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Michel Foucault, Patrice Maniglier, and Dork Zabunyan, *Foucault at the Movies*, ed. and trans. Clare O'Farrell. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. xiv + 243 pp. Appendix, notes, and bibliography. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-23116-706-2; \$27.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-23116-707-9; \$26.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0-23154-783-3.

Review by Dana Polan, New York University.

First, let's get the issue of the title out of the way: Michel Foucault, it seems, was in his adult years actually not much of a moviegoer. (It appears, though, that young Michel was quite enamored of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, seeing it multiple times.) And beyond an entertainment realm of moving images ("movies") that he really did not seem to have much to do with, Foucault doesn't even appear to have fit the mold of that notorious intellectual figure that is the Parisian *cinephile*. Not only did he not go much to the movies, but Foucault wasn't really centered on "cinema" (the French title has it as "Foucault va au *cinéma*").

I should make clear that this is not so much a question of translation—indeed, neither "movies" nor "film" really could capture Foucault's relation to visuality—as of the very idea of a book on Foucault and the motion picture. Indeed, the book's translator, the eminent Foucault scholar Clare O'Farrell, does a great job with the material at hand. Her translator's notes show, for instance, the adept and astute choices she has made along the way. I was most impressed by her sharp explanation of why, contrary to famed Foucault translator A. M. Sheridan Smith, she chose to render "rémanence" not as "remanence," a curious word in English (my spellchecker doesn't like it!) but as "persistence," in part because it picks up a common understanding of the illusion of moving images as coming from a "persistence of vision" as individual film frames unspool before the spectator. And O'Farrell is to be applauded for choosing, in contrast to the original French volume, to translate the entirety of each of Foucault's texts around moving images, rather than just excerpts. However challenging it might be to imagine a theoretical or political consequentiality to the furtive encounter of Michel Foucault with cinema, this English translation assembles in full fashion how Foucault talked on occasion about film. This all is very useful, but it has to be admitted that the challenge in all of it to build something bigger is quite imposing.

Indeed, if Foucault is so important to the study of visual culture, it is for reasons almost the opposite of those that are entailed in the usual ways that scholars study film. In the Collège de France lectures leading up to *Discipline and Punish* and in that book itself, Foucault was wont to suggest that, whereas societies of the spectacle were about many people watching a few people (as happens in live theater and in the movie theater), our modern disciplinary or punitive society

was all about a very few people watching many. For instance, the panopticon involves the potential for a handful of observers (even just one) to keep an eye out on the many subjects within its purview.

To put it bluntly, the panopticon and the movie house do not really resemble each other, and it is not easy to imagine how Foucauldian notions about the former could help us understand to any great degree what goes on in the latter as spectators encounter moving images flitting across the screen. (Of course, one option—more from media studies than from film theory—might be to study how those spectators are *looked at*: for example, the ways in which media companies try to determine the identities and tastes behind all those eyeballs gazing up at screens. One pioneer in this domain has been Mark Andrejevic with his breakthrough, and explicitly Foucauldian volume, *iSpy*.^[1])

To be sure, Foucault could be a sharp commentator on the specificities of visual style, and there are strong moments in his pieces in *Foucault at the Movies* that hint at the many things he might have been able to say about filmic form had this area of concern mattered to him more. Most intriguing in this respect is a 1975 interview with *Cinématographe* around a set of dreary films (such as Liliana Cavani's softcore *The Night Porter*) that posit a chic erotics to Nazism. Foucault uses the occasion to denounce both this new valorization of Nazism as a fascinating sensuality (rather than the banality of genocidal evil that it actually was) and the equally dreary, deadly sexual philosophy of Sade, whom he terms an “accountant” of sexuality for his mathematical disciplining of instincts and body parts through rationalized controls. (Foucault: “I believe that there’s nothing more allergic to film than Sade” [p. 139].) As importantly, Foucault posits against both retro Nazi chic and Sadean calculation and regimentation, the fluid and fleeting means of filming bodies and pleasures in the queer cinema of Werner Schroeter. As Foucault puts it, “What Schroeter does with a face, a cheekbone, lips and an expression in the eyes has nothing to do with sadism. It is more a reduction, a granulation of the body, a kind of autonomous exaltation of its smallest parts, of the minutest potentials of a fragment of the body” (p. 140). Here, a year before the publication of *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, we see Foucault hinting at that *ars erotica* that he saw much of Western society’s fascination with sexual *science* as bracketing out or occluding. As Foucault concludes in the interview, “We need to accept the body with its elements, surfaces, volumes, and invent a nondisciplinary eroticism: an eroticism of the body in a volatile and diffuse state, with its chance encounters and uncalculated pleasures” (p. 144).

That Schroeter’s imagery mattered so much to Foucault in this respect is confirmed by the fact that Foucault himself appears to have sought out the filmmaker/theater director in 1981 for an extended conversation around questions of passion and limit-experience, right in the middle, then, of Foucault’s reorientation of the *History of Sexuality* project toward aesthetic and ascetic issues of the care and fashioning of the self.

I referred above to the *Cinématographe* interview as an “occasion,” and, for all its adumbrations of the later Foucault, I would want to emphasize both the occasional and instrumental nature of many of the pieces by Foucault collected in *Foucault at the Movies*. Occasional: On the one hand, it is clear that Foucault’s “engagement” with film was inconstant and fleeting. On the other hand, when he did address film, it was often at the invitation of others, most famously, for instance, the editors of the vastly influential *Cahiers du cinéma*, who initiated conversation with Foucault on multiple occasions to see what he could bring to them from outside. Instrumental: Often, on these

occasions, Foucault would talk less about the formal specificities of film itself than treat film as one path to something else. Most noteworthy in this respect is one of Foucault's most noted conversations with *Cahiers du cinema*, an oft-cited discussion of a set of TV shows and films, such as Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien*, that Foucault and his interlocutors saw as bolstering a fierce move in France to the right, embodied in Giscard d'Estaing's presidency, entailing both an invocation of the charismatic leader (from De Gaulle to Giscard) and a concomitant devaluation of the "people" as having overwhelmingly been cowards (or, even worse, collaborationists) in a way that continued to discredit popular struggle to the present. The political and historical analyses in the interview are really smart and sharp but have little to do with films per se, except insofar as their content is readable as instruments to vehiculate dominant ideology. As Foucault puts it, "Nowadays cheap literature is no longer enough. There are the much more effective means of television and film. And I think this is a way of *reencoding* popular memory, which still exists but is unable to find an expression. So people are shown not what they actually were but what they need to remember themselves as having been" (p. 106).

I spoke earlier of the "challenge" of finding in Foucault's infrequent forays into film commentary any sort of systematic aesthetics of cinema, including a political aesthetics. It's a challenge that film scholar Dork Zabunyan and philosopher Patrice Maniglier both admit—they are often necessarily modest about what Foucault provides for any extended theory of film—and do their best at meeting. Theirs is a valiant effort.

Yet, I'm not convinced that Foucault's primary critical concerns easily lend themselves to a theory of cinema per se, and several aspects of Zabunyan's and Maniglier's discussions seem to me to signal the difficulties. First, there is a somewhat overstated forcing of minimal comments of Foucault into broader philosophical claims. For instance, in the aforementioned *Cahiers du cinéma* interview on the retro-films around World War II resistance versus collaboration, Foucault refers in passing to the films (and TV shows) as forming a "series" of works on the subject, something any scholar of culture might say in wanting to see a set of similar texts as equally symptomatic of political concerns. For Zabunyan, though, the mention of "series" occasions an extended discussion of Foucault's theorization of "series" in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* as the often-discontinuous strata of events and their sequences constituted for critical treatment within this or that historical discursive formation. The discussion is intelligent but seems to make much more of Foucault's quick reference to "series" than it perhaps merits.

Likewise, it is noteworthy that Patrice Maniglier's avowedly philosophical discussion of Foucault, a quite good exposition, it must be said, leaves aside any mention of cinema per se for many pages and instead explains at length general Foucauldian concepts (for example, nonteleological temporality and the complex nature of the event). It is all quite enlightening but only tangentially helpful in thinking about film.

Conversely, when Maniglier offers readings of individual films, including René Allio's adaptation of Foucault's edition of *Moi, Pierre Rivière*, he comes up with great insights (he is really terrific, for instance, on how Alain Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard* reworks historical memorialization in critical fashion), but it doesn't seem to me that his analyses are specifically Foucauldian in any concerted way. For instance, Maniglier's analysis of how sound-image relations in *Moi, Pierre Rivière* engage in complicated plays of asynchronicity may, as he asserts, have been inspired by Foucault's complex theory of text and concrete event, but Maniglier doesn't need Foucault in

order to fashion the specific points he comes up with. (In fact, many of Maniglier's assertions about cinema seem to be more Deleuzian than Foucauldian.)

Despite the injunction against "posthumous publication," recent years have seen an outpouring of texts by Foucault, some new (for example, the Collège de France courses as well as some earlier teachings, and, most especially, the fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality* project, *Les Aveux de la chair*) and some new assemblages of older material, and it is certainly useful to have all of Foucault's occasional remarks on film assembled in one place. But the book remains to my mind a curiosity, a wished-for glimpse at what perhaps might have been—a deep and extended engagement by a major intellectual with a major culture form—but never really was.

NOTE

[1] Mark Andrejevic, *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

Dana Polan
New York University
dana.polan@nyu.edu

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