
Review by Sarah Wilson, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London.

*Foucault on the Arts and Letters: Perspectives for the 21st Century*, is the fruit of a conference in 2014, anticipating Catherine M. Soussloff’s *Foucault on Painting*, 2017.[1] Richly intersectional and transdisciplinary, it sets out to avoid any chronological presentation and is divided into four sections: “Visual Articulations,” “Bodily Experience in Dance and Music,” “Heroic and Tragic Subjectivities,” and “Aesthetics Transformed.”

There is a curious attitude to previous publications, footnoted as “exceptions” in Soussloff’s preface (p. xviii), although these include Joseph T. Tanke’s *Foucault’s Philosophy of Art*, and Philippe Artière’s collection, *Michel Foucault, La Littérature et les Arts.*[2] This is despite extraordinary resonances between those works and this volume. Pierre Lascoumes’s “La Perpendicularisation de la societé. Soldats, Danseurs, Carrousels et Ballets de Cour” published in Artière’s volume, for example, complements and anticipates Frédéric Pouillaude on dance here, in an essay subtitled “On Some Uses of Foucault’s concepts in the Choreographic Field,” or Brandon Konoval’s virtuoso piece, “Discipline and Pianist” on the *Étude*, which discusses piano exercises, and pianistic virtuosity itself, as the ultimate disciplined display (Franz Liszt’s body fusing almost monstrously with his piano).

The collection also endeavours to reconcile anglophone and francophone scholarship—but the divide between those approaches goes far beyond language, to the very heart of Foucault’s enterprise. I well remember the late Roy Porter’s take on English madness that could in no way be correlated to Foucauldian models of the “Great Confinement.” Porter is acknowledged, but this essential Anglo-French divide does not feature as it might in Dana Arnold’s opening essay on Hogarth’s *Rake’s Progress* in the context of the grandiose architecture of the Bedlam lunatic asylum in London.[3] A prelude discusses different French and English editions of *Folie et déraison*, involving R.D. Laing and the “antipsychiatry” context (p. 6). Surely this perspective should interrogate Arnold’s persistent use of the word “madness” (pp. 3-7) with no distinctions made here between schizophrenia, senile dementia, alcoholism or sheer destitution, let alone “ruin” (Tom Rakewell’s situation) (p. 15)?
Anton Lee firmly places Duane Michals in the burgeoning 1980’s French photography world, in his discussion of Foucault’s essay “Thought and emotion,” written for the American photographer’s 1982 Paris retrospective. Foucault was suggested to curator Philippe Stoeckel via the novelist and photographer Hervé Guibert. This is not really Foucault’s “sole treaty on photography” (p. 27), as the essay on Gérard Fromanger, “Photogenic Painting” is at least half historical in focus.[4] Lee’s focus on Foucault’s term pensée-emotions, “thought-emotions,” as a post-Cartesian tool with which to explore more than visual responses, is tellingly juxtaposed with Barthes’s concept of the punctum. Homoerotic dimensions are downplayed here: Guibert, the friend of Roland Barthes as well as Foucault, was a beautiful young man, at a time when Barthes, too, was deliberately exploring art world fauna; it is the illustrated photo Narcissus (1974) that attracts Foucault. Inadvertently, the essay marks the passage from the dominance of Narrative Figuration as a painterly movement to conceptual and post-conceptual art in Paris, with a central role for photography and photography in series: the essay includes seven captioned images of Michel’s The Man in the Room (1975).

This mode segues easily to Sophie Berrebi’s accomplished text on Jean-Luc Moulène, based on her book, The Shape of Evidence, 2014.[5] She emphasises the impact of the 1977 translation, Discipline and Punish, on photography historians Alain Sekula and John Tagg in the mid-1980s.[6] The chiastic relationship between monument and document from Foucault’s Archeology of Knowledge introduces Jean-Luc Moulène’s projet Le Monde, Le Louvre (2005-2006): twenty-four relatively humble museum objects were exhibited as his photographs on plinths, as well as in the take-away Le Monde supplement.[7] Chris Marker appears rather than André Malraux amongst other rich references, anticipating contemporary practice. Berrebi (who points back to the fact that Moulène was gay conceptual artist Michel Journiac’s assistant) writes the most future-oriented essay in the collection.

Moving to part two, “Body Techniques and Techniques of the Self,” Frédéric Pouillade turns to dance, whose ethos does not align with the disciplinary structures of army, school or factory, yet where the “ethics of subjectivity” may also confront in-house power conflicts. Is the gap now closing, he asks, between Discipline and Punish and the last two volumes of the History of Sexuality? Richard Schusterman’s Body Consciousness. A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somesthetics is challenged for its normative aims.[8] Yet a “Foucauldian notion of heterotopian dance” outside the institution, “breaking its enclosure (p. 76),” seems to beg the question of conceptor, choreographer, narrative and the dancer as actor and tool, as well as the disciplined yet individual body/performer.

It is at this point that Brandon Konoval introduces and concludes “Discipline and the Pianist” with Claude Debussy’s 1915 wartime Étude for piano. (It is the justesse of this chapter I found so delightful, made to suffer piano competitions as a child.) From the fusion of military and musical institutions into the Conservatoire de Paris, to the discipline of the metronome or the sadism of Chopin’s larger-than-octave elevenths forced upon the practising pianist, far larger questions are raised. Konoval’s longue durée indeed extends from the earliest Christian asceticism to topical patriotism.

In part three, one moves from the era of Debussy’s piano to Jean-Michel Jarre’s 1970’s synthesisers—or one might, if Foucault’s actual context of writing were more evident. Foucault on Art and Letters offers a new generation no intimation of Foucault’s Paris, nor his relationship with its art world. Sima Godfrey, in “Foucault’s Baudelaire,” argues: “the truth is that from the
1970s on Foucault’s literary space had shrunk.... Baudelaire’s appearance coincides with the discovery—or rediscovery—of Walter Benjamin in France in the early 1980s, a result, most notably, of Jean Lacoste’s translation of Benjamin’s Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism in 1979” (pp. 110-111).[9] Foucault’s reading of Kant through Baudelaire and thus modernity is interesting here, and Godfrey mentions precursors, from Sartre to the Jakobsen-Lévi-Strauss analysis of “Les Chats” of 1962 (though not its republication in 1977). However, in 1971, Sur le dandysme reprinted Baudelaire’s “Painter of modern life” essay in the sexy 10/18 format, and following Baudelaire’s Pléiade re-edition of 1975 came Roger Kempf’s Dandies, Baudelaire et Cie, and more.[10] Jean-François Lyotard used the trope of the dandy and the confrontation of Marx and Baudelaire within a capitalist-libidinal analysis in his text on painter Jacques Monory as early as 1972 and with the widest literary range.[11] Dandyism signifies the turn to an après-mai des faunes after 1968, the FHAR movement for homosexual liberation, and Parisian exhibitions of the Pre-Raphaelites and Symbolists—along with catalogues, re-editions, press, and discussions.[12] Long hair, velvet jackets, ruffled shirts and bell bottoms were the norm; while Foucault could not compete sartorially with this androgynous 1970s dandyism he was certainly affected.

“Foucault’s Beckett” follows “Foucault’s Baudelaire;”; (he saw Waiting for Godot at the Théâtre de Babylone 1953, cited “What matter who’s speaking, someone said, what matter who’s speaking ?” when questioning authorship in 1969, while for the Collège de France inaugural lecture, he misquoted The Unnameable: “I must go on, I can’t go on I must go on,” misattributing the passage to Beckett’s Molloy. Marisa C. Sánchez’s passionate exercise in intertextuality ends with Foucault’s evocation of the philosopher Jean Hyppolite, who had first proposed him for the Collège de France chair. Thence we move back in time to Arianna Sforzini’s “The Role of Parrhésia in King Lear,” which looks at Foucault’s earliest doctoral work on madness, a 1970 interview in Japan, with Lear as the embodiment of truth, preceding reflections upon the suffocation of Lear’s extravagance in the classical period. Lear reappears in the last Collège de France course, “The Courage of the Truth” (1983-1984), following Foucault’s “Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling” course at the University of Louvain in 1981, where Shakespeare, Corneille, Racine and Schiller “put into question of the modern form of the state” (p. 43). Nothing could be more topical.

Catherine Soussloff’s own contribution, “Deleuze on Foucault. The Recourse to Painting,” focusses on Deleuze’s Foucault and “visibilities” in Foucault’s thought (p. 150). Introductory passages recapitulate Foucault’s mentions of Van Gogh or Artaud and illustrate the Hieronymous Bosch triptych that impressed him before resting on Gérard Fromanger, where Foucault’s text “Photogenic painting” throws us back to Henry Fox-Talbot. But the passage from Fox Talbot’s “shadow images” to Foucault on the photographic “shadow” in Fromanger (p. 153), misunderstands Foucault’s reference to the presence of the artist’s silhouette cast by the slide projector throughout the previous “Painter and Model” series.[13] The painting “left to exist ‘all by itself’”, actually refers to the moment the slide projector is switched off; the projected photograph vanishes from the painting’s surface to which its image has been transferred. (p. 153) “In what might be called its ontological status, then, the completed painted canvas did not directly reference or index the prior image projection” (p. 153). This statement is entirely at odds with Fromanger’s political commitment. His painted police vans, his crowds, owe their on-the-street “look,” with its photographic perspectives to the photographer’s work, catapulted as images through different media: what Foucault called the “frond des images,” or “slingshot”.[14] It is in the third out of five chapters of Deleuze’s posthumous Foucault (1986), “Les
Indeed more useful élán one might argue, why not of letters? impression of not necessarily seek more on gender or minoritics in this collection, but it certainly eschews any impression of the polymorphous desires of Foucault’s 1970s; he shared his world of art and letters, after all, with Guy Hocquenghem, Catherine Millet, Monique Witting and the doyennes of écriture féminine.

Why not Foucault, Arts and Letters? This well-edited and informative volume, misleadingly titled, one might argue, with so much research and moments of great perspicacity, indeed offers a new élan for twentieth-century perspectives on Foucault. It would have been more gracious, and indeed more useful, to have added at least a chronology detailing Foucault’s actual engagement to the remaking of the self—first with Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of “making deserts of ourselves,” according to Andrew Ballantyne, who reverts to Saint Anthony, the model for Flaubert and hence Foucault, and offers the contemporary parallel of Michel Tournier’s Friday or the Other Island. Henry Thoreau’s two years in the woods offer another trope. Finally—via Gilbert Simondon and Bernard Stiegler—one circles back to the heterotopias of mountain and desert island, the opposite of prisons, madhouses and schools. Frédéric Gros’s “The Aesthetics of Bias” focuses on Foucault’s concepts of the aesthetics of existence and how to make oneself a work of art, attempting to redeem Foucault from charges of decadence and depoliticization. He emphasizes the espousal of Nietzsche’s paradigm of creation rather than contemplation (p. 203), Foucault’s classical masters and rigorous work ethic. Self-mastery, self-care is, nonetheless always that of a man in a man’s world. In terms of today’s focus on identity politics, one would not necessarily seek more on gender or minorities in this collection, but it certainly eschews any impression of the polymorphous desires of Foucault’s 1970s; he shared his world of art and letters, after all, with Guy Hocquenghem, Catherine Millet, Monique Witting and the doyennes of écriture féminine.

Both Foucault’s Magritte and Manet projects begin during the crucial sojourn from 1966-1968 in Tunisia. Ilka Kressner emphasises the criticality of the period: Foucault’s violent “March of ‘68” in the former French protectorate, just over a decade into independence. The intensity of his political baptism of fire is instantiated with vivid detail: Foucault’s off-campus lecture on structuralism and “madness and civilisation”, and his student courses on Quattrocento painting, were delivered in a context of revolts and repression. The organisation of rooftop police forces around the “Red Square” inner courtyard of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences was striking. Foucault would evolve “discourses of mobility and... strategies of a mobile challenging of established systems of power,” attacking a prevalent “limp humanism” (“humanisme mou” (p. 171)). It is here that Foucault also studies “the physical reality of speech acts” (p. 172)—though we need to read Dominique Séglard’s “Foucault à Tunis” to learn that the philosophy department was directed by Gérard Déledalle, who introduced Foucault to Austen. The lecture on Manet’s painting and two others are sourced to Les Cahiers de Tunisie (1989)—but the genesis of the rediscovery of the texts is entirely missing, downplaying previous scholarship. Foucault’s disciple Fathi Triki set up the research group whose “Foucault study day” in 1987 revealed the original recordings of Foucault’s lectures, and both Triki and his wife, Rachida Boubaker-Triki, the feminist philosopher, art historian and curator, have published subsequently on the subject.

Finally, to the making of the self—for instance, with Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of “making deserts of ourselves,” according to Andrew Ballantyne, who reverts to Saint Anthony, the model for Flaubert and hence Foucault, and offers the contemporary parallel of Michel Tournier’s Friday or the Other Island. Henry Thoreau’s two years in the woods offer another trope. Finally—via Gilbert Simondon and Bernard Stiegler—one circles back to the heterotopias of mountain and desert island, the opposite of prisons, madhouses and schools. Frédéric Gros’s “The Aesthetics of Bias” focuses on Foucault’s concepts of the aesthetics of existence and how to make oneself a work of art, attempting to redeem Foucault from charges of decadence and depoliticization. He emphasizes the espousal of Nietzsche’s paradigm of creation rather than contemplation (p. 203), Foucault’s classical masters and rigorous work ethic. Self-mastery, self-care is, nonetheless always that of a man in a man’s world. In terms of today’s focus on identity politics, one would not necessarily seek more on gender or minorities in this collection, but it certainly eschews any impression of the polymorphous desires of Foucault’s 1970s; he shared his world of art and letters, after all, with Guy Hocquenghem, Catherine Millet, Monique Witting and the doyennes of écriture féminine.

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with the arts, the posthumous republishing of his relevant texts and significant subsequent scholarship.

NOTES


LIST OF ESSAYS

Catherine M. Sousloff, “Introduction: Perspectives on Foucault and the Arts and Letters”

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Dana Arnold, “Unreason and the Ambiguities of Silence”

Anton Lee, “The Photogenic Invention of Thought-Emotion: Duane Michals and Michel Foucault”

Sophie Berrebi, “Documents, Monuments and Photographs: Jean-Luc Moulène with Michel Foucault”

Part two, Bodily Experience in Dance and Music
Frédéric Pouillaude, “Body Techniques and Techniques of the Self: On Some Uses of Foucault’s Concepts in the Choreographic Field”

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Part three, Heroic and Tragic Subjectivities

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Catherine M. Soussloff, “Deleuze on Foucault: The Recourse to Painting”

Ilka Kressner, “Critical Travels, Discursive Practices: Foucault in Tunis”

Andrew Ballantyne, “Remaking the Self in Hererotopia”

Frédéric Gros, translated by Sima Godfrey, “The Aesthetics of Bios”

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