Review by Michael C. Behrent, Appalachian State University.

The vastly influential work of Michel Foucault often seems suspended, methodologically speaking, between two alternatives. Let's call them the idealist Foucault and the materialist Foucault. The idealist Foucault explained how institutions, scientific disciplines, social practices, and ways of knowing are rooted in what he cryptically called "discourse"--the combination of objects, statements, concepts, and strategies through which the social world becomes utterable, and thus thinkable. Over and against this Foucault stands his materialist doppelgänger, who sought to outflank Marx by demonstrating that society's most tangible basis, upon which even modes of production are contingent, is power (or, as he often preferred to put it, "power relations"). To those who contended that this conception of power was merely stealth idealism, Foucault was quick to point out that the proof of power's inescapable concreteness lies in the human body, the ultimate target of all power systems and the surface upon which power inscribes its all-too-real traces. The body, Foucault famously wrote, is "directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs."[1]

In his latest book, the anthropologist Jean-Jacques Courtine returns to this well-traveled path, enlisting Foucault to reflect on several episodes in the history of the human body in Western societies from the sixteenth century to the present. Yet what makes Courtine's book surprising is that, over the course of five loosely connected essays, it is the idealist Foucault that he invokes to grapple with one of the materialist Foucault's central preoccupations. The body, for Courtine, is less the human putty with which power plays, than a field of visibility overlaid with words and discourse which, like a Cubist portrait, provides only fragmentary hints of an actual physical presence. "The body," Courtine writes, "was and remains for us covered in signs" (p. 73).

By focusing on discourse, Courtine specifically aligns himself with the archeological method, the more technical term for Foucauldian "idealism." Indeed, one of the few books by Foucault that Courtine discusses at any length--despite the fact that he mentions Foucault in his own book's title--is *The Archeology of Knowledge,* Foucault's retroactive and convoluted attempt to explain the methodology practiced in his previous works. References to genealogy--the more materialist approach that Foucault developed after abandoning archaeology, in which power replaced discourse as his primary concern--are almost completely lacking in Courtine's volume. He cites *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* either not at all or only in passing, even though these works are the *loci classici* of the Foucauldian study of the body. When Courtine does speak of "genealogy," he means something like archaeology. Consequently, unlike scholars who, inspired by Foucault, have sought to analyze historical modalities of the "political economy of the body," Courtine concerns himself not with how bodies are disciplined or mobilized, but with how they are seen, classified, and invested with meaning. What interests him is the body as a discursive creation.

Without exactly offering an original interpretation, Courtine has a number of ideas about how we should understand Foucault's notoriously elusive concept of "discourse." First, he maintains that discourse is not primarily a linguistic phenomenon. This is really a way of saying that a discourse is more than a text. At times, Courtine suggests that discourse is simply the principle which unites a particular group of texts and images--"a fine but sturdy thread that crosses through the canvas, weaving words and images into it" (p. 22). In other places, he makes the more useful--if fairly conventional--argument that discourse refers to the various procedures for rendering particular phenomena visible and intelligible. Drawing on Paul Veyne, Gilles Deleuze, and Giorgio Agamben, Courtine further contends that discourse must be understood in relation to Foucault's notion of *dispositif*--often translated as "apparatus"--one of the terms in Foucault's lexicon that is, arguably, as opaque as "discourse."[2] In 1977, Foucault defined a *dispositif* as a "thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, [and] philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions--in short, the said as much as the unsaid."[3] For Courtine, however, discourse is not just one ingredient of a *dispositif*, but a near synonym. In any case, he sees the terms as closely enough related that one can be interpreted in light of the other. Discourse and *dispositif*, he writes, are perhaps simply "two ways of speaking about, two noticeably different ways of looking at similar realities" (p. 27). Yet in the same interview quoted above (which Courtine also cites), Foucault specifically says that *dispositifs* (unlike *epistemes*, the key concept of *The Order of Things*) are both "discursive and non-discursive."[4] In a move that is typical of his entire enterprise, Courtine thus takes a concept that marked Foucault's effort to move beyond discourse and interprets it as discourse writ large.

After a mostly methodological first chapter ("Corps, discours, image"), Courtine proceeds to analyze four moments in the history of the body since the Renaissance, focusing mostly on France, with the exception of a final chapter devoted to the United States. In doing so, his goal, he claims, is not so much to apply Foucault's thought to particular historical periods as to think "*with* Foucault" (p. 7, Courtine's emphasis). In chapter two ("Lire le corps à l'âge classique"), Courtine examines the discursive tradition of physiognomies in France from roughly 1550 to 1650 (of which Marin Cureau de la Chambre's *Art de connaître les hommes* is a prime example). He is particularly interested in the changing ways in which bodies are "read" as sources of social data. During the Renaissance, an astrological interpretation prevailed: human physiognomy was believed to mirror the configuration of celestial bodies; the character of the corresponding soul could be interpreted accordingly. This conception was upended, however, when, during the seventeenth century, the body--like the world, for Max Weber--underwent gradual disenchantment. This transition allowed "the gradual emergence of a vision of the body as referring to itself, ordered by reason, [and] inhabited by a subject" (p. 51)--a corporeal epistemology that was, moreover, tied to the development of experimental science and the modern state. Courtine further maintains that this material demonstrates that Foucault's notion of "discursive formation" is far more than a linguistic phenomenon, but one that, in addition to words and text, includes images, practices, and ways of seeing (*"regards"*), which together constitute what Gilles Deleuze called "fields of readability" (p. 74).

In chapter three ("Une archéologie de la curiosité"), Courtine turns to an examination of human "monsters" in popular urban fairs in the eighteenth and (to a lesser extent) nineteenth centuries. Foucault, he argues, considered monsters only to lay bare the normalizing assumptions implicit in science and the law. Yet if one examines monsters from the standpoint of popular culture, one finds not this "fixed gaze, abounding in seriousness," but rather "a mobile and nomadic gaze," sensitive to the "pleasures experienced in the spectacle of the extraordinary and in the delights, which strike us today as cruel, occasioned by the *mise-en-scène* of the abnormal" (p. 107). Courtine conjectures that the presence of human monsters at city fairs represents a transposition of rural folklore to urban contexts. He also hypothesizes that human monsters represented a "burlesque theatralization of castration" (p. 97)--a claim that, in its imputation of highly speculative psychological motives to cultural phenomena, seems distinctly un-Foucauldian.

Courtine continues his examination of human monsters in the following chapter ("La normalisation des anormaux"). While he again insists on the need to integrate popular culture into our understanding of monstrosity, going beyond Foucault's exclusive emphasis on law and medicine, the chapter's argument departs from Foucault in yet another way. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he contends, the discourse on monsters was, in Western societies, humanized. Thus Isidore Geoffroy Saint Hilaire, the founder of teratology in the 1830s, recognized that, biologically speaking, monsters are simply human beings whose development has been stunted. By 1883, the Paris police prefect was denying public space to a popular freak show company which, according to Courtine, is evidence that monsters came to be perceived as "human, *horribly human*" (p. 129, Courtine's emphasis). Deformities once seen as signs of monstrosity were henceforth regarded as infirmities; in this way, monstrosity shifted "*from the order of the other to that of the same*" (p. 131, Courtine's emphasis). This evolution, Courtine suggests, dovetails with the advent of democratic society: the monster, once a recognizable creature confined to very specific social spaces, disappears, and all that remains are signs of monstrosity--individual handicaps, disabilities, and conditions--that are widely distributed throughout the social space (and, as such, largely invisible). We live, as Erving Goffman put it, in a society of "normal deviants" (cited by Courtine, p. 133). "Mass democratic societies," Courtine concludes, "have sought to turn the abnormal body into the ordinary body" (p. 133).

Yet the inclusiveness and shared humanity that Courtine sees as constitutive of democracy (at least ideally) comes, he believes, under considerable strain when citizens of these societies encounter foreign peoples--and never more so than when they are thrust into such interactions through war. To explore how such situations allow the emergence of new forms of monstrosity, Courtine devotes his final chapter ("Des Américains ordinaries: La généalogie des images d'Abou Ghraib") to an analysis of the notorious photographs taken by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison in 2003, which revealed to the world the appalling way that Iraqi prisoners had been treated by U.S. occupiers. Courtine's analysis is persuasive and humane; it is also commonsensical and familiar. He shows how the various ways in which the modern media turns suffering into a spectacle can inure even direct witnesses to the pain they are experiencing. In this way, the GIs at Abu Ghraib became Eichmanns of the digital age, embodying "the banality of evil in the era of avatars" (p. 156). In analyzing the impact of these photographs, Courtine introduces the concept of "intericonicity," a term of his own coinage (evoking the idea of intertextuality, a term used in structuralist literary criticism), to refer to the fact that images, like words, belong to webs of references, so that one picture can conjure up an entire sequence of representations with which it is both historically and culturally associated. Thus for Courtine, the collapse of the Twin Towers triggered flashbacks to Pearl Harbor, while pictures of Specialist Sabrina Harman mugging in front of the corpses of tortured Iraqis harked back to lynchings in the Jim Crow South (in making this point, Courtine fails to consider that "intericonicity" might be in the eye of the beholder).

Yet, as this brief summary indicates, while the influence of Hannah Arendt, Luc Boltanski, and Susan Sontag is distinctly audible in Courtine's argument, his attempt to make the case for Foucault's relevance to this analysis feels strained. He maintains that images are central to the "realms of memory" (*domaines de mémoire*) upon which knowledge, according to Foucault, depends and that the concept of *dispositif* can help us to understand the technological processes through which the Abu Ghraib pictures were disseminated. He quotes Agamben to argue that a *dispositif* implies "desubjectification," suggesting that the American soldiers renounced their subjectivity in photographing themselves with dead prisoners, transforming themselves into mere spectators or tourists. All this is well and good, but the reader is left wondering where Foucault really fits into an argument that seems for more preoccupied with the banality of evil, suffering at a distance, and how we regard the pain of others.[5]

One of the puzzles of this book is exactly what Courtine means by "thinking with" Foucault. Does it mean seriously engaging with Foucault's ideas or simply citing Foucault when one finds it convenient? For a book that mentions Foucault's name in its title, specific references to his work are in startlingly

short supply. Courtine mentions five or six essays by Foucault, mainly in the first chapter, and he makes single, perfunctory references to *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish.* Other than this, the only works Courtine deals with at any length are *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and the lecture course on *The Abnormal.* In his chapter on physiognomy, he refers to the medieval and Renaissance "doctrine of signatures" (whereby objects were believed to refer to other objects based on the formal similarities), noting the scholarship on this topic in a learned footnote (note 22, p. 59). Yet, oddly, he manages to omit any reference to *The Order of Things*--in this context, or anywhere in his book--despite the fact that the second part of the second chapter of Foucault's book specifically discusses this doctrine—in a section entitled, of all things, "Signatures."[6] Though he professes his desire to think "with" Foucault, Courtine is strangely inclined to hold him at arm's length.

Courtine is, of course, free to talk about whatever he wants without having to reference Foucault--even in a book that puts Foucault's name in its title. Yet sometimes one wonders if a more extensive discussion of Foucault's work might not have clarified Courtine's own methodology. For instance, he repeatedly insists that "discourse," as Foucault understood it, is more than a linguistic phenomenon. Courtine is not wrong, but he is breaking down a door that is wide open. Foucault was very clear that his understanding of discourse went well beyond language in *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* one of the books Courtine most frequently cites. What is peculiar is that, despite Courtine's interest in the body, power, and the relationship between normality and abnormality, he makes almost no reference to Foucault's genealogical work (save for brief and completely undeveloped nods to "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" and *Discipline and Punish*), when these issues were at the forefront of Foucault's concerns. Consequently, Courtine has to reinvent the wheel, philosophically speaking--speculating how the notion of discourse might accommodate an examination of the human body, as if Foucault himself had somehow neglected this issue. Though Foucault is one of the best known and most referenced philosophers on the planet, Courtine feigns ignorance of almost everything that Foucault wrote after 1969; it is as if one felt the need to speculate about how Karl Marx might theorize the nature of capital solely on the basis of *The Communist Manifesto.*

As a result of Courtine's failure to grapple with Foucault's works that are most relevant to his concerns--particularly *Discipline and Punish*--a peculiar whiff of philosophical idealism pervades his book. Bodies, as Courtine analyzes, are afflicted with an uncertainty principle: at times they appear distinctly corporeal, at others they are reduced to figments of discourse. "[T]he paradox inscribed at the very heart of Michel Foucault's thought," he writes, is that when "one interrogates the flesh in all its depth, it is the sedimented thickness of language and the gaze's multiple displacements that reply" (p. 75). Yet the moment in Foucault's thought when he was most concerned with the problem of the human body (or, in any case, a crucial phase in his thinking on that topic) coincided with a retreat from his prior emphasis on discourse, at least as an explanatory framework in its own right. Nothing requires Courtine to prefer *Discipline and Punish* over *The Archaeology of Knowledge*; but in a book that claims to shed light on the history of the body using Foucault, the reason for his disagreements with the former deserve to be laid out, particularly since his interpretation of Foucault commits him to a form of idealism on the very terrain (the history of the body) that Foucault seems at one point to have believed demanded a kind of methodological materialism, however idiosyncratic (to wit: a materialism of power relations).

Part of this confusion can be traced to Courtine's fondness for the Foucauldian concept of *dispositif.* The term is undeniably popular, witness the attention it has received from such prominent Foucault exegetes as Agamben, Deleuze, and Veyne. What exactly the term is supposed to mean remains, however, rather unclear. Foucault used the term most explicitly in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality,* to refer to the multiple and varied ways in which the injunction to speak about sex deployed itself in the nineteenth century. The appeal of the term seems to lie in the fact that it allows one to emphasize what Foucault called the micropowers of society, while also asserting that they are coordinated with one another for some broader strategic purpose (as the military overtones of the French term suggest). The problem is that while *dispositif* posits such coordination, it sheds no light as to how, by whom, and to what end

these micropowers are coherently arranged. Consequently, the term is not falsifiable--unlike, say, the Marxist theory of base and superstructure, Gramscian hegemony, Bourdieu's notion of domination, or even structural-functionalist sociology: all of these theories characterize more or less specifically the relationship between small- and large-scale manifestations of social and political authority. *Dispositif* makes no such claims. It commits itself to little more than the near tautology that power produces power effects.

To his credit, Foucault never elevated the term to the status of a full-blown concept, in the way that some of his interpreters have. In Courtine's case, it is not clear what the cognitive payoff is, for example, in describing the exhibition of abnormality in nineteenth-century European visual culture as a *dispositif* (p. 114). The relative emptiness of the term is further exacerbated by the fact that Courtine, precisely because he wants to consider the history of the body, not from the standpoint of science and law (Foucault's major concerns), but from that of popular culture, strips *dispositif* of the one concrete criterion it undeniably implies: the production of power effects. Courtine uses the term simply to refer to a system of generating ideas of monstrosity or abnormality in nineteenth-century urban culture, reducing *dispositif* to a watered-down version of Foucault's concept of *episteme* or, more generically still, of ideology, loosely construed. Finally, Courtine's use of *dispositif* suffers from his exclusive emphasis on Foucault's archaeological thinking, despite the fact that this term is intimately wedded to Foucault's genealogical work. In mostly evacuating questions of power from his consideration, *dispositif* becomes virtually indistinguishable from Foucault's understanding of *discours*. Courtine writes: "if there is one thing that is not in doubt, it is that there is no discourse outside of *dispositifs*, and no *dispositifs* without discourse" (p. 27). While from a strictly Foucauldian point of view, this statement is not false, its emphasis is misplaced: *dispositifs* may include discourse, but they do so to control, regulate, manage, optimize, or incite--in short, to wield power. In his idealistic reading of Foucault, Courtine consistently overlooks this crucial dimension.

Finally, one of the particularly striking ways in which Courtine's book departs from Foucault is the humanistic and even democratic narrative that drives a number of its chapters. It is well known that the philosophical underpinning of much of Foucault's thought was his critique of what he called "humanism," by which he meant a way of thinking that endows human beings with a special epistemological status in the order of things, with all that this implies morally and politically. In Foucault's histories, the most insidious moment always occurs when a particular science or institution is "humanized." Courtine, however, wants to tell a story in which the "humanity" of monsters is gradually acknowledged (p. 126) and in which Abu Ghraib could happen because it tapped into a reservoir of "dehumanizing" images which haunt American society (p. 137). Courtine admits that, on these points, "it is hard to follow Michel Foucault entirely" (p. 125). Still, Courtine seems to minimize the gulf that separates his own position and that of Foucault, who once declared "[o]ur task…is to emancipate ourselves definitively from humanism."[7]

Ironically, despite his enthusiasm for Foucault, Courtine's own views at times more closely resemble those of Foucault's fiercer critics. For instance, he speaks of the "slow and paradoxical inclusion" in the social body of human monsters who had previously been excluded (p. 120), and even describes this process as characteristic of "democratic societies" (p. 133). Yet this is the very same argument that Marcel Gauchet and Gladys Swain, in their critique of *Madness and Civilization*, made not about monsters, but about the mentally ill: that Foucault had erroneously told a story of increasing exclusion that would be better described as one of gradual inclusion and integration, made possible by the spread of democratic values.[8] One thus wonders at what point Courtine is thinking against Foucault rather than with him.

What Courtine's book represents, perhaps, is a change in the way that we consume Foucault, and specifically in our taste for his most radical premises. A number of years ago, William Safire wrote an editorial for the *New York Times* in which he reflected on the fact that the bagel had gradually replaced

the doughnut as Americans' favorite baked good. Doughnuts, Safire opined, are sugary, sweet, and fun, while bagels are chewy, serious, and harder to digest. But while the doughnut's decline seemed to suggest "soft sweetness was in trouble," the taste for sugar staged a dialectical comeback with the advent of the blueberry bagel--"sweet, soft, inky-colored and hard to tell from a stale doughnut." "Reaching for an ever-wider audience," Safire concluded, "the bagel has gone soft and spongy."[9] Perhaps our taste for Foucault has undergone a similar evolution. The austere counter-intuitiveness of his philosophical anti-humanism may have lost its appeal; a softer and spongier Foucault, in which the critique of normalizing institutions and discourses is roped into the service of demanding (or celebrating) a more humane society, is easier to digest. In a sense, Courtine's book represents the blueberry bagel moment in Foucault studies: an attempt to make Foucault palatable for a generation of scholars in which many of the stakes that drove Foucault's own philosophical project have lost their relevance and purchase. Yet if this is the case, then why is it that so many scholars still so eager, like Courtine, to "think with" Foucault? Why, in short, do we still care about Foucault, if the intellectual battles in which he plotted his assault on philosophical orthodoxy are indeed behind us?

NOTES

[1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977 [1975]), p. 25.

[2] See Paul Veyne, *Foucault: sa pensée, sa personne* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2008), chapter eight; Gilles Deleuze, "Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif?," in *Michel Foucault philosophe* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), pp. 185-195; and Giorgio Agamben, "What Is an Apparatus?," in *What Is an Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 1-24. On this literature, see Jeffrey Bussolini, "What is a Dispositive?," in *Foucault Studies* 10(2010): 85-107. Agamben's essay is an interesting case study in the malleability of *dispositif* in the hands of those who claim to embrace it. While purporting to elucidate the term, Agamben manages to argue, in effect, that his own philosophy has entirely prefigured in Foucault's concept. *Dispositif* is *Homo Sacer* in miniature.

[3] Foucault, "Le jeu de Michel Foucault," in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 3, *1976-1979*, eds., Daniel Defert, François Ewald, and Jacques Lagrange (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 299. This text, a conversation between Foucault and a group of psychoanalysts, was originally published in the Lacanian journal *Ornicar* in 1977.

[4] Foucault, "Le jeu," p. 301.

[5] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006 [1963]); Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics*, trans. Graham Burchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1993]); Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).

[6] Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 40-45.

[7] Foucault, "Entretien avec Madeleine Chapsal" (1966), in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, *1954-1969*, eds., Defert, Ewald, and Lagrange (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 516.

[8] Marcel Gauchet and Gladys Swain, *La pratique de l'esprit humain: l'institution asilaire et la révolution démocratique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).

[9] William Safire, "Essay: Bagels vs. Doughnuts," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1999, http://www.nytimes.com/1999/10/25/opinion/essay-bagels-vs-doughnuts.html, accessed February 3, 2014.

Michael C. Behrent
Appalachian State University
behrentmc@appstate.edu