THE SEMIOTICS OF POWER:
READING MICHEL FOUCAULT'S *DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH*

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Procura-se aqui relacionar a estratégia interpretativa de Foucault com seu conceito de poder, por um lado, e com sua análise do poder – especialmente tal qual exemplificada enquanto semiótica do poder em Surveiller et punir –, *por outro.*

Três regimes da punição são descritos em Surveiller et punir, *sendo analisados como três modos segundo os quais o poder molda e interpreta os sinais da ordem social e de sua transgressão. Reconstruindo as regras da semiótica do poder para cada um desses regimes, torna-se possível a comparação entre a própria estratégia interpretativa de Foucault e as das ordens de poder que ele estuda. A primeira está vinculada às últimas, pois – como se mostrará – Foucault interpreta anedotas históricas e textuais como sinais de ordem, no discurso e nas relações de poder. De um ponto de vista semiótico, o uso que faz Foucault das anadotas (ou narrativas) é paralelo à maneira pela qual o ancien régime servia-se de "marcas", o teatro da punição do século 18 servia-se de "representações", e a prisão moderna vem utilisando "traços".*

Mostra-se que cada um dos quatro modos de interpretação implica pressuposições diferentes quanto à relação significante/significado e quanto à visibilidade do significado. Argumenta-se que a diferenciação entre esses quatro tipos de pressuposições semióticas cobre a totalidade das possibilidades. Logo, se se rejeitam as pressuposições dos três regimes descritos por Foucault em Surveiller et punir *– e há boas razões para fazê-lo–, deve-se adotar a posição do próprio Foucault. Finalmente, mostra-se como o quadro interpretativo de Foucault, que implica seu conceito de poder e restringe a possibilidade de criticá-lo, é responsável pela posição de Foucault como crítico social.*

This paper is an attempt to relate Foucault's interpretative strategy to his concept of power on the one hand, and to his analysis of power, especially the semiotics of power as exemplified in Discipline and Punish, *on the other hand.*

Three regimes of punishment are described in Discipline and Punish *and analysed as three modes through which power imprints and interprets signs of social order and its transgression. When the rules governing the semiotics of power are reconstructed for each regime, it becomes possible to compare Foucault's own interpretive strategy with those of the orders of power he studies. The former is linked to the latter, for, it is shown, Foucault posits and interprets historical and textual anecdotes as signs of order, in discourse and in power relations. From a semiotic point of view, Foucault's usage of anecdotes is on a par with the way the ancient regime used "marks", the eighteenth century "theatre of punishment" was meant to employ "representations", and modern prison has been playing with "traces".*

It is demonstrated that each of the four modes of interpretation entails distinct presuppositions regarding the relation between signifier and signified and the visibility of the signified. The differentiation among these four types of semiotic presuppositions is shown to be exhaustive. Therefore, if one rejects the presuppositions of the three

regimes Foucault describes in Discipline and Punish — *there are good reasons for doing this — one must adopt Foucault's own position. Finally it is shown how Foucault's interpretive framework, which implies his concept of power and constrains its possible criticism, is responsible for his position as a social critic.*

Can one write intelligibly about Foucault and still "evade the fate of commentary" (BC xvii)?[1] Can one write about Foucault without admitting "by definition an excess of the signified over the signifier" (BC xvi)? Can one write about his thought in the way he wrote about the thought of others, bracketing the search for the meaning of what they say, what their words signify, trying, rather, to analyze their words as they appear on the surface of their texts, to look for networks of signifiers, to reconstruct the system of differences and interrelations that governs them?

In this paper I try to follow Foucault and apply to him what he says about interpreting other thinkers. Reading closely one of his works, *Discipline and Punish,* I will count "in the things said by [him] . . . not so much what [he] may have thought or the extent to which these things represent [his] thought, as that which *systematizes them from the outset,* making them thereafter accessible to new discourses and open to the task of transforming them" (BC xix). This cannot be achieved, however, without a certain measure of violence. 'For myself, I prefer to utilize the writers I like", Foucault says about Nietzsche, "The only valid tribute to thought such as Nietzsche's is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest" (PK 53-4). The tribute I would like to pay Foucault in this paper is to show how useful can be that "grid of differences" that "systematizes from the outset" his own work[2].

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[1] A list of abbreviations of Foucault's works is included in the bibliography. All citations and references follow the English translations.

[2] This systematizing element pervades — *malgré lui* — Foucault's work as a whole, endowing it with a unity he so much tried to deny, fixing it in a certain discursive field whose rules he constantly avoided explicating (cf, AK 130). However, I will ignore that aspect of my argument that enables one to unify Foucault's work, for, being still faithful to Foucault, it is not his persona or position as an author, but the validity and applicability of his discourse that concerns me most.

The question of the unity of Foucault's work, i.e., the question of Foucault as an author, is clearly un-Foucaldian, although it may still be a legitimate one for biographers and historians of ideas. They may distinguish between the archaeological and the genealogical interests, and accordingly, between an early period that was guided by the first interest (and therefore more influenced by structuralism) and a latter period, guided by the second interest (and therefore one that transcends structuralism). But then, how should one classify *Histoire de la folie,* Foucault's first major work which combines both interest, and what should one do with the historical analyses in *Naissance de la clinique?* On the other hand, my own analysis will articulate a strong element of continuity that governs the archaeology of *Les mots et les*

This systematizing element, I will argue, is the same element respon-
sible for the exclusion of the commentary and for shifting the reader's
attention from layers of hidden meanings to the play of signs on the surface
of texts. It is, in other words, an element that determines Foucault's own
way of reading signs. This systematizing element is worth a careful recons-
truction because it is precisely this element in Foucault's thought that
accounts for the possibility of an intellectual position which neither claims
transcendental grounding nor entails nihilistic consequences, a position
which has faith in no God, and still does not entail that "anything goes".
This is a position I would like to be capable of defending.

I will reconstruct the systematizing element through a structural
interpretation of Foucault's study of power. I will talk about the power
of signs and the signs of power in four different regimes of power-relations
and fields of discourse. Three of these regimes are described in *Discipline
and Punish*, the story of "the Birth of the Prison". The fourth regime is
exemplified by Foucault's very act of writing and concerns his own dis-
course. I will argue the following: 1) Each regime of power entails a dis-
tinct ontological presupposition regarding the relation between signifier
and signified; this presupposition is shared by anyone who emits or inter-
prets signs within that regime, 2) the differentiation among the four types
of ontological presuppositions is exhaustive[3]; 3) therefore, if one rejects the
ontic commitments of the three regimes Foucault describes in DP, as I think
one should, one must end up — and rightly so — adopting Foucault's own
position[4].

1. *The Anecdote as a Sign of Order*

My starting point is a special figure of discourse Foucault uses quite
often, the anecdote. Foucault's narration — in *Discipline and Punish* and
elsewhere — moves constantly between anecdotes and schematic general-

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choses as well as the genealogy of *Surveiller et punir*. But this element is worth pursu-
ing for its own sake, not in order to impose it on Foucault's work as a whole, on his
literary studies, for example, or on the courses in political philosophy he gave in the
Collège de France in the eighties.

[3]The distinction is exhaustive under a certain description, of course, which in
this context means, under a certain definition of the relation of signification. For a
detailed analysis see Ophir (forthcoming).

[4]Such a position does not amount to a methodology for the human sciences,
but clearly entails an exclusion of certain such methodological approaches. In this
sense Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) are correct to place Foucault "beyond Structu-
ralism and Hermeneutics".

izations[5]. At the book's opening one encounters the shocking description
of the execution of Damien, a regicide, and a tiresome list of rules
for the Parisian "House of Young Prisoners". The two anecdotes im-
mediately give way to a methodological discussion of the historiography
that presents them as exemplary. The same path is followed throughout
the text. One reads, for example, about a certain vocational school (of
the Gobelins) and then proceeds to an analysis of the organization of
time as a disciplinary mechanism (DP 156 ff.); the description of the penal
colony of Mettray is followed by the analysis of the carceral (DP 293 ff.);
and so forth, examples may be piled up here[6]. A pendulum movement takes
place between a story and a structural interpretation, the most concrete
and the most abstract, a forgotten fragment from a lost life-world and a
reconstructed scheme of that life-world as a whole.

Foucault's narration redeems archive items[7], contextualizes them
as pauses in the course of an abstract discussion, and poses them as exem-
plary anecdotes. Of course, "facts" are mentioned or told by Foucault
even in the course of the most abstract analysis. But the anecdote is a
different way to narrate facts, it is a peculiar textual entity that plays a
unique role in Foucault's discourse.

The anecdote is a self-contained piece of narrative, it has a meaning
of its own and "makes sense" even when taken completely out of con-
text. Usually, it refers to a particular reality endowed with the unity of an
"event" (e.g., Damien's execution) or to a particular series of utterances
endowed with the unity of a "text" (e.g., the *Panopticon*). Nevertheless,
it is not the referred event or text that confers upon the anecdote its self-
contained character. Rather, the way a certain piece of language that
"refers" is textualized into the interpreter's discourse determines it as
an illustrating anecdote. The anecdote is differentiated from a background
of other textual elements, other citations and documentations that "refer",
"imply", etc., by a unity that *seems* to be conferred upon it from the
outside through a certain strategy of writing. This unity is what makes
the anecdote exemplary, an informative illustration, something capable
of signifying. The anecdote is endowed, in short, with *an articulated unity
of a sign*, which is always to be grasped against a certain, amorphous back-
ground, still devoid of clear articulation.

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[5] Compare the opening passages of *The Birth of the Clinic* or Borges's Chinese
Encyclopedia which opens *The Order of Things*.

[6] See, for example the petitions concerning executions and tortures (DP 73-5),
the ideal figure of the soldier (DP 135-6), or the organization of a plague stricken
town (DP 195-9).

[7] "In our time, history is that which transforms documents into monuments"
(AK 7); and cf. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (in LCMP).

The clearest case of the anecdote as a sign is the *Panopticon*, Bentham's plan for an all-purpose disciplinary building, one that could fit as a prison as well as a school, or a manufacture, or a hospital. When Foucault reads Bentham he reveals an astonishing isomorphism between the main discursive elements in Bentham's text and diagrams and real disciplinary and punitive elements in modern disciplinary and punitive systems. The panopticon is the "architectural figure" of the composition of two main forms for the exercise of power in the West, exclusion and control over space. Modern prison and its likes are more or less perfect manifestations of this model (DP 199-205). The text is transformed by Foucault from an episode in English political literature into an ideal-type of the disciplinary and punitive phases of modern power relations, it contains all the principal grains of this order of power which the Foucaldian analysis later unfolds.

The anecdote is capable of signification not because it is a representative average or a mere illustration chosen at random. Usually, it is an account of a case in which the "logic of the situation" is consistently brought to the extreme. Thus, for example, an eighteenth century military camp is presented as a "diagram of power that acts by means of general visibility" (DP 171), and the penal colony of Mettray is "especially exemplary" (DP 295) because one may find there "the disciplinary form in its most extreme, the model in which are concentrated all the coercive technologies of behavior" (DP 293)[8]. In other words, an anecdote is a crystallization, so to speak, of every significant element present at large in a certain conjunction of power and knowledge. Furthermore, it is a privileged *locus*, a *topos* — actual or textual — in which all these segments are contingently assembled.

How exactly does the anecdote signify? What gives it its exemplary status? What makes it a privileged entry into a complex of power relations and constitutes it as preferred outlook from which a whole network of discursive and non-discursive practices is suddenly grasped? The anecdote, like any signifying element, somehow "stands" or "substitutes" for "another", and it does so in a certain respect only. This respect, I propose, is the *order* of series of discursive and non-discursive elements.

The signified is an order — complex and multidimensional as it may be — of elements. The signifier is nothing but the crystallization of such an order in a privileged locus. The anecdote articulates an order; the order of elements which the anecdote portrays may be a partial one, but implicit

[8] See also the story of a trial of a young delinquent cited from the workers' newspaper *La Phalange*. Placed at one of the extremes of a continuum of attitudes toward illegality, the story is "situated in the context of the polemic" and may serve to highlight its structure (DP 292 ff.).

in that order is the full scope of interrelations among the elements consti-
tuting the complete order[9]. The identification of the anecdote *qua* sign
means a projection of its order into an entire domain of discourse and
practice, the interpretation of the anecdote *qua* sign is the explication of
a series of elements located in that domain and the articulation of the
order that holds them together. The anecdote embodies implicity a net-
work of relations which the structural interpretation reconstructs, weaving
it, as it were, out of a series of fragments assembled according to a pre-
conceived, projected pattern.

2. *Systematization from Without*

In order to make good on my claim that anecdotes are used by
Foucault as signs of order, it is necessary to present the different ordered
domains to which the anecdotes refer. This would involve a somewhat
tiresome textual analysis to which I will turn in the next section below.
But why should one follow the way anecdotes signify in DP in the first
place?

In DP Foucault describes three regimes of punishment: the public
execution of the ancient regime, the theatre of punishment envisaged
by the French ideologues and some social reformers at the second half
of the eighteenth century, and the carceral regime of modern prison. Appar-
ently, the text is guided by a straightforward historical question: for a short
period of time, around the turn of the eighteenth century, the theatre and the
prison were two alternative systems that competed for the replacement
of the ancient festival of torture. Prison won, the theatre lost, why?[10]
But this historical question presupposes an elaborate distinction among
the three regimes of punishment. From both a philosophical and semiotic
points of view, it is this distinction that should interest us most.

The three regimes are three order signified by the various anecdotes
spread so playfully throughout the text; Foucault says so more or less ex-
plicitly in a passage cited below (DP 131). But one should remember here
that each of Foucault's signified orders is an order of power that employs,
is involved with, and is actually committed to a distinct mode of significa-

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[9]For a more elaborate argument regarding the projection of order as a mode
of signification see Ophir (forthcoming).

[10]See the concluding paragraph of the book's second part, which, literary
speaking, constitutes the main turning point in Foucault's narration: "The problem
then is the following: how is it that, in the end, it was the third [punitive system,
i.e., prison] that was adopted? How did the coercive, corporal, solitary, secret model
of the power to punish replace the representative, scenic, signifying, public, collective
model? Why did the physical exercise of punishment (which is not torture) replace,
with the prison that is its institutional support, the social play of the signs of punish-
ment and the prolix festival that circulated them?" (DP 131).

tion, i.e., a distinct strategy for the imprinting and interpretation of signs. From a semiotic point of view the anecdotes should be placed alongside these three orders. The way anecdotes are read out of other texts, woven into Foucault's own text, and interpreted within it reveals Foucault's own way of reading signs, his own mode of signification, and it presupposes his peculiar notion of power. We are faced then not with three but with four orders of power and modes of signification.

Here lies the core of my argument. Once Foucaldian anecdotes are understood in the context of both how and what they signify, it is possible to show that the three regimes of punishment are three orders of power-relations which are necessarily co-related with three modes of signification. Logically speaking, given a certain semiotic order, the order of power that activates signs, interprets them, and announces itself through them, is also given. Hence, only one form of power-relations can be consistently co-related with a given semiotic order and vice-versa (only one semiotic order can be co-related with a given form of power-relation), and the correlation itself (i.e., the co-existence of a given semiotic order and a given order of power) is necessary. An important corollary of this is that the kind of critique of power possible within the framework of the Foucaldian position, as well as the practical dimension of this critique, are necessarily linked to the concept of power its semiotics entail. In other words, Foucault's own semiotic framework is necessarily linked to his position as a social critic.

Foucault himself gives us a clear entry into the grid of possible relations between power and signification. Toward the end of the second part of the book, after enjoying for a while that pendulum movement between con-crete anecdotes and abstract generalizations, and right before formulating his guiding historical question, Foucault speaks about "three ways of organizing the power to punish ... that face one another in the second half of the eighteenth century . . . [three] modalities according to which the power to punish was exercised . . . three technologies of power" (DP 130-1). He summarizes the series of elements that characterize the three regimes of punishment as follows:

> We have, then, the sovereign and his force, the social body, and the
> administrative apparatus; mark, sign, trace;
> ceremony, representation, exercise,
> the vanquished enemy, the juridical subject in the process of requal-
> ification, the individual subjected to immediate coercion,
> the tortured body, the soul and its manipulated representations,
> the body subjected to training (DP 131).

One may easily read this key passage more schematically, arranging "the three series of elements that characterize the three mechanism [of power]" in the following table (only the headings of the columns and rows have been added to the text):

Type of regime the semiotic element	Execution	Theatre	Prison
The power that imprints and interprets signs	sovereign	social body	administrative apparatus
Type of signification	mark	sign	trace
Act of signification	ceremony	representation	exercise
Signified individual	vanquished enemy	juridical subject	individual subjected to coercion
The medium of signification	tortured body	soul and its representation	body subjected to training

Power in this context is the power to punish (according to the law, the will of the sovereign, or the criminal's personality), but it is also the power to organize society in such a way that the punitive regime would be effective as a means for order and stability. The structural interpretation of power is organized around one key aspect of power-relations, i.e., the semiotics of power: power as that which imprints, distributes, and interprets signs. The signs discussed here are those that relate to human reality, especially those designating the demarcation lines that map the social space: the lines that separate a sovereign from his subjects, a delinquent from a law-abiding citizen, a deviant from a normal person, a legal from an illegal act. The semiotic aspect is so cardinal because the semiotic structure is conceived as a necessary condition for the possibility of interaction among all other layers of social life and as a medium for the interaction between power and knowledge.

The table drawn above schematizes and correlates three types of power relations and modes of signification involved in the three punitive regimes, but I would like to go further. Adding Foucault's own notion of power and his own mode of interpreting signs, it is possible to schematize the table according to three key parameters: the presence of power, the relation between signifier and signified, and the visibility of the signified. It is only with this systematization that the historical argument may be rendered philosophical, for organizing the four different types of power and signification in this way demonstrates that — under a certain description, at least — the distinction among them is exhaustive indeed.

The rest of the paper consists of three parts. The first extracts and explicates the three parameters presented schematically above out of the

account given in *Discipline and Punish* to the three punitive regimes, moving, as it were, from a quick description to an abstract characterization. Obviously, attention is paid mainly to the semiotic elements of each punitive system. The next part explicates Foucault's interpretive strategy and his concept of power in terms of the same abstract characterization. Finally, in the last part, some conclusions are drawn regarding the validity and limitations of a Foucaldian social criticism.

3. *Three Regimes of Punishment*

I. *Public Execution*

At the middle of the eighteenth century, punishment is still "an art of unbearable sensations" (DP 11), a ritual of torture (DP 34); and above all, it is a community festival. As in every festival, symbols abound, the routine of everyday life is suspended, and some old continua and dichotomies, fundamental for social and intellectual order, are reasserted through the suspending event. The main function of this event is to re-establish the sovereign as the sole source of law and order and as a mighty power that crushes its enemies.

At the center of the picaresque scene lies, is hung up or tied down, the body of the condemned. He is the main bearer of marks, but also the one who is marked. The placard he carries, the public reading of his sentence, the procession through the streets, his hand that once carried the dagger and is now visibly burnt, the *amende honorable*, all these are marks as well as acts that display marks (DP 42-4). The condemned is marked as the one who committed the crime, the vanquished enemy of the crown, and the miserable soul that seeks pardon and refuge (DP 46). But also marked are the very crime with its nuances and horrors, and the power that comes now to terms — through playful elimination of the criminal's body — with the crime that has challenged it (DP 48). Power too is not only marked but also the bearer of its own marks, being present everywhere, through "a whole military machine [that] surrounds the scaffold" (DP 48).

Let us take a closer look at the marks which are on display on the scaffold stage and around it.

The mark is attached to the marked object from the outside — take for example the placard to which the condemned is nailed, or his burnt hand (DP 43-5). But even if the mark radiates, so to speak, from within the marked object, it takes an external gaze to declare it, out of that object's many facets, as the object's mark. The mark does not signify an object because it somehow belongs to the object, rather, signifying power is endowed to the marking element by the same power that attaches it or the gaze that singles it out. The act that attaches the mark is the act that determines a single phenomenal element as "a mark of something". A provisional code is established with the moment of signification; signi-

fication is inscribed anew at each such moment and through it. From this
it follows that the power that renders distinct phenomenal elements into
marks (of objects, events, persons, etc.) must announce itself as a power
endowed with a "marking authority", and that it must make both its marks
and its acts of marking publicly recognizable. The audience of the public
execution needs no acquaintance with the legal code of pain (DP 34),
which is based on a series of ambiguities in any case (DP 36-44), for it has
everything needed for interpreting each moment of signification: the au-
dience witnesses power as it is imprinting its own marks through the marks
it fixes upon persons and artifacts in the execution's scene.

The semiotic relation we decipher here immediately brings to mind
the semiotic relations that   characterize the *épistèmè* of the Renaissance,
according to Foucault's brilliant analysis in *The Order of Things*[11]. The
Renaissance scholar, according to Foucault, was a master of reading texts,
the Book of Nature included. The authority he claimed for himself was
based upon his skillful ability to establish marks of similarity between
conspicuous segments of natural or linguistic phenomena. By the same
token, the sovereign in the festival of torture claimed authority by a display
of marks, of his own power, of his vanquished enemy, and of the social
order which the festival of torture reenacted. Both the learned scholar and
the mighty monarch worked with a plethora of competing codes and no
procedure to decide among them[12]. They participated in a kind of semiotic
dance in which signifier and signified were coordinated for the benefit of
the power that held them together. Authority, of the sage or of the sovere-
ign, was always reaffirmed through semiotic activity, although, once things
went wrong, heresy could take the place of orthodoxy and rioters the
place of the Prince. This, however, could happen through inversion of
meanings, while using the very same semiotic elements (cf. DP 58 ff.) and
without breaking the structure of the semiotic relation involved. There are
three elements in this structure which should be now reformulated for the
sake of further analysis.

The first thing to note is *the ontic aspect of the signifying relation*.
Signifier (mark) and signified (marked object) are correlated from without,
i.e., signification does not depend upon the existence of any relevant ontic
connection between the two relata. Following a scholastic distinction
echoed in Leibniz, I will call this type of ontic relation, relation of *con-
venience* — to be later distinguished from relation of *connection*[13].

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[11] Cf. OT, "The Prose of the World", pp. 17-45.

[12] More on the semiotics of the Renaissance Ophir (forthcoming) and Feldhay
and Ophir (forthcoming).

[13] Leibniz distinguished between "relation of comparison" — which he also
called   "relation of convenience' — and "relation of connection" (G.W. Leibniz,
Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe, A; vi, 1-95, 285, 371). The crux of the distinction is
the existence — or its lack — of an ontic connection between the two relata.

The second conspicuous characteristic of the semiotic relation concerns the *visibility* of the signified. Some signifieds may be unobservable, invisible in their very nature, like God, for example, or "class consciousness", or the Idea of the Good. These are ever absent signifieds, they can never be present as such in the phenomenal field in which their signifiers appear. This is not the case with the mark. Even when the signified, e.g., the sovereign, is absent from the space in which its marks are displayed, its absence is contingent. There is nothing in the semiotic relation that requires an absent signified as a condition for the presence and functioning of the signifier.

Finally, the third characteristic concerns the *presence of power*. The power that endows objects, persons and words with their signifying capacity is present through, and alongside with, the moment of signification. Since correlation of signified and signifier is basically arbitrary, given to the needs, whims and wit of the power that distributes signs, the manifested presence of power is a necessary condition for signification to occur. Also, power cannot announce itself, imprint its own signs, except through recurrent acts of "surfacing", through an orchestrated manifestation of its presence. And necessarily so, for power itself has become an object of signification now. The legitimate agents of power, those authorized to imprint signs and interpret them, must share with all the participants to the play of power the same two presuppositions regarding the relation between signifier and signified and the visibility of the signified.

We are faced then with two basic binary relations (signified is/is not connected to signifier; signified is/is not visible in principle) and a necessary corollary regarding the presence of power (power is/is not present in principle). Each punitive regime, and in the last analysis each notion of power and mode of signification involved, is but one out of four possible transformations of the two binary relations, as the following analysis will show.

II. *The Theatre of Punishment*

French reformists of the penal system of the late eighteenth century shared a dream about punishment as a "museum of order", a school for civic obedience, or better still, an institutional theatre with regular shows all over the country (DP 111-3). These shows, however, did not purport to become a bourgeois version of the monarchical festival of torture, but to enact a totally different social order in a totally different way.

Most eighteenth century reformists hoped to control the body and manipulate its behavior by a controlled manipulation of the mind, its ideas and representations. The "theatre of punishment" and the "museum of order" they envisaged had to represent a taxonomy of crime and punishment, a classification of deviation and its price. This classification was, in fact, a careful delineation, as if from the outside, of civic order. A map

of a stable society had to be drawn by way of repeating references to types
of illegality. The shows in that theatre had to create this effect through
a performative production of a series of signs, which would *represent* the
type of crime committed and the class of punishment exerted, and would
play the traditional threefold function of the sign: *rememorativum, de-
monstrativum, prognostikon.* Punishment produces an effective sign if it
recalls the crime, demonstrates the effectiveness of the Law, and prognozes,
i.e., prescribes punishment to further crimes of the same *type.*

The entire repertoire of the theatre encloses a taxonomy of crime
and punishment. Every show, each punitive act, *represents* a class in a
table. Not the details of the crime are significant but the place it occupies
in that table, i.e., its type. The power that punishes inflicts no more violence
than what is necessary for the "neat", perfectly rational linkage between
a crime and its corresponding punishment, acting always according to a
preestablished code, with no trace of revenge, devoid of any sentiment.

The semiotic relation in the theatre of punishment is, no doubt, an
example of classic representation. Representation rests on a well established
code, on a relation so "natural" between representing signifier and repre-
sented signified, that the power that activates it becomes invisible. The Law
is the code on the basis of which punishement signifies, i.e., represents. On
the basis of the Law punishment and offence are correlated *qua* signifier
and signified. The Law, however, is nothing but social order inscribed into
texts; correlation is therefore as self-evident, obvious, or natural as that
social order is. Signification should remain opaque to the fact that a whole
sophisticated mechanism of power is required in order to legitimize power,
enforce the Law, and execute punishment. One should never face the power
that acts behind the scene, because this might destroy the "clear and dis-
tinct" link between crime and offence. The signifier (punishment) has to be
wholly transparent towards its signified (offence), yet it is always by law,
not by nature, that the two are correlated.

In the theatre of punishment the Law, that human manifestation of
order, occupies the same place held by language in the classic épistèmè
described by Foucault in OT. One is unable to see the constitutive power
active through it, but one is always aware of its human — as opposed to
natural — status and character (cf. OT 62). In OT it was through language
that man ordered Nature into classes, and it was through the legal code that
he was supposed to order society into its various segments (OT, 4, V).
According to OT, contemporary scientific language in the classical age was
not guided by Nature but opposed to it in order to conquer it, to make it
wholly comprehensible; in the same way, in the theatre of punishment,
the nature of the social did not guide the Law but had to be conquered
through it. Offence and punishement had nothing in common, except for
a penal code inscribing from without an arbitrary link between them.

At the same time, since the signified which punishment represents
here was not a token but a type of offence, a class in a taxonomy of trans-

gressions, it was always absent from the theatre's scenes. It was the idea of a class of crimes, not any particular crime, which was represented in those shows; it was therefore impossible that the signified would have ever been present on the stage.

The three parameters of the semiotic relation in the theatre of punishment may be summarized as follows:

1. The ontic aspect of the semiotic relation: convenience.
2. The visibility of the signified: signified is unobservable.
3. The presence of power: signification is opaque towards the power that activates it, power is concealed.

III. *Modern Prison*

Bentham's *Panopticon* contains the ideal type of disciplinary punishment, that punitive system that was finally adopted by modern Western societies. In this faultless combination of a leperd house and a plague sricken city, a school and a prison, a manufacture and a laboratory, the body of the imprisoned confronts not the ruthless arm of a monarchic sovereign but the invisible, yet ever-present eye of the bourgeois Law. Modern imprisonment is an art of manipulation of surfaces; it distributes spaces, allocates time, and regulates activities, gestures, and minute bodily movements (DP 141-195). Yet it is depth which is presupposed throughout, a depth which the art of the surface should recarve. Not only is the body coerced but a whole person is to be reshaped.

Since they had to move between surface and depth, surperficiality and wholeness, modern disciplinary systems operate through a double play of *traces*: on the one hand, power interprets traces of hidden entities within the behavior of the subjects it observes (like, e.g., "personality", "character", a "psychotic syndrome" or a "developmental stage"); on the other hand, power systematically leaves its own traces on the body and surroundings of the subjects it shapes. This can be witnessed, for example, even in the seemingly innocent organization of the space of a classroom. (i)   The traces of power are everywhere, in the organization of space, in scheduling a time-table, in the division of labor and leisure, and of course, in the presence of all kinds of agents of surveillance. From the "client"'s point of view, none of these particular regulations or the agents that impose them should be taken as direct representatives of power. Each of them, however, betrays a hidden presence of a powerful system that makes one obey or breaks one to the point of rebellion. Whenever one obeys or resists, one does not merely respond to a particular supervising agent or to a manipulative regulation, but to the system as a whole. Yet this system exists only as the signified which the particular traces of power signify. One may find the traces of power everywhere, but nowhere can one face it "as it really is". The headmaster is not different in this respect from any of his teachers, nor is the warden from any of the guards. The disciplinary system envelops

its clients in numerous regulations and channels their interactions with its
agents into narrowly confined patterns. In this way, specific regulations and
particular modes of interactions are emptied of any significance, which
means, precisely, that something else must be significant, something greater
than any of those details, greater even than their sum total, hence invisible.
A detail in a disciplinary system can be effective only when taken as a trace
for the invisible power that activates the system as a whole.

(ii)   When the behaviour of the system's clients is broken down to its
minute details something very similar happens. Significance cannot lie
within any of the details grasped in isolation, it must lie somewhere else,
in a unobservable plane. Hence, each detail of the client's behaviour beco-
mes a trace of that hidden, "unifying" agent responsible for a series of
gestures, speech acts, and actions. As the individual is scrutinized in the
observatory of a disciplinary system, an almost perfect mirror image is
formed between the subjectivity of power and the objectivity of its sub-
jects. It all depends upon the role one plays in the system, upon one's
institutional point of view. The disciplined is supposed to reflect the sub-
jectivity of power, as that unified, invisible system of coercion and regula-
tion; the disciplinary agent is supposed to constitute the objectivity of
his/her subjects, their "character", or "personality", their tendency to act
thus or otherwise, or the unifying substance that governs their past, present,
and future behaviour.

Throughout the interpretive process a surface of visible traces signifies
the invisible, unifying element. Surfaces, however, are always part of that
which remains in depth, that which is already and forever absent. The
signifier is ontically connected to the signified, and it is so connected
through a particular play of absence and presence. This connection means,
moreover, that it is of the nature of the signified to appear through its
signifiers in this particular way. In the case of the trace, it is not an external
power — of language, the Law, or the sovereign — that correlates signifier
and signified, but the nature of the signified itself. In other words, in this
semiotic relation, the signified and the power that endows distinct pheno-
mena with their signifying capacity are one and the same thing. Power is the
invisible signified *par excellence*, that which is always only partly mani-
fested and whose mode of manifestation is precisely its mode of activity.

The three parameters of the semiotic relation that characterize the
modern disciplinary system may be summarized as follows:
1. The ontic aspect of the semiotic relation: connection.
2. The visibility of the signified: the signified is unobservable.
3. The presence of power: power is present as hidden; it is not external to
   the signifying moment, but manifests its very nature through it.

4. *The Foucaldian Square*

Three parameters have been abstracted and articulated in the inter-

pretive analysis: ontic relation between signifier and signified, phenomenal availability of the signified, the presence of the power that imprints signs. Since we are dealing here with two basic binary relations (signifier is/is not ontically related to the signified, signified is/is not visible) it is possible to rearrange the three semiotic systems and regimes of power in a four-square matrix. Fortunately enough, the fourth, empty square is occupied by Foucault's own semiotics and concept of power, as I demonstrate in some detail below.

As for the third parameter, the possible presence of power, it is implied by the nature of the signifying relation and the visibility of the signified. Each mode of semiotic relations puts certain, very definite constraints on the power that imprints and interprets signs: it affects the way interpretive claims are redeemed, the communicability of the signifying act, the receptivity of the medium on which signs are imprinted and out of which they are interpreted, and routes of manipulation or coercion for the production of meanings, through a *legitimate* exercise of power. In the upper right square, for example, a reliable signification requires the active presence of the power that imprints and interprets marks; in the lower right square, representation is not effective without presupposing an already established code and is not reliable without eliminating the traces of the power that enforces it, and finally, in the lower left square, depth analysis is not effective without the power to manipulate surfaces.

Viewed from a different perspective, the power that activates a certain mode of signification must rely on that same mode in order to be posited as an object of signification: the sovereign (or the sage) must announce his strength and authority by means of the marks he distributes through a certain violence done to men and scripts; an ordered society is represented in the perfect, transparent codex of its laws; and a disciplinary power manifests its invisible omnipresence through manipulation of surfaces.

Granted this semiotic grid and the constraints upon the interrelations between power and discourse which it implies, it is possible to make a reflexive turn now. It is possible to move from semiotic systems *qua* objects for Foucault's structural interpretation to Foucault's own semiotic system — taken now as the object of our structural interpretation. Foucault too is engaged in an interpretive enterprise, albeit of a very special kind. Foucault too takes certain (discursive) phenomena as "standing for" something else, discursive regularities, formations or practices, for example. In other words, Foucault too interprets signs. Locating Foucault's semiotics by means of the semiotic grid reconstructed above is a key for understanding "that which systematizes [his] thought from the outset". Since the semiotic grid establishes a system of contraints for the power/knowledge interaction, deciphering this element of systematicity also supplies one with a key for understanding the pratical-political position of Foucault's writing, i.e., for understanding his position as a social critic.

	CONNECTION	CONVENIENCE
signified is visible	Archeology of knowledge, Genealogy of power (Foucault) Signifying device: Anecdote as a crystallization of order Power: its presence is an implication of signification; Transgression Postmodern *episteme*?	Public execution as a festival of torture Signifying device: Mark Power: its presence is a necessary pre-condition for signification; Torture Renaissance *episteme*
signified is invisible	The modern prison; Panoptic society Signifying device: trace; expression Power: its hidden, partially manifested presence is a pre-condition for signification; it inheres in the signifying relation; Coercion of bodies Modern *episteme*	The theatre of punishment Signifying device: representation Power: its total absence is a pre-condition for signification; it is foreign to the signifying relation; Manipulation of minds Classic *episteme*

Even before looking back at Foucault's distinct semiotics, it must be clear that he cannot belong to any of the semiotic modes he recons tructs. Being a post-Nietzschean thinker, he can share neither the semiotic presuppositions of Platonic representations (classic épistèmè; the theatre of punishment— nor the Hegelian interplay of surface and depth, parts and whole (of the modern prison). The arbitrariness of the mark is also out of the question for one who, despite the abolition of the possibility for met aphysical, methodological grounding in the search for knowledge, refuses an anarchist attitude[14] and even confesses positivism, albeit of a very peculiar sort[15]. The elimination of all three semiotic positions necessarily places Foucault in the fourth square. This means that for him, signifier and sig

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[14]See, for example, Foucault's response to the accusation that *Surveiller et punir* has an anaesthetic effect (Foucault 1980).

[15]"If, by substituting the analysis of rarity for the search for totalities, the description of relations of exteriority for the theme of the transcendental foun dation. . . one is a positivist, then I am quite happy to be one". (AK 125; see also the notion of the "positivity of discourse", ibid, 125-8, 168-9, 171-81, 186-8, 190-5).

nified must be ontically linked and the signified cannot be unobservable; hence, the system of power-relations must be signified by some of its elements and co-present with them in the same phenomenal field. The illustrating anecdote is a typical mode of signification in this semiotic regime, to which we should turn now.

The anecdote is a privileged type of sign in a semiotics one may call a "semiotics of (projected) order", or alternatively, a "semiotics of surfaces". Interpretation of signs in this semiotic regime is a matter of guesses, extrapolations, and prejudices put to the test; in short, it is an art of putting forward hypotheses, or, alluding to Peirce, an art of "abduction"[16]. No code is given in advance; the identification of an element as a sign is itself a hermeneutical process and is inextricably linked to the intepretation of the signified.

However, the link between signifier and signified, that is between a crystallized yet partial order and a projected — complete — one, is not arbitrary. The lack of any code may remind one of Renaissance semiotics. But we are not dealing here with a network of ambigous resemblances (cf. OT ch. 2), which could be carved and recarved according to the interpreter's whims. Signification is based now on isomorphisms of order, which — in principle, at least — may be a strictly analytic matter. The same relations should exist among elements of the same kind. The signifying order "reflects" another order, but it is not posited over against the "reflected" order. The signifying order is rather a *part* of the signified domain, the signifier is governed by the internal rules of the general order which it exemplifies due to the contingent, temporary crystallization of those rules in its privileged locus.

Hence, Foucaldian semiotics presupposes indeed an ontic connection between signifier and signified. At the same time, it is clear that the two elements must be co-present in principle in the same phenomenal field. The *Panopticon*, for example, appears in the same discursive space together with numerous other plans for the exercise of power in the modern state; at the same time, it is their ideal type. The *Panopticon* signifies an order that governs a whole disrcursive domain by bringing it to perfection and without transcending it. Similarly, the signified order is never hidden, its partial crystallization does not constitute an outer expression of its inner essence. The order of elements Foucault deciphers is always a formation of patterns in a two dimensional plane; his interpretive analysis, even when taking the form of a genealogy, is an art of surfaces.

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[16] Abduction, or "hypothetical inference", is based on the interpretation of a particular case as an instance of a universal or a general rule, which is neither deduced nor inductively inferred. Rather, the rule is hypothetically posited as a necessary and integral moment of the interpretive process. See C.S. Peirce (1953/1958, 2.623-5; 4.541; 5.145, 171, 196); and Eco (1976, pp. 131-133).

What is that effervescent surface upon which Foucault delineates
ordered formations of discursive elements? It is, I believe, what Foucault,
refused to call in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* "archive"; it is a text-
ualized world, a past rendered into piles of documents which, when under-
stood in their proper discursive context, are later turned into monuments
(cf. Intr.: part iii, ch. 5). Foucault never looks at bare, cunning power-
relations, cruel executions of the actual daily practices of coercing, but only
at their discursive traces. Digging now into the archive where discursive and
nondiscursive practices have left their imprints, he delineates structures, pat-
terns, or regularities, out of a continuous, seemingly endless web of words,
pictures, and other graphic signs.[17] True, these are regularities of old and
recent modes of social and discursive activity, but it is the order of their
traces in the present archive that is now being deciphered. From the point
of view of discursive analysis, "il n'y a pas de hors-textes", to use Derrida's
phrase, (1976, p. 156) even if it is a reconstruction of order, not necessarily
a deconstruction of texts, which is here at stake.

5. *The Concept of Power and the Position of the Critic*

Foucault is not merely another interpreter of texts that almost
nobody reads any longer, not even a social theorist who proposed a new
theory of power-relations. His theory is a form of practice, and a very
political one at that; some of his texts are political acts, and very subversive
ones at that. The subversiveness of Foucault's writing will be grasped once
we understand the nature of the power that activates signification in Fou-
cault's discourse.

The anecdote serves as a valid vehicle of signification to the extent
that it is indeed a crystallization of order. This means that its signifying
power cannot be reduced to the conventions of one's style or to the strate-
gies of one's writing. The anecdote may be a reliable sign only if the order
it crystallizes occurs in reality, in the domain of the signified, i.e., in the

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[17]*The Archaeology of Knowledge* may be seen as an attempt to describe how
such discursive patterns and regularities are identified and reconstructed. See especially
the second part named "The Discursive Regularities". The fact that *The Archaeology*
is based in part of a reflection on three earlier works and the *Surveiller et punir* departs
significantly from what that book describes or recommends hardly matters. Foucault
may have changed his mind regarding the relation between discourse and the rest
of the world (social institutions, material relations). Discourse may be taken now
not as a paradigm for the search of knowledge but as a series of battles for truth (cf.
"Truth and Power" in PK). But if the history of these battles is to be made intelligible,
"susceptible of analyses down to the smallest detail. . . in accordance to the intel-
ligibility of struggles, of strategies and tactics" (PK p. 114), one should keep searching
for regularities of elements, and one can find regularities of elements in the archive
only, in the place in which those battles have been documented.

archive. What then is the power that holds a series of archive elements in an ordered ensemble? The question immediately turns a signified order into a sign of the power that lies somewhere "behind" the ordered surface or makes that order possible. Turning a signified into a signifier is a common semiotic phenomenon (see Eco 1976, pp. 133-6), but to turn power once again into a hidden agent means to violate the principles of Foucaldian semiotics stated above. In order to remain consistent Foucault must keep playing on the surface of discourse: therefore he has to give an account of power which would not fall back in a type of "depth semiotics" (of the kind that characterizes modern punitive systems). Order cannot be a manifestation of the power that activates, governs or sustains it, yet remains somewhere behind the scene. Order is not a by-product of power-relations; the constitution of an order and the exercise of power are one and the same thing. Power is not stored somewhere and then applied so as to enact an order. Power exists only so far as a certain order is maintained, destroyed, or generated, or when there are attempts to reconstruct an order or to deconstruct it.

In DP, Foucault does not develop, at least not explicitly, such a concept of power that would allow the analysis of power and social order without a retreat into a "metaphysics of depth". But a sketch for such a concept can be found in the series of interviews and articles that followed the publication of the book[18]. Power is neither a reified entity nor some kind of diffused, but still unified energy which acts behind the scene[19]. Power is spoken of in terms of actions that limit or change the field of possibilities of the behavior of an agent. Strictly speaking there is no "power" but "power-relations" and "the exercise of power"[20]. In other words, there are only modifications of actions by other actions. These moments of modifications — by means of threats or sanctions, control and manipulation of spatio-temporal frameworks of activity, division of labor, training, etc. — are:
1. observable; 2. documented for us by contemporary observers;
3. usually displayed through a variety of regularities.

The exercise of power becomes intelligible and worth noticing when and where it is possible to identify *regular* modifications of actions by other actions. Regularity here may concern the types of agents involved, definite spatio-temporal arrangements within which actions are taken,

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[18]See the interviews gathered in *Power/Knowledge*; also Foucault 1980; and "The Subject of Power", appended to Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983. I dealt with the relation between Foucault's main texts, published as books, and his minor publications and interviews in Ophir 1985.

[19]See, e.g., "The Subject of Power", Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, pp. 219 ff.

[20]Ibid. pp. 216-221.

certain techniques by which modifications are achieved, advantages or
disadvantages of the agents involved, etc.

If one insists on asking what "behind" or "below" this regularity
of action's modification, the Foucaldian strategy *should be* to withdraw
to other, more comprehensive orders of relations, to which a specific power-
game belongs. Such a strategy may be at work, for example in DP, in
Foucault's references to the emergence of capitalism, with its new modes
and relations of production (DP 82 ff., 220-22).

Since Foucault is interested in a "microphysics of power", a domain
neglected by most Marxists and liberal analysts of the political arena, he
merely presupposes, and takes as his point of departure, the existence of
certain orders of relations in the sphere of the "macrophysics of power"[21].
Note that the microphysics of power is not independent of the State and
the economy, but presupposes these (and perhaps other) macro-systems as
its necessary background and the contingent network of its external cons-
traints. The way is always open for anyone who wishes to go from local
orders in the micro-level to more general orders in the macro level and
vice versa[22]. At no point along this way should one assume forces hidden
in principle, working behind the overt scene. The matter is one of varying
degrees of complexity, abstraction and concreteness, and immediacy in the
relay of power. The analysis moves accordingly along a horizontal line,
between more and less painstaking, detailed thick descriptions, not ver-
tically, between more and less penetrating acts of unconcealment.

The production, distribution, and interpretation of signs, it should
be clear by now, are all modes in the exercise of power. All participants in
the situation — be it the festival of torture or a military camp, a show in

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[21] For the place of the State in Foucault's concept of Power see e.g., "Truth
and Power", an interview with A. Fontana and P. Pasquino: ". . . the State, for all
the omnipotence of its apparatuses, is far from being able to occupy the whole field
of actual power relations, and. . . [it] can only operate on the basis of other, already
existing power relations" (PK 122).

[22] Michael Walzer (1983) has argued against Foucault that because he lacks
any concept of right he necessarily ignores the role of a social critic and can supply
no ammunition for his struggle: the struggle for the rights of oppressed individuals
and groups vis-à-vis the dominating State. But if I am correct in the above argument,
Foucaldian analysis of power is at least relevant for any such struggle and can be
used in the attempt to delegitimize an oppresive order of power. Such an analysis
may be useful not only when rights are denied but also when the concept of right
itself is used as a means in the legitimation of a coercive order of power, or when it
seems irrelevant altogether. In fact, it is precisely the problematization of a system
of power relations which allows one to pose the question of rights within a relevant
sphere of human interaction (e.g., the hospital, the asylum), to understand human
relations in that sphere in terms of struggle and oppression, and to take a moral stand
on that struggle. Cf. Foucault's remarks on "problematization" in his interview with
Paul Rabinow (FR 381-9).

the theatre of punishment or a shift in prison — have an active share in the semiotic activity and in the exercise of power involved with it. Power works through signs whether it imprints and distributes them or deciphers and decodes them, whether it interprets, misinterprets, or refuses to interpret them. Exercising power is truly an exercise in semiotics, whether one punishes in order to signify (e.g., the theatre of punishment) or signifies in order to punish (e.g., labeling or naming), and whether one signifies in order to discipline (e.g., marking of space) or discipline in order to signify (e.g., drills, parade). The opposite is no less true: any systematic use of signs presupposes and reactivates an involvement with a certain system of power-relations. Hence, the articulation of semiotic strategies involved in power-relations means a reconstruction of a network of relays and transmission lines through and along which power is exercised. This means that, due to its semiotic preoccupation, social theory can assume the role of social criticism, and can play this role in a very special way. This role, the role of the Foucauldian theorist as a social critic, is the subject matter of the remaining of this paper.

Undermining the epistemological and ontological foundations of the semiotics of power may have only a marginal effect, if any, on the system of power relations. But the fact that the semiotic aspect of power and knowledge is exposed as a strategy in the exercise of power may suffice to invite a moment of transgression, it may lead one from an attempt to understand power to a struggle against it, creating a scene for possible resistance along the lines of order just exposed. The historian does not oppose merely this or that manoeuvre of power while being still caught in the system which has anticipated and programmed even the routes of negations; the historian — who has now become a social critic — confronts the system of power as a whole.

Surely, when the system under investigation has long passed away, when its only place is the archive, the historian's discourse may seem innocent of power-relations. But disciplinary punishment and the punishment of the disciplines are alive and well. To expose their strategies — and Foucault does not expose, of course, their semiotic strategies only — is to expose them from without[23]. As far as signification goes, at least, an exposed strategy is a less effective strategy. The production and interpretation of signs may be based on a semiotic structure in which signs are natural or conventional, or both; but if such a structure is to be regarded as reliable for the process of the transmission of messages it must appear as innocent of manipulation as possible. Signification takes place, writes Umber-

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[23] Resistance, however, is still enacted from within. Foucault, as well as his contemporary interpreters, cannot free themselves entirely from the system that has reared them, provided their salaries, and judged their words and deeds. Hence transgression is such an appropriate term.

to Eco, (1976, pp. 6ff, 58; 179), whenever there is a possibility to lie or deceive. But signification is effective only as long as its lies remain unde- tected and the deception it spreads is still veiled. Foucault is not interest- ed in pointing out this or that lie within a given process of signification, but in exposing that structure which underlies the very possibility to lie — which is also the possibility to signify. By forcing power to give its semiotics away Foucault calls into question the production and interpre- tation of signs through which a system of power operates, becomes ef- fective and yields its legitimation. To decipher the semiotic aspect of a working system of power-relations is therefore a clear act of transgression.

The semiotic aspect of power lies at the basis of the order of power relations in society. It lies at certain junctures of power and knowledge, in places where non-discursive and discursive practices meet and interplay. To expose this order and these junctures means to articulate a layer of *impensé* in social reality. This *impensé* is not concealed but something lying out there, in the open, in one's visual field, yet in order to grasp it one must switch perspectives. Social theory of the type Foucault has developed, performs precisely this: Switching perspectives. Thus, a theory of practice which touches upon its object precisely at the point where words can touch things has become possible; it is a theory that touches upon the discourse that imprints, distributes and interprets signs. Power is ex- posed at that very dimension in which theory can do more than to descibe or explain it; power is exposed at its discursive — communicative and semi- otic — skeleton, at the dimension most susceptible to the impact of theory. At this semiotic level Q theory may be capable of undermining power, or setting its limits.

Looking back at the place Foucault holds in the semiotic matrix it is possible to infer certain constraints on the kind of social theory that yield valid social criticism.

I. Foucaldian semiotics presupposes an ontic link between those social and discursive phenomena endowed with a signifying power and their signifieds. This means, quite simply, that the interpretation — of words and deeds — cannot be based upon conventional meanings of acts, ut- terances and gestures. The meanings of actions and statements are not denied but rather suspended.[24] Theoretical attention is now shifted from meanings to order of signifiers. This implies a unique interpretive strategy, which I suggest to name — alluding to Ricoeur yet against him — "the

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[24] Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) rightly speak about a double *epoché*. Over and above the phenomenological suspension of judgement regarding the existence of the referents of concepts, Foucault adds a second suspension, of judgement regarding the meaning of concepts. Ignoring both meaning and reference, Foucault follows the display of groups of concepts in their discursive field and reconstructs the rules that govern such a display, i.e., the possible ways to use the relevant concepts.

hermeneutics of suspension"[25]. Adopting this hermeneutics, social theory does not look for the meaning of what one wants to say *(vouloir dire)* or intends to do, but for orders of acts, communicative and non-communicative alike.[26] At the same time, being committed to the observability of its objects, social theory does not presuppose hidden motives or interests acting behind the scene and does not look for their expressions in words or deeds. Adopting a hermeneutics of suspension the social theorist shifts attention from such expressions and what they mean to the organization of entire, yet limited, fields of discourse and practice, and to the set of constraints that govern the sayable and the doable within them.[27]

II. Social theory must adopt a kind of "critical positivism". Interpreting various domains of social reality, social theory must posit its signified on the surface of social fields. Thus, social criticism must speak in terms of observable regularities of behavior and orders of relations among overt elements of social reality, discursive practices included. This "positivist" observation of order is critical on two accounts. First, the theoretical statements it yields are open to both empirical and conceptual reformulation or refutation. Second, it does not stop at regularities of known social facts; by a constant shift of perspectives it establishes ordely relations among elements of new kinds, which the common reconstruction of social reality consistently misses[28].

III. Perhaps the most important constraint for social theory and criticism is Foucault's new concept of power. The localization of power, the rejection of the notion of a unifying, hidden agent as the *source* of power, and the understanding of order as power-at-work, not a sign-for-power, define and structure a field of possible theoretical and critical moves. Most importantly, this concept of power allows for criticism which is not restricted by the fact that the critic still belongs to the social order she criticizes, and yet is not conducted from an impossible Archimedean point. The subject of the critique would never be "the capitalist nation-state" or

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[25] Ricoeur (1970, pp. 32-6) coined the term "hermeneutics of suspension", referring mainly to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, whose hermeneutic enterprises unsystematically cover concealed and hidden meanings.

[26] For the notion of communicative act and its distinction from non-communicative act see Habermas (1980, pp. 94-101; 273-336).

[27] One can find an excellent example for such a shift of attention in Foucault's inaugural lecture in the Collège de France (Foucault 1971). A lousy translation of this text is appended to AK as "The Discourse on Language". A decent translation is included in Young (1981).

[28] Foucault speaks about making "visible the unseen" by "a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, asthetic, political or historical value" ("Prison Talk", PK 50).

the "post-industrialized society", for such entities are much too complex
ensembles of systems of power-relations, each deserving a reconstruction
and criticism of its own. The order of power is always too local to allow
for totalizing moments of the kind the Frankfurt School thinkers or Sar-
tre of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* once entertained. But this is
precisely what enables the critic to take a position while stepping outside
the power-system he scrutinizes and what allows theory to counter an
order of power from without. But not from above: critical discourse meets
the discourse of power always already from within a conflicting system of
power and on the battle ground betwen the two systems[29].

The semiotic framework of the analysis of power combined with the
specific place Foucault occupies in the semiotic grid allows him a privileged
position as a social critic. It is a position which is free, I believe, of the
illusions of "fondationalism", or "transcendentalism" on the one hand,
and, against the view of many of his critics, of the pitfalls of relativism on
the other hand. This position is available to Foucault precisely because his
critical and interpretive strategies are linked intrinsically, as shown above,
to a certain semiotic structure that entails a definite ontic commitment
regarding the nature of the relation of signification. A theory that has
given up its claim for a transcendental position is a theory that has given
up its claim for a disinterested study of the world of interest — laden
practices. Not only does Foucault deny the possibility of a disinterested
theory; his theory claims a very definite interest, it has a very clear kind
of political engagement: to delineate from the outside an order of power in
certain domains, that is, to designate demarcation lines that call for a pos-
sible transgression, to open new horizons for resistance to power, to modify
the field of possibilities of social actions.

The outline is sound but still sketchy. One still needs a clear notion
of evil in order to establish transgression as a moral, not only political
act, and resistance as a worthy, not only possible attitude. A Foucaldian
inspired social criticism of such a sort may require an analytics of order
that would secure signification through the projection of order as a reliable
vehicle in the search for knowledge, in the human sciences at least. Finally,
and somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, one may have to place the structural
interpretation of order and the hermeneutics of suspension it entails within
a comprehensive hermeneutic theory; only such a theory could give a valid
account of the contrast between Foucaldian interpretive strategies and the

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[29]"There is a battle 'for truth', or at least 'around truth' — it being unders-
tood that by truth I . . . mean . . . the ensemble of rules according to which the true
and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true . . . "
"Truth and Power", an interview with Fontana and Pasquino in PK. Cf. also the
conversation with Deleuze ("A 'theory' is the regional system of that struggle [for
power]") in LCMP.

outcasted commentary, that type of interpretation I have been trying to avoid in this paper. I do not think that Foucault's work can provide us with any of these not so small demands. But it does provide us with a beginning of a framework and some working hypotheses for the reconstruction of a unique position in the fields of intellectual history and social criticism, a position some of us at least, have been sharing — unknowingly — with Michel Foucault. It is a position that does not need the ultimate grounding of any transcendental philosophy and nevertheless resists the nihilistic attitude of self-defeating relativism; this is a position that allows one to think discursively after the death of God in face of the possible death of man.

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