusion of official truth. By highlighting contradictions and exposing fabricated accounts, the Maniac embodies Foucault's idea that truth is not rooted in fact, but is shaped by those who wield power.

Furthermore, the play's style, its awareness of its own theatricality, functions as a form of political resistance. It disrupts passive viewing and invites critical engagement, prompting the audience to question the veracity of state narratives. This strategic use of satire and performance positions the play within a lineage of politically engaged theatre that seeks to dismantle dominant ideologies.

Examining Fo's drama through the lens of Foucauldian theory is both intellectually enriching and culturally pertinent. It sheds light on the ways in which institutions manipulate truth through discourse, while also demonstrating how art can contest these power structures. In an era, rife with disinformation and public skepticism toward authority, such analysis is strikingly relevant.

It highlights the interconnectedness of language, authority, and perceived truth, showing how theatre can serve as a potent vehicle for counter-narratives. Consequently, this research offers valuable contributions to literary analysis, political theory, and cultural critique by applying Foucault's philosophical framework to a work that is both artistically bold and politically resonant.

## **Review of the Literature**

Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* serves as a powerful critique of institutional authority, making it particularly effective for analysis through Michel Foucault's theories on power and discipline. Rather than viewing power as concentrated in a single figure or authority, Foucault (1977) redefines it as a pervasive force embedded within everyday institutional functions. Fo's portrayal of law enforcement and the judiciary illustrates this dispersed nature of power. He shifts the focus from overt oppression to the subtle, procedural routines that conceal systemic violence. As Joseph Farrell (1982) observes, Fo's use of farce reveals the underlying operations of power hidden beneath bureaucratic appearances,

emphasizing how control is maintained through normalization and surveillance rather than through explicit force.

The absurd and chaotic setting of the police station marked by scripted interrogations and rehearsed denials epitomizes Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, where individuals are managed through constant oversight and categorization. This depiction closely mirrors Foucault's insights in *Discipline and Punish*, which traces the development of modern institutions in cultivating obedience and conformity by regulating knowledge and behavior. Through this dramatization, Fo makes visible the subtle mechanisms of power at work, encouraging audiences to uncover the often-invisible systems that sustain institutional dominance.

Building upon this theoretical foundation, Fo's exploration of truth further aligns with Foucault's ideas on discourse and knowledge. According to Foucault (1972), truth is not an objective or detached reality but is instead shaped by power-laden systems of discourse that determine what can be acknowledged or believed in a given society.

"Truth is not by nature free, truth is a thing of this world, produced by multiple forms of constraint."

Tony Mitchell (1999) while describing *Power and Farce as Subversion* in Dario Fo: *People's Court Jester*, Mitchell argues that Fo's play uses farce not merely for comedy but as a radical political strategy to expose how institutional power fabricates truth. The Maniac's impersonations serve to destabilize authoritative discourse, revealing how truth is a manipulated construct rather than an objective reality.

"Fo's farcical techniques are a means to question official narratives and to empower the audience with the tools of critical interrogation."

In *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, the police narrative surrounding the anarchist's death is shown to be a strategic construction, carefully crafted to protect institutional interests and obscure wrongdoing. Antonio Scuderi (1998) highlights how Fo unveils these manipulations, illustrating the ways in which official narratives are engineered and maintained through language and authority.

Oliver Double (2007), while highlighting Comedy as Political Weapon, he discusses how Fo uses comedic performance to demystify power and its claims to truth. He stresses the Brechtian influence in breaking the fourth wall, encouraging the audience to question official discourses rather than passively consume them.

“The Maniac is a clown who becomes a political saboteur, not just mocking authority but showing how truth is manufactured by it.”

The character of the Maniac plays a key role in unsettling these narratives by mimicking authority figures and exposing inconsistencies, thereby dismantling the credibility of the so-called truth. Stephen A. Watt (2000) argues that this tactic reveals the fluid and constructed nature of institutional truth claims, prompting audiences to rethink the foundations of what they accept as fact. Through this approach, Fo dramatizes the Foucauldian belief that discourse determines access to truth and that such truth is ultimately shaped to serve structures of control.

Glynne Wickham (1985), focusing on Institutional Power as Theatre, he situates the play within the tradition of political theatre, arguing that the judicial system in Fo's play functions like stagecraft, where reality is shaped through scripted performance. This links to Foucauldian ideas about surveillance and discipline being sustained through performance and repetition.

“In Fo's anarchic courtroom, justice becomes a parody of itself, and truth a mere rehearsal of power's needs.”

David Lane (2010), Lane discusses the play's meta-theatrical structure as a way to critique legal and political authority, arguing that Fo deliberately collapses the line between fiction and reality to show that institutions rely on fictionalized performances of legitimacy.

“In staging a lie to expose a lie, Fo's drama becomes an interrogation of how truth is performed by power.”

Furthermore, the play's theatrical form and sharp satire operate as effective tools of resistance against dominant narratives an idea central to Foucauldian thought. Foucault (1980) emphasizes that wherever power exists, so too does the potential for resistance, often emerging through the subversion of dominant discourses. Fo's

use of comedy, parody, and absurd impersonations becomes a vehicle for undermining official authority and revealing its contradictions.

Farrell (1982) describes the Maniac's mimicry as an example of what Foucault terms "counter-conduct" a form of rebellion that disrupts governance by mocking and destabilizing its structure. Joseph Farrell (2001), in *State Narratives and Manufactured Reality*, Farrell emphasizes how *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* reflects the Italian state's efforts to control political narratives during the "Years of Lead." The police's shifting explanations about the anarchist's death serve as a theatrical metaphor for the construction of truth by those in power.

"The play dramatizes a judicial and political system where facts are not discovered but invented, revised, and rehearsed like lines in a play."

The play's carnivalesque tone, as noted by Jane Hodgkinson (2006), invites audiences to laugh at powerful institutions, effectively lowering their perceived legitimacy and creating space for critical engagement. The ease with which characters shift roles and identities throughout the play further erodes the stability of institutional hierarchies, reflecting Foucault's argument that power is never static but constantly negotiated and contested. By turning satire into a weapon of critique, Fo stages a theatrical rebellion against dominant regimes of truth and power, illustrating how performance can resist, reframe, and reimagine societal norms.

Elaine Aston (2003), in *Gender, Power, and Resistance*, Aston introduces a gendered reading, examining the role of Maria Feletti (the journalist) as a figure of potential resistance to male-dominated power. While the Maniac dismantles official truths comedically, Feletti's rationalism and questioning highlight how gender intersects with knowledge production.

"In a male-controlled machinery of justice, Feletti's challenge signifies not only journalistic integrity but feminist resistance."

Although *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* has been widely analyzed as a critique of authoritarian rule and systemic corruption, there is a noticeable lack of scholarship that applies a comprehensive Foucauldian framework to the play. Existing studies by Farrell (1982), Scuderi (1998), and Watt (2000) identify thematic links between Fo's political satire and Foucault's theoretical concepts, yet they tend

to treat these ideas, such as power, truth, and resistance in isolation. Few have attempted to explore how these Foucauldian notions function in tandem within the play's narrative structure, thematic content, and performative style.

Furthermore, while Fo's theatrical techniques and his political engagement have received considerable academic attention, insufficient emphasis has been placed on how his dramaturgy operates as a site of discursive resistance. Specifically, there is limited investigation into how *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* crafts counter-narratives that challenge dominant truth regimes through its use of satire and performative devices.

This oversight becomes more apparent when examining the potential of satire and performance as dynamic forms of what Foucault termed "counter-conduct." While scholars like Hodkinson (2006) have acknowledged the carnivalesque and subversive qualities of Fo's work, there remains a need for deeper exploration of how his theatre simultaneously critiques institutional power and reveals the mechanisms by which social truths are produced and maintained. Moreover, most of the existing research stems from the late 20th century and does not incorporate more recent developments in Foucauldian theory or performance studies.

In light of renewed global authoritarianism and growing skepticism toward institutional narratives, reassessing Fo's play through a contemporary Foucauldian lens is especially relevant. This study aims to fill these scholarly gaps by offering an integrated analysis of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* that weaves together Foucault's concepts of power, discourse, and resistance.

By doing so, the research not only enriches our understanding of Fo's political theatre but also underscores the ongoing relevance of Foucauldian theory in examining how cultural texts resist and reimagine dominant systems of knowledge and authority.

## **Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative and interpretive approach, grounded in textual analysis to explore how Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* portrays institutional power, constructs truth, and mobilizes satire and performance as acts of resistance within a Foucauldian framework. Since the study is concerned with

uncovering the cultural and political meanings embedded in the play, a qualitative methodology is most suitable for capturing the complex interactions between language, authority, and theatrical performance.

The primary method involves a detailed textual analysis of the play's dialogue, character interactions, structural design, and performative features, interpreted through key Foucauldian concepts particularly those found in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), and *Power/Knowledge* (1980). This analytical model enables a thorough investigation into how power operates through institutional discourse, how regimes of truth are established and maintained, and how resistance manifests within and against these discursive structures.

To further unpack the play's use of language, this critical discourse analysis will be used to analyze how characters especially the police figures and the Maniac employ discursive tactics to assert or undermine authority. In line with Fairclough's (1995) framework, CDA allows for a deeper understanding of how language operates within institutional settings to preserve or challenge dominant power relations.

This method closely aligns with Foucault's argument that discourse is both a reflection and a producer of truth regimes. Particular attention will be given to the exposure of contradictions in official narratives, the subversive humor used by the Maniac, and the theatrical techniques that disrupt the façade of institution. credibility.

In addition to discourse analysis, the study will incorporate insights from performance theory to analyze how satire, farce, and theatrical devices act as Foucauldian tools of counter-conduct. Drawing on theorists such as Richard Schechner (2002) and Marvin Carlson (1996), the research will consider how Fo's use of improvisation, meta-theatricality, and audience interaction challenges hegemonic ideologies and engages viewers in active reflection. These performance strategies will be understood as mechanisms of resistance that call institutional truths into question and promote alternative understandings of justice and power.

The study may also refer to archival performance footage, production notes, and critical reception to explore how various stagings of the play have emphasized or reinterpreted its themes of resistance. This will highlight how performance beyond

the written text serves as a site where meanings are continually negotiated and reshaped.

Ultimately, by combining close reading, CDA, and performance analysis, this multi-dimensional methodology offers a robust and theoretically informed examination of how *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* critiques dominant institutions. It reveals how Fo's theatre not only mirrors socio-political power dynamics but also acts as an agent of disruption, challenging established narratives of truth and authority through Foucauldian lenses.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This research adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology rooted in textual and critical discourse analysis to examine how Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* engages with institutional power, constructs truth, and utilizes satire and performance as forms of resistance, all within a Foucauldian theoretical framework. Given the study's focus on interpreting the cultural and political meanings embedded in a theatrical text, a qualitative approach is best suited to explore the intricate relationships among language, authority, and performance.

However, like all interpretive qualitative studies, this research is subject to certain limitations that may affect the breadth and applicability of its conclusions. One notable limitation arises from the inherent subjectivity of textual and discourse analysis, particularly when dealing with a satirical and performative work like *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Although this study applies Foucauldian concepts with consistency and academic rigor, the possibility of interpretive bias remains especially due to the layered and often ambiguous nature of satire, irony, and theatrical expression.

Another limitation is the exclusive reliance on Foucault's theoretical lens. While this focus allows for an in-depth, coherent analysis of the play's power dynamics and discursive strategies, it also limits engagement with alternative critical perspectives such as Marxist, feminist, or psychoanalytic approaches which might offer additional or complementary insights into the text's political implications. This theoretical narrowing is both a strength and a constraint, providing analytical depth while potentially sidelining broader interpretive possibilities.

The study also refrains from incorporating empirical data such as audience feedback, interviews, or surveys, which could have provided valuable evidence regarding the play's reception and impact on public perceptions of institutional authority and truth. As a result, the analysis remains firmly situated in the realm of theory and interpretation.

In terms of delimitations, the scope of the research has been intentionally defined to maintain a focused and coherent analytical framework. The study limits itself to Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* as the sole primary text and draws exclusively on Michel Foucault's theories of power, discourse, and resistance. While other works by Fo or other theorists might be relevant, this narrowing of scope ensures a more manageable and in-depth investigation.

Moreover, the study is confined to theoretical and textual analysis rather than field-based methods like audience ethnography or performance studies, reflecting the researcher's aim to prioritize conceptual and critical exploration over empirical inquiry.

### **Textual Findings**

In *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Dario Fo constructs a theatrical critique of institutional authority, exposing how power functions not only through overt coercion but through the calculated fabrication of truth and manipulation of discourse principles that are central to Michel Foucault's theoretical approach. Foucault (1977) conceptualizes power as decentralized and embedded within the practices of institutions, especially through mechanisms like surveillance, normalization, and discipline. Fo's satirical portrayal of the Italian police bureaucracy framed against the backdrop of the real-life death of anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli vividly reflects these Foucauldian concerns. The characters representing the state, such as police officers and judicial figures, assert control less through physical force and more through their authority to construct narratives, manipulate legal categories, and manage evidence. Fo's use of farce and structural absurdity exposes how bureaucratic power relies not on transparency or moral legitimacy but on its ability to distort truth through institutional complexity.

At the heart of this critique stands the character of the Maniac, whose impersonations underscore Foucault's insight that power is intricately linked to the

production and regulation of knowledge. By masquerading as officials such as a judge and forensic expert, the Maniac exposes the fact that institutional authority derives its influence not from competence or justice but from its command over language and discourse. As Foucault (1980) posits, power and knowledge are inseparable; those deemed capable of articulating the “truth” are typically those legitimized by the state. The Maniac’s manipulation of the police into inadvertently confessing their contradictions and illegal conduct lays bare the theatrical, performative essence of institutional power. Fo thus crafts a Foucauldian satire that unmasks how state authority manufactures truths to maintain its dominance.

Fo also foregrounds the multiplicity of narratives surrounding the anarchist’s death, each offered by the police in attempts to shield themselves from blame. These conflicting stories whether the anarchist jumped, fell, was pushed, or died from other causes highlight Foucault’s (1972) theory that truth is not an absolute, but rather the outcome of contending discourses regulated by power. These competing narratives reflect what Foucault terms a “regime of truth”, a system in which institutions define and enforce acceptable versions of reality. The police in Fo’s play constantly revise their accounts to align with what is politically and legally expedient, underscoring how institutional truth is constructed as a function of power, not fact.

The play also critiques the legal system’s complicity in institutional violence. The Maniac’s seamless transition into roles of judicial authority and the police’s immediate compliance exposes how titles confer unquestioned legitimacy, often bypassing ethical scrutiny. Foucault’s (1991) concept of “governmentality” is relevant here, describing how modern institutions operate through administrative procedures and normative regulation to guide individual behavior. The Maniac’s effortless performance of bureaucratic roles illustrates that the power of such roles lies not in their commitment to justice, but in their capacity to perpetuate state-sanctioned narratives. Institutional authority, Fo suggests, is sustained by the performance of neutrality, not by its adherence to truth.

Farce intensifies this critique by revealing the absurdities within institutional operations. The chaotic reenactments and comic unraveling of official versions function as a form of resistance embedded within the theatrical form itself, echoing Foucault’s (1977) assertion that power generates resistance at the very sites of its enactment. The audience is invited to laugh, but this laughter serves a critical

function: it destabilizes the veneer of institutional credibility. The farcical style undermines the rituals of power, exposing them as mechanisms of obfuscation rather than justice. Furthermore, the play addresses the illusion of accountability. Even after revealing misconduct, the narrative does not suggest that consequences will follow. This lack of resolution illustrates Foucault's (1980) view of power as productive and self-sustaining creating subjects, norms, and truths that reinforce the status quo. The corrupt officers are not portrayed as anomalies but as standard products of a self-preserving institutional system.

Fo also subtly critiques the role of media and public perception in maintaining this system. While the play focuses on internal dialogues among police, concerns about public image and media coverage shape their actions. This reflects Foucault's (1979) theory of pan-opticism: the idea that visibility leads to self-regulation. The constant threat of observation compels the police to stage a performance for public consumption, reinforcing institutional narratives while suppressing dissent. The play becomes a theatrical enactment of Foucault's discourse theory, which defines discourse not merely as language, but as systems of knowledge that determine who can speak, what can be said, and under what conditions (Foucault, 1972). The setting, a police station attempting to make sense of an unexplained death becomes a site where institutional discourse is crafted and manipulated. Truth, in this environment, is not discovered but constructed through performance and authority. The fragmented and inconsistent stories provided by the police are emblematic of Foucault's (1980) "regime of truth." Here, truth is produced not as an ethical imperative but as a bureaucratic necessity. Each contradictory account whether about the anarchist's fall or the state's procedures serves institutional preservation, not factual integrity. Titles and roles serve as key instruments in this discursive production. Metatheatrical elements, including characters breaking the fourth wall and acknowledging the artificiality of the play, further reinforce the idea that truth is a construction. According to Foucault (1980), truth is inseparable from power and is always shaped by specific interests. Fo deliberately avoids offering a definitive explanation for the anarchist's death, presenting instead a series of ever-shifting stories. This narrative instability mirrors how institutional discourse often obscures more than it reveals.

The unseen body of the anarchist repeatedly described but never shown becomes a central symbol in the discursive struggle. As Foucault (1977) argues, institutions control bodies through classification and discourse. The anarchist's body, absent

from view yet central to the play's action, becomes a contested symbol whose meaning depends entirely on the institutional voice speaking about it. Official documents, files, and investigative reports in the play serve as additional tools of distortion. These are treated not as sources of objective truth, but as malleable artifacts manipulated to suit institutional goals. This aligns with Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality, where modern institutions govern through knowledge systems that appear neutral but are deeply political. Fo's depiction of paperwork fetishism satirizes how bureaucracies construct truth through layers of administrative discourse rather than through genuine inquiry.

The theme of confession, central to Foucault's (1978) *History of Sexuality*, is also parodied. In the play, the officers' "confessions" emerge not from moral conscience but from rhetorical traps set by the Maniac. These moments expose how institutions exploit confession as a discursive ritual to stabilize their narrative control, rather than as a route to accountability or redemption. Ultimately, Fo's play critiques not only individual corruption but the structural mechanisms that enable and protect it. The police are not exceptions; they are exemplars of a broader disciplinary regime that defines acceptable behavior and neutralizes dissent. The institutional system, as shown by Fo, is resilient enough to absorb critique without suffering collapse, illustrating just how deeply entrenched its power truly is.

The public and media perception is also involved in the reproduction of institutional power. The play focuses mainly on police dialogues, the apparition of public image emerges large. Officers are not concerned with justice for the anarchist but with creating a reasonable narrative for public consumption. This comes in parallel with Foucault's (1979) concept of panopticism, where the possibility of being seen (by the public, the press, or other institutional overseers) compels self-regulation and performance. In this way the state disciplines itself through the gaze of the public to serve institutional preservation. The media becomes part of the apparatus that regulates dissent, reinforcing official narra while marginalizing oppositional narratives.

In *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Dario Fo puts together revolutionary interrogation of the construction and manipulation of truth, aligning with Michel Foucault's theory of discourse. According to Foucault (1972), discourse does not simply refer to language or speech, but to systems of knowledge and statements that define what can be said, by whom, and under what conditions. Fo's play

dramatizes this theory by showing that truth is not an objective reflection of reality but rather a strategic product of institutional discourse shaped by those in power. The setting becomes a laboratory of discursive production, where language, official statements, and performance are manipulated to generate versions of truth that serve state interests.

The play builds truth mainly through the conflicting narratives proposed by the police officials regarding the anarchist's fall. These multiple narratives are signs of incompetence or corruption. They are indicative of what Foucault (1980) refers to as a regime of truth. This regime is a network of accepted discourses and institutional authority that together decide what is considered truthful. In Fo's depiction, the police do not attempt to uncover truth as a moral imperative but rather work to shape a version of events that will be institutionally acceptable and politically useful. The narratives whether the anarchist jumped, fell, was pushed, or died of a heart attack is an example how state institutions continually revise their discourses to preserve authority.

A central mechanism for this manipulation is the discursive authority bestowed by institutional titles and roles. When the Maniac, a lunatic, impersonates a judge and later a forensic expert, his utterances suddenly gain legitimacy. The officers who initially dismissed him immediately begin to put off to his knowledge once he assumes these roles. This transformation highlights Foucault's claim that discourse is legitimized not by its truth value but by its institutional anchoring (Foucault, 1972). The Maniac's role exposes how easily truth can be manufactured when institutional forms are uncritically accepted as sources of legitimacy. His authority is performative, not epistemic it is the uniform, title, and institutional role that render his words believable.

Additionally, Fo's use of metatheatrical techniques such as characters breaking the fourth wall and referencing the play's own fictionality amplifies the Foucauldian idea that truth is constructed a Performative. In Foucault's (1980) theory, truth is always implanted within relations of power and cannot be disengaged from the interests that it serves. The play does not present a single, coherent version of what happened to the anarchist instead it offers possibilities, each shaped by oratory strategy and institutional need. The ridiculousness of these shifting stories marks the extent to which language becomes a tool of distortion rather than revelation.

The more the police speak, the less clarity the audience has emphasizing the Foucauldian premise that discourse often serves to conceal rather than to disclose. This manipulation of truth is also closely tied to the idea of visibility and invisibility, another key aspect of Foucault theory. We see as the play progresses, what is shown and what is concealed become acts of power. For example, the body of the anarchist remains offstage and unseen yet it is constantly referenced and described becoming a kind of phantom signifier around which the competing discourses revolve. This absence ironically makes the anarchist more visible as a subject of interpretation. Foucault (1977) argues that power regulates bodies by classifying and speaking about them turning them into objects of knowledge. In Fo's play, the anarchist's body is precisely an object, one whose meaning is wholly dependent on who is doing the talking.

The function of official documents and investigations within the play further demons the performative aspect of truth. The police officials constantly refer to files, evidence, and protocols, but these documents are manipulated and fabricated depending on the desired outcome. This bureaucratic lust of paperwork serves as a Foucauldian illustration of how modern power sustains itself through administrative discourse. As Foucault (1991) elaborates in his concept of governmentality, institutions do not govern solely through laws or coercion but through the production of knowledge and statistics that appear objective but are deeply political. In *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, the files and reports do not reveal truth; they are instruments for its construction and distortion.

The play discovers the production of truth through the logic of confession a central theme in Foucault's (1978) *History of Sexuality*. Confession is seen as a gateway to truth an act through which the subject reveals a hidden inner self. Fo satirizes this logic by staging situations in which the police officers unintentionally confess their wrongdoings under the Maniac's manipulation. Yet these confessions are not the acts of moral reckoning they are performative slips or acts of desperation. The confessional mode becomes another discursive form through which institutions try to stabilize their narratives. Moreover, the fact that the Maniac is a madman serves to challenge the boundaries of sanity and rationality that supports institutional discourse. Foucault (1965) discusses how the category of madness is itself a discursive construct which is used to delimit who can speak the truth and who cannot. In *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, the Maniac's madness becomes a form

of cognitive freedom, allowing him to transgress the rigid boundaries of institutional discourse.

His ability to manipulate narratives with ease and to imitate authority figures erodes the credibility of those who claim rational control over truth. Fo dramatizes a Foucauldian reversal in which madness becomes the site of resistance and subversion. Significantly, the audience plays a crucial role in this discursive construction of truth. By constantly being addressed and misled the viewers are drawn into the same matrix of power and knowledge that the characters inhabit. This aligns with Foucault's (1980) idea that the distribution of truth is never neutral it is always an effect of power relations that position subjects within a specific epistemic field.

The play's multiple endings offering different resolutions to the narrative further rupture the audience's ability to discern a single truth, leaving them to confront the instability and plurality of all knowledge claims. This active engagement with the audience imitates the Foucauldian process of subjectivation. In *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Dario Fo uses performance and satire as active strategies of resistance that undermine the narratives propagated by institutional powers. By using a Foucauldian lens this performative resistance functions within and against the regimes of truth (Foucault, 1980), challenging the idea that institutions alone can define and dictate what is true.

Fo's theatrical method, deeply rooted in Brechtian alienation utilizes exaggeration, parody, and absurdity to expose ridiculous foundations of institutional authority. These techniques destabilize the performative rituals of power by turning them into farce. This renders the audience more aware of how power constructs and manipulates truth. The Maniac the play's central trickster figure embodies the dissident potential of performance. By imitating a judge, a psychiatrist, and other institutional authorities, he highlights the performative nature of power itself. His ability to manipulate institutions, official language, and bureaucratic procedures exposes how easily these systems can be appropriated and twisted.

This performativity aligns with Foucault's (1977) notion that power is not a fixed possession but a dynamic process enacted through social practices and discourses. By mimicking these discourses in exaggerated form, the Maniac undress them of their naturalized authority and invites the audience to see their constructed nature.

In this way, performance becomes not merely a tool for entertainment but a political act that disrupts dominant cognitions. Satire in the play further intensifies this critique by mocking the absurdities of bureaucratic logic and the failures of institutional self-justification. The play's comedy arises from the ridiculous contradictions in the police officers' testimonies and their desperate attempts to appear credible. This ridicule functions as what Foucault (1983) refers to as a counter-conduct.

Satire in Fo's work is therefore not merely about laughter it is a form of discursive indiscipline that opens space for dissent and critical reflection. By making audiences laugh at power, Fo weakens its capacity to impose itself as a natural or unquestionable force. The use of meta theatre also enhances this resistance. The characters often break the fourth wall and comment on the play's own artifice. This self-referentiality not only aligns with Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* but also reflects a Foucauldian awareness. Foucault (1972) emphasizes that discourse is historically and institutionally bounded, and Fo's metatheatrical techniques reveal these boundaries by exposing the constructed nature of both theatre and authority. This reflective stance disrupts passive reception and invites the audience into an active engagement with the truth claims being made within both the fiction of the play and the reality it critiques.

Moreover, the structure of the play resists narrative closure and moral certainty. This open-endedness presents the Foucauldian understanding of truth as multiple and produced through power relations rather than discovered through empirical verification. The fact that the audience is left to choose between two conflicting conclusions either the Maniac escapes and lets the police die, or he defers to moral compromise undermines the idea of a singular, authoritative truth.

It forces the audience to question their own complicity in accepting institutional narratives and to consider the ethical implications of resistance. This is a powerful satirical strategy, as it transfers the responsibility of judgment from the stage to the spectator, thereby resisting the finality of official accounts. Satire also functions as a protective veil, allowing the play to deliver radical critique while avoiding direct censorship. In Foucault's (1980) conception, discourse is always policed by rules of inclusion and exclusion what can be said and by whom. Fo's satire evades these rules and allows subversive ideas to circulate within restrictive regimes of knowledge.

The play's historical context marked by state violence and political repression amplifies the importance of satire as a covert weapon. The Maniac's lunacy, like the Fool in Shakespearean tradition, becomes a license for speaking dangerous truths. This strategic ambiguity reflects Foucault's idea that resistance often operates within the interval of power, exploiting the cracks in its discursive armor. Additionally, the performance of madness by the Maniac becomes an allegory for resistance itself. As Foucault (1965) illustrates in *Madness and Civilization*, madness has historically been used as a category to marginalize and silence dissent. Fo reverses this logic: The Maniac's madness grants him immunity from institutional constraints and empowers him to speak freely, ridicule authority, and manipulate truth with impunity. Madness here is not a mark of exclusion but a tool of subversion, echoing the Foucauldian view that what is labeled "irrational" is often that which most threatens the dominant order. By making the madman the only one capable of seeing through and exposing the institutional charade, Fo valorizes performative resistance and questions the very structures that define sanity, legality, and truth.

The communal nature of theatre itself becomes a form of resistance within this framework. Unlike mass media, which often transmits institutional discourses in unidirectional form, theatre creates a live, participatory space where meanings are negotiated collectively. This aligns with Foucault's (1991) theory of governmentality, which emphasizes the diffuse nature of power across institutions and practices. In Fo's theatre, the audience is not a passive consumer but an active witness and potentially, an agent of change. The play's interactive style, its interruptions, and its refusal to provide easy answers all contribute to a theatrical experience that resists the pacifying effects of dominant ideological apparatuses.

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Correspondence:

Ramiza Aslam

ramizaaslam909@gmail.com

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