SEMIOTEXT(E) FOREIGN AGENTS SERIES
Jim Fleming & Sylvère Lotringer, Editors

IN THE SHADOW OF THE SILENT MAJORITIES, *Jean Baudrillard*
NOMADOLOGY: THE WAR MACHINE, *Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari*
DRIFTWORKS, *Jean-François Lyotard*
POPULAR DEFENSE AND ECOLOGICAL STRUGGLES, *Paul Virilio*
SIMULATIONS, *Jean Baudrillard*
THE SOCIAL FACTORY, *Toni Negri & Mario Tronti*
PURE WAR, *Paul Virilio & Sylvère Lotringer*
LOOKING BACK ON THE END OF THE WORLD, *Jean Baudrillard et al*
FOUCAULT LIVE, *Michel Foucault*
FORGET FOUCAULT, *Jean Baudrillard*
BEHOLD METATRON, THE RECORDING ANGEL, *Sol Yurick*
BOLO'BOLO, *P. M.*
SPEED AND POLITICS, *Paul Virilio*
ON THE LINE, *Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari*
SADNESS AT LEAVING, *Erje Ayden*
REMARKS ON MARX, *Michel Foucault*
69 WAYS TO SING THE BLUES, *Jürg Laederach*
INTERVENTIONS, *Michel Foucault*
ASSASSINATION RHAPSODY, *Derek Pell*
THE ECSTASY OF COMMUNICATION, *Jean Baudrillard*
COMMUNISTS LIKE US, *Toni Negri & Félix Guattari*
GERMANIA, *Heiner Müller*

SEMIOTEXT(E) NATIVE AGENTS SERIES
Chris Kraus & Sylvère Lotringer, Editors

NOT ME, *Eileen Myles*
HANNIBAL LECTER, MY FATHER, *Kathy Acker*
IF YOU'RE A GIRL, *Ann Rower*
WALKING THROUGH CLEAR WATER, *Cookie Mueller*
SICK BURN CUT, *Deran Ludd*
ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES, *Barbara Barg*

JM Foucault
M 1692
N X C

MICHEL FOUCAULT

REMARKS ON MARX

Conversations with Duccio Trombadori

Translated by R. James Goldstein
and James Cascaito

SEMIOTEXT(E)

1991

questions is present in the conversations with Foucault that I reproduce in these pages with the sole regret that I did not have the opportunity to elaborate, on the level of criticism and contents, as much as I would have liked. Nonetheless, the outline of an unusual intellectual biography clearly emerges here, grounded in the historical and cultural landscape of contemporary France, where the figures of Bataille, Klossowski, Bachelard, and Lévi-Strauss stand out among others. And then there is always present Foucault's confrontation with the "theoretical humanism" of the existentialists (with Sartre leading the way, who is polemically alluded to in a moving reference to the events in Czechoslovakia in 1968); and his polemic with the "Marxism" of the Frankfurt School. To conclude, I would draw attention to Foucault's preliminary observations concerning the relation between truth and experience in his works, where the theme of language returns powerfully, as well as the "instrumental" and "dreamlike" character that compels him to write books "in order to change myself and no longer to think the same thing as before."✣

How...

1

How an 'Experience-Book' Is Born

Duccio Trombadori: I think one could explain the interest which has been concentrated on the results of your thought, especially in recent times, in this way: there are few people, notwithstanding the different ideological "languages" or points of view, who would not

be willing to recognize the progressive and disconcerting dissociation between "words" and "things" in the contemporary world. This also justifies the meaning of our discussion: an attempt to understand better the leaps you've made in the course of your investigations and research, the changes of field in your analysis, and the acquisition of new theoretical understandings. From your studies of "originary (*originaire*) experience" in *The History of Madness* to the theses more recently presented in *The History of Sexuality*, it seems that you proceed by leaps, by shifting the levels of investigation.[17] If I wanted to characterize your thought in order to reveal its essential and continuous character, I could begin by asking: in the light of your most recent research on "power" and the "will to knowledge," what do you think you have surpassed in your earlier work?

Michel Foucault: Many things have certainly been surpassed. I'm perfectly aware of having continuously made shifts both in the things that have interested me and in what I have

already thought. In addition, the books I write constitute an experience for me that I'd like to be as rich as possible. An experience is something you come out of changed. If I had to write a book to communicate what I have already thought, I'd never have the courage to begin it. I write precisely because I don't know yet what to think about a subject that attracts my interest. In so doing, the book transforms me, changes what I think. As a consequence, each new work profoundly changes the terms of thinking which I had reached with the previous work.

In this sense I consider myself more an experimenter than a theorist; I don't develop deductive systems to apply uniformly in different fields of research. When I write, I do it above all to change myself and not to think the same thing as before.

Duccio Trombadori: The idea of a work as "experience" should in any case suggest a methodological point of reference. Or, if nothing else, it should permit the possibility of extracting the directions taken in a method,

within the relationship between the means employed and the results obtained in the investigation.

Michel Foucault: I never know at the beginning of a project what I'll think at its conclusion. Thus it is difficult to indicate clearly what the method is which I employ. Each of my books is a way of dismantling an object, and of constructing a method of analysis toward that end. Once a work is finished, I can of course, more or less through hindsight, deduce a methodology from the completed experience. And thus I happen to write alternatively what I'd call books of exploration and books of method. Books of exploration: *The History of Madness*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, etc. Books of method: *The Order of Things*, *The Archeology of Knowledge*. And now, after having finished *Discipline and Punish* and while waiting to finish *The History of Sexuality*, I am setting down certain thoughts in articles, interviews, etc.

There's no fixed, definite rule, but a series of precise considerations of completed works

which can help me define other possible objects of investigation. If you want an image, think of a network of scaffolding that functions as a point of relay between a project being concluded and a new one.

Thus I don't construct a general method of definitive value for myself or for others. What I write does not prescribe anything, neither to myself nor to others. At most, its character is instrumental and visionary or dream-like.

Duccio Trombadori: What you're saying confirms the eccentricity of your position; and in a certain sense it explains the difficulties encountered by critics, commentators, and interpreters in the attempt to locate or to attribute to you a precise place within contemporary philosophical thought.

Michel Foucault: But I don't consider myself a philosopher. What I do is neither a way of doing philosophy nor a way of suggesting to others not to do it. As far as I'm concerned, the most important authors who have — I won't say formed me — but who have enabled me

to move away from my original university education, are: Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Pierre Klossowski. All of them people who were not "philosophers" in the strict, institutional sense of the term. What most struck and fascinated me about them is the fact that they didn't have the problem of constructing systems, but of having direct, personal experiences. At the university, however, I had been instructed to attempt to understand those great philosophical monuments, which when I was a student were called Hegelianism, phenomenology....

Duccio Trombadori: You speak of phenomenology: but all phenomenological thought is centered on the problem of experience, in which these thinkers place their trust in order to delineate the theoretical horizon of their philosophy. In what sense, then, do you distinguish yourself from the phenomenologists?

Michel Foucault: The phenomenologist's experience is basically a way of organizing the conscious perception (*regard réflexif*) of any

aspect of daily, lived experience in its transitory form, in order to grasp its meaning. Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot, on the contrary, try through experience to reach that point of life which lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living, which lies at the limit or extreme.[18] They attempt to gather the maximum amount of intensity and impossibility at the same time. The work of the phenomenologist, however, essentially consists of unfolding the entire field of possibilities connected to daily experience.

Moreover, phenomenology tries to grasp the significance of daily experience in order to reaffirm the fundamental character of the subject, of the self, of its transcendental functions. On the contrary, experience according to Nietzsche, Blanchot, and Bataille has rather the task of "tearing" the subject from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such, or that it is completely "other" than itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation, its dissociation.

It is this de-subjectifying undertaking, the idea of a "limit-experience" that tears the

subject from itself, which is the fundamental lesson that I've learned from these authors. And no matter how boring and erudite my resulting books have been, this lesson has always allowed me to conceive them as direct experiences to "tear" me from myself, to prevent me from always being the same.

Duccio Trombadori: Work as a continually unfolding experience, the extreme relativity of method, a de-subjectifying tension: these are three essential aspects of your attitude toward thought, as I understand it. Starting with these aspects taken together, one wonders what certainty there could be in the results of such research: what would be the definitive "criterion of truth" which follows from certain premises of your way of thinking?

Michel Foucault: The problem of the truth of what I say is very difficult for me, and it's also the central problem. It's essentially the question which up to now I have never answered.

In the course of my works, I utilize methods that are part of the classic repertory:

demonstration, proof by means of historical documentation, quoting other texts, referral to authoritative comments, the relationship between ideas and facts, the proposal of explanatory patterns, etc. There's nothing original in that. From this point of view, whatever I assert in my writing can be verified or refuted as in any other history book.

Despite that, people who read me, even those who appreciate what I do, often say to me, laughing: "but in the end you realize that the things you say are nothing but fictions!" I always reply: who ever thought he was writing anything but fiction?[19]

If, for example, I had wanted to write the history of psychiatric institutions in Europe between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, I'd certainly never have written a book like *The History of Madness*. But the problem isn't that of humoring the professional historians. Rather, I aim at having an experience myself — by passing through a determinate historical content — an experience of what we are today, of what is not only our past but also our present. And I invite others to share

the experience. That is, an experience of our modernity that might permit us to emerge from it transformed. Which means that at the conclusion of the book we can establish new relationships with what was at issue; for instance, madness, its constitution, its history in the modern world.

Duccio Trombadori: The efficacy of your discourse comes into play completely in the balance between the force of the demonstration and the capacity to refer to an experience that might lead to a transformation of the cultural horizons within which we judge and experience our present. I still don't understand how, in your opinion, this process is related to what we called before the "criterion of truth." That is to say, to what extent are the transformations which you are talking about in a relationship to truth; or how do they produce "truth-effects"?

Michel Foucault: There is a peculiar relation between the things I've written and the effects they have produced. I'm not saying this out of

vanity. Look at the fate of *The History of Madness*: as soon as it was published, it was very well received in some literary circles (Blanchot, Roland Barthes); considered with curiosity at first by psychiatrists; totally ignored by historians who didn't consider it interesting, etc. Then, after a few months, the level of hostility was raised to the point that the book was judged a direct attack against modern psychiatry and a manifesto of anti-psychiatry. This was absolutely not my intention for at least two reasons: first, when I wrote the book in Poland in 1958, anti-psychiatry didn't exist (Laing himself was little known); second, it wasn't a matter in any case of a direct attack on contemporary psychiatry, because it stopped at analyzing facts and events which took place no later than the beginning of the nineteenth century. And so why did people insist on seeing in that work a direct attack on contemporary psychiatry? I'm convinced that the reason is this: the book constituted for me — and for those who read or used it — a transformation of the relation (marked historically, theoretically, and also

from the ethical point of view) which we ourselves have with madness, the institution of psychiatry, and the "truth" of that discourse.

So here is a book that functions as an experience, much more than as the demonstration of a historical truth. Thus I return to the discourse on "truth": it is evident that in order to have such an experience through a book like *The History of Madness*, it is necessary that what it asserts is somehow "true," in terms of historically verifiable truth. But what is essential is not found in a series of historically verifiable proofs; it lies rather in the experience which the book permits us to have. And an experience is neither true nor false: it is always a fiction, something constructed, which exists only after it has been made, not before; it isn't something that is "true," but it has been a reality.

To summarize, then: the difficult relation with truth is entirely at stake in the way in which truth is found used inside an experience, not fastened to it, and which, within certain limits, destroys it.

Duccio Trombadori: This "difficult relation with truth": is it a constant that accompanies your research, and which may also be recognized in the series of your works that followed *The History of Madness*?

Michel Foucault: The same thing could be said about *Discipline and Punish*. The inquiry is limited to an investigation covering the period up to about 1830. But even in this case readers, whether critics or not, took it as a description of modern society. You won't find an analysis of the present in the book, although it's true that for me it was a matter of living out a certain experience related to contemporary life.

Here too the investigation makes use of "true" documents, but in such a way as to furnish not just the evidence of truth but also an experience that might permit an alteration, a transformation, of the relationship we have with ourselves and our cultural universe: in a word, with our knowledge (*savoir*).

Thus this game of truth and fiction — or if you prefer, of evidence and fabrication —

will permit us to see clearly what links us to our modernity and at the same time will make it appear modified to us. This experience that permits us to single out certain mechanisms (for example, imprisonment, penalization, etc.) and at the same time to separate ourselves from them by perceiving them in a totally different form, must be one and the same experience.

This procedure is central to all my work. And what are its consequences? First of all, that there does not exist a theoretical background which is continuous and systematic. That implies, secondly, that there is no book that I've written without there having been, at least in part, a direct personal experience. I had a personal, complex, direct relation with madness, psychiatric hospitals, and illness. And even with death: when I was working on *The Birth of the Clinic*, arguing about the subject of death in medical knowledge, it took place at a time when these things had a certain importance for me. Thirdly, starting from experience, it is necessary to clear the way for a transformation, a metamorphosis which isn't

simply individual but which has a character accessible to others: that is, this experience must be linkable, to a certain extent, to a collective practice and to a way of thinking. That is how it happened, for example, for such movements as anti-psychiatry, or the prisoners' movement in France.

Duccio Trombadori: In indicating, or as you say, in clearing the way for a transformation capable of being linked to a collective practice, I find already the outline of a methodology or a particular type of "teaching." Doesn't it seem so to you? And if so, doesn't that seem to contradict another requirement that you've mentioned, of avoiding a discourse that prescribes?

Michel Foucault: I would reject this term "teaching"; such a term would reflect the character of a work, of a systematic book that leads to a method that can be generalized, a method full of positive directions, of a body of "teachings" for the readers. In my case it's another matter entirely: my books don't have

this kind of value. They function as invitations, as public gestures, for those who may want eventually to do the same thing, or something like it, or, in any case, who intend to slip into this kind of experience.

Duccio Trombadori: But isn't it true that a "collective practice" must lead us back to values, criteria, and behavior which transvalue individual experience?

Michel Foucault: An experience is, of course, something one has alone; but it cannot have its full impact unless the individual manages to escape from pure subjectivity in such a way that others can — I won't say re-experience it exactly — but at least cross paths with it or retrace it. Let's return for a minute to the book on prisons. In a certain sense it is a historical investigation. But its audience appreciated or detested it not as a historiographical work. All its readers felt or had the impression that it was about them, the world today, or their relations with "contemporaneity," in the forms by which the latter is accepted and recognized

by everyone.... We feel that something contemporary has been brought up for discussion. And in effect I began writing this book only after having participated for some years in work groups — groups involved in reflections "upon" and struggle "against" penal institutions. It was complex and difficult work, carried out with prisoners, their families, prison guards, magistrates, etc.

When the book came out, various readers — particularly prison guards, social workers, etc. — gave this singular judgment: "It is paralyzing. There may be some correct observations, but in any case it certainly has its limits, because it blocks us, it prevents us from continuing our activities." My reply is that it is just that relation that proves the success of the work, proves that it worked as I had wanted it to. That is, it is read as an experience that changes us, that prevents us from always being the same, or from having the same kind of relationship with things and with others that we had before reading it. This demonstrates to me that the book expresses an experience that extends beyond my own.

The book is merely inscribed in something that was already in progress; we could say that the transformation of contemporary man is in relation to his sense of self.[20] On the other hand, the book also worked *for* this transformation; it has been, even if in a small way, an agent. That's it. This, for me, is an "experience-book" as opposed to a "truth-book" or a "demonstration-book."✣

2

The Subject, Knowledge, and the 'History of Truth'

Duccio Trombadori: I'd like to make an observation at this point. Your speak of yourself and of your research as if the latter had developed almost independently of its historical context — and above all of the cultural relationships — within which your research came to maturity. You've cited Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot: how did you arrive at them? What