

Chapter 13

Micro-techniques and Panoptic Discourse: A Quid pro Quo

In his *Discipline and Punish*,¹ Michel Foucault examines the organization of penal, academic, and medical "surveillance" at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He multiplies synonyms and evocations in an attempt to approximate proper nouns for what are the silent agents of his story (as if these escaped verbal identity): "apparatus," "instrumentations," "techniques," "mechanisms," "machineries," and so on. This very uncertainty and terminological instability is already suggestive. Yet the basic story the book has to tell—that of an enormous quid pro quo or socio-historical deal—postulates a fundamental dichotomy between ideologies and technical procedures, and charts their respective evolutions and intersections. In fact, what Foucault analyzes is a chiasmus: how the place occupied by humanitarian and reformist projects at the end of the eighteenth century is then "colonized" or "vampirized" by those disciplinary procedures that have since increasingly organized the social realm itself. This mystery story narrates a plot of substituted corpses, the sort of game of substitution that would have pleased Freud.

As always, for Foucault, the drama is played out between two forces whose relationship to one another is inverted by the ruse of history. On the one hand, there is the ideology of the Enlightenment, with its revolutionary approach to the matter of penal justice. The reformist projects of the eighteenth century aim

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essentially at doing away with the "ordeal" of the *ancien régime*, with its bloody ritualization of hand-to-hand combat intended to dramatize the triumph of royalty over criminals whose crimes had particular symbolic value. Such projects involved the equalization of penalties, their gradation according to the crime, and their educational value both for the criminals and for society itself.

In actual fact, however, disciplinary procedures evolved in the army and in the schools rapidly come to prevail over the vast and complex judicial apparatus elaborated by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and the new techniques are refined and applied without recourse to any overt ideology: the development of a cellular grid (whether for students, soldiers, workers, criminals, or sick people) transforms space itself into an instrument that can be used to discipline, to program, and to keep under observation any social group. In such procedures, the refinement of technology and the attention to minute detail triumph over theory and result in the universalization of a single, uniform manner of punishment—prison itself—which undermines the revolutionary institutions of the Enlightenment from within and everywhere substitutes the penitentiary for penal justice.

Foucault thus separates two heterogeneous systems. He describes the triumph of a political technology of the body over an elaborated system of doctrine. Yet he does not stop here: in his description of the institution and of the triumphant proliferation of this particular "minor instrumentality"—the penal grid—he also tries to elucidate the workings of this type of opaque power, which is the property of no individual subject, which has no privileged locus, no superiors, and no inferiors, which is neither repressive nor dogmatic in its action, and whose efficacy is quasi-autonomous and functions through its capacity to distribute, classify, analyze, and give spatial individuality to any given object. A perfect machinery. Through a series of clinical—and splendidly "panoptical"—tableaux, Foucault attempts to name and classify the "methodological rules," the "functional conditions," the "techniques" and "processes," the distinct "operations" and "mechanisms," "principles" and "elements" that would constitute something like a "microphysics of power." His text is thus an exhibition of their secrets, an exhibit that has a dual function: 1) to diagram a particular stratum of non-verbal practices and 2) to found a discourse *about* those practices.

Nature and Analysis of the Micro-techniques

How are such practices to be described? In a characteristic strategy of indirection, Foucault isolates *the gesture that organizes discursive space*—not, as in *Madness and Civilization*, the epistemological and social gesture of confining an outcast in order to create the space of reason itself, but rather a minute gesture, everywhere reproduced, by which visible space is partitioned in order to subject

its inhabitants to surveillance. The procedures that repeat, amplify, and perfect this gesture organize in turn that discourse which comes to be called the "human sciences" or *Geisteswissenschaften*. Thus, in Foucault's view, eighteenth-century procedures that constitute a *non-verbal gesture* have been privileged (for historical and social reasons) and have then been articulated through the discourse of contemporary social sciences.

The novel perspectives² opened up by this analysis might also have been prolonged into a whole stylistics, a whole method for analyzing the non-verbal gesture that organizes the text of thought itself. But that is not my purpose here. Rather, I wish to raise several questions relating to these practices.

First Question: In his archaeology of the human sciences—Foucault's explicit project since *The Order of Things*—and in his search for that common "matrix"—the "technology of power"—which could be found to organize both the penal code (the punishment of human beings) and the human sciences (the knowledge of human beings), Foucault is led to make a *selective choice* from among the totality of procedures that form the fabric of social activity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He begins with a proliferating system examined in its *present status* (essentially our contemporary scientific or juridical technology), and moves backward to the past. It is a surgical operation. It consists in *isolating* the cancerous growth from the social body as a whole, and thereby in *explaining* its contemporary dynamic by way of its *genesis* in the two preceding centuries. Drawing on an immense mass of historiographic materials (penal, military, academic, medical), this method disengages the optical and panoptical procedures which can increasingly be found to proliferate within our society, thereby identifying the disguised indices of an apparatus whose structure gradually becomes more precise, complex, and determinate within the density of the social fabric or body as a whole.

This remarkable historiographic "operation" raises two distinct questions at one and the same time: on the one hand, the decisive role of *technological procedures* and apparatuses in the organization of a society; on the other, the exceptional development or privileged status of *one particular category* (i.e., the panoptical) among such apparatuses. We must therefore now ask:

a) How do we explain the *privileged development* of the particular series constituted by Foucault's panoptical apparatuses? It is perhaps not so surprising, when we recall that optical epistemology is fundamental since the sixteenth century in the elaboration of modern sciences, arts, and philosophy. In this case, the panoptical machinery is only a historical effect of this technical scientific and philosophical optical tradition. It does not constitute the victory of anything new, but the victory of a past, the *triumph of an old system* over a new, liberal, and revolutionary utopia. A past model of organization is coming back and "colonizing" the revolutionary projects of a new time. This return of the past suggests a Freudian story.

b) What happened to all the *other* series of procedures that, in their unnoticed itineraries, failed to give rise either to a specific discursive configuration or to a technological systematization? There are many other procedures besides panoptical ones. These might well be looked on as *an immense reserve* containing the seeds or the traces of alternate developments.

It is, in any case, impossible to reduce the functioning of a whole society to a single, dominant type of procedure. Recent studies (such as that of Serge Moscovici on urban organization,³ and Pierre Legendre on the medieval juridical apparatus⁴) have revealed other kinds of technological apparatuses, which know an analogous interplay with ideology, and prevail for a time before falling back into the storehouse of social procedures as a whole, at which point other apparatuses replace them in their function of "informing" a whole system.

From this point of view, then, a society would be composed of certain practices which, selectively developed and externalized, organize its normative institutions alongside innumerable other practices. The latter, having remained "minor," do not organize discourse itself but merely persist, preserving the premises or the remnants of institutional or scientific hypotheses that differ from one society to another. But all these procedures present the double characteristic underscored by Foucault of being able to organize both space and language in dominant or subordinate ways.

Second Question: It is the final formation or "full" form—in this instance the whole contemporary technology of surveillance and discipline—which serves as the point of departure for Foucault's archaeology: the impressive coherence of the practices he selects is thereby explained. But can we really assume that all procedures in themselves had this coherence? A priori, no. The exceptional and even cancerous development of panoptical procedures would seem to be indistinguishable from their *historic role* as a weapon against heterogeneous practices and as a means of controlling the latter. Thus, their coherence is the effect of a particular historic success, and not a characteristic of all technological practices. Thus, behind the "monotheism" of the dominant panoptical procedures, we might suspect the existence and survival of a "polytheism" of concealed or *disseminated practices*, dominated but not obliterated by the historical triumph of one of their number.

Third Question: What is the status of a particular apparatus when it has become the organizing principle of a technology of power? What is the effect upon it of that process whereby it has been isolated from the rest, privileged, and transformed into a dominant? What new kind of relation does it maintain with the dispersed ensemble of other procedures when it has at length been institutionalized as a penitentiary and scientific system? It might well be that an apparatus privileged in this fashion could lose that efficacy which, according to Foucault, it originally owed its own mute and minuscule technical advances. On emerging from that obscure stratum where Foucault locates the determining

mechanisms of society, it might well find itself in the position of an institution itself imperceptibly colonized by other, still more silent procedures. Indeed, this system of discipline and surveillance, which was formed in the nineteenth century on the basis of preexisting procedures, is today in the process of being "vampirized" by still other ones which we have to unveil.

Fourth Question: Can we go still further? As they have evolved, the apparatuses of surveillance have themselves become the object of elucidation and a part of the very language of our rationality. Is this not a sign that they have ceased to determine discursive institutions? They now belong to our ideology. The organizing apparatuses the discourse can explain would no longer fill that silent role which is their definition for Foucault. At that point (unless we are to suppose that, by analyzing the practices from which it is itself derived, *Discipline and Punish* surmounts its own basic distinction between "ideologies" and "procedures"), we have to ask what apparatus determines Foucault's discourse in turn, an underlying apparatus which by definition escapes an ideological elucidation.

By showing, in a single case, the heterogeneous and equivocal relations between apparatuses and ideologies, Foucault has constituted a new object of historical study: that zone in which technological procedures have specific effects of power, obey logical dynamisms which are specific to them, and produce fundamental turnings aside in the juridical and scientific institutions. But we do not yet know what to make of other, equally infinitesimal procedures that have remained unprivileged by history yet which continue to flourish in the interstices of the institutional technologies. This is most particularly the case of procedures that lack the essential precondition indicated by Foucault, namely the possession of a locus or specific space of their own on which the panoptical machinery can function. Such techniques, which are just as operative though without locus, are rhetorical "tactics." I suggest that these secretly reorganize Foucault's discourse, colonize his "panoptical" text, and transform it into a "trompe-l'oeil."

Micro-techniques to Produce a Panoptical Fiction

When theory, instead of being a discourse upon other preexistent discourses, ventures into non- or pre-verbal domains in which there are only practices without any accompanying discourse, certain problems arise. There is a sudden shift, and the usually reliable foundation of language is missing. The theoretical operation suddenly finds itself at the limits of its normal terrain, like a car at the edge of a cliff. Beyond, nothing but the sea. Foucault works on this cliff when he attempts to invent a discourse that can speak of non-discursive practices.

But we may consider the micro-techniques as building the theory, instead of being its object. The question no longer concerns the procedures organizing social surveillance and discipline, but the procedures producing Foucault's text

itself. In fact, the micro-techniques provide not only the content of the discourse but also the process of its construction.

Recipes to Produce a Theory

As in cooking, here we find subtle "recipes" to get theories of practices. Yet in the same way that a cooking recipe is punctuated with a certain number of action imperatives (blend, baste, bake, etc.), so also the theoretical operation can be summed up in two steps: extract, and then turn over; first the "ethnological" isolation of some practices for obtaining a scientific "object," then the logical inversion of this obscure object into an enlightening center of the theory.

The first step is a "découpe": it isolates a design of some practices from a seamless web, in order to constitute these practices as a distinct and *separate* corpus, a *coherent* whole, which is nonetheless *alien* to the place in which theory is produced. It is the case for Foucault's panoptical procedures, isolated from a multitude of other practices. By this way, they receive an ethnological form. Meanwhile, the particular genre thereby isolated is taken to be the metonymy of the whole species: a part, observable because it has been circumscribed, is used to represent the undefinable totality of practices in general. To be sure, this isolation is used to make sense out of the specific dynamics of a given technology. Yet it is an ethnological and metonymic "découpage."

In the second step, the unity thus isolated is reversed. What was obscure, unspoken, and culturally alien becomes the very element that throws light on the theory and upon which the discourse is founded. In Foucault, procedures embodied in the surveillance systems at school, in the army, or in hospitals, micro-apparatuses without discursive legitimacy techniques utterly foreign to the *Aufklärung*, all become the very ordering principle that makes sense of our own society just as they provide the rationale of our "human sciences." Because of them, and in them, as in a mirror, Foucault sees everything and is able to elucidate everything. They allow his discourse itself to be theoretically panoptical in its turn. This strange operation consists in transforming secret and aphasic practices into the central axis of a theoretical discourse, and making this nocturnal corpus over into a mirror in which the decisive reason of our contemporary history shines forth.

This very "tactic" marks his history as belonging to the same species of practices he analyzes. Foucault, of course, already studies the determination of discourse by procedures in the case of the "human sciences." His own analysis, however, betrays an apparatus analogous to those whose functioning it was able to reveal. But it would be interesting, in regard to a theory of these micro-techniques, to consider the differences between the panoptical procedures Foucault has told us about and the twin gesture of his own narrative, which con-

sists in isolating a foreign body of procedures and inverting its obscure content into a spotlight.

An Art of Making Panoptical Fictions

In this way, Foucault's theory is also part of the art of "scoring." It does not escape its object, that is, the micro-procedures. It is an effect and a network of these procedures themselves. It is a narrative, a theoretical narrative, which obeys rules analogous to those panoptic procedures. There is no epistemological and hierarchical break between the theoretical text and the micro-techniques. Such a continuity constitutes the philosophical novelty of Foucault's work.

This kind of "art" is easy to see at work. It is an art of telling: suspense, extraordinary quotations, ellipses of quantitative series, metonymical samples, etc. A complete rhetorical apparatus is used for seducing and convincing an audience. It also is an art of seizing the opportunity and of making a hit, by crossing old texts and contemporary conjunctures. Foucault has specified himself as a "reader." His reading is a poaching. Hunting through the forests of history and through our present plains, Foucault traps strange things which he discovers in a past literature and uses these for disturbing our fragile present securities. He has an almost magic power for pointing at surprising confessions in historical documents as well as in contemporary ones, for gathering both these past and present curiosities into a system, and for transforming these revelations of non-verbal practices determining our political and epistemological institutions into convincing evidence. His rhetorical art, creating an obviousness that reverses our obvious convictions, is the literary gesture of a certain way of acting. His immense erudition is not the principal reason for his effectiveness, but rather this art of speaking which is also an art of thinking.

His manner of using a panoptical discourse as a mask for tactical interventions within our epistemological fields is particularly remarkable. He practices an art of "scoring" by means of historical fictions. *Discipline and Punish* draws on subtle procedures for "manipulating" erudite exhibitions. It is a calculated alternation between three variants of optical figures: representational tableaux (exemplary narratives),⁵ analytic tableaux (lists of ideological "rules" or "principles" relating to a single phenomenon),⁶ and figurative tableaux (seventeenth-nineteenth century engravings and photographs).⁷ This system combines three sorts of shop-windows: case-study narratives, theoretical distinctions, and past images. It only pretends to show and not to explain how a machinery worked: it makes this opaque process visible and transparent by staging it in three different panoptical settings. Organizing a rhetoric of clarity—or "écriture de la clarté"—it produces an effect of self-evidence in the public. But this theater of clarity is a ruse. It systematically displaces the fields in which Foucault

successively intervenes. It is a subversive operation, hidden by and within a limpid discourse, a Trojan horse, a panoptical fiction, using clarity for introducing an otherness into our "epistémè." Taken for granted, the panoptical space of our contemporary scientific language is consciously and craftily reorganized by heterogeneous micro-techniques. It is colonized and vampirized, but voluntarily colonized by procedures that obey contrary rules.

This way of thinking cannot have a discourse of its own, because it amounts essentially to a practice of non-locus. The optical space is the frame of an internal transformation due to its rhetorical reemployment. It becomes a façade, the theoretical ruse of a narrative. While the book analyzes the transformation of Enlightenment ideologies by a panoptical machinery, its writing is a subversion of our contemporary panoptical conceptions by the rhetorical techniques of a narrative.

On a first level, Foucault's theoretical text is still organized by the panoptical procedures it elucidates. But on a second level, this panoptical discourse is only a stage where a narrative machinery reverses our triumphant panoptical epistemology. Thus, there is in Foucault's book an internal tension between his historical thesis (the triumph of a panoptical system) and his own way of writing (the subversion of a panoptical discourse). The analysis pretending to efface itself behind an erudition and behind a set of taxonomies it busily manipulates is like a ballet dancer disguised as a librarian. And so, a Nietzschean laughter meanwhile runs through the historian's text.

Two short propositions may be an introduction to a debate, and may take the place of a conclusion:

1) Procedures are not merely the objects of a theory. They organize the very construction of theory itself. Far from being external to theory, or from staying on its doorstep, Foucault's procedures provide *a field of operations within which theory is itself produced*. With Foucault we get another way of building a theory, a theory which is the literary gesture of those procedures themselves.

2) In order to clarify the relationship of theory with those procedures that produce it as well with those that are its objects of study, the most relevant way would be a *storytelling discourse*. Foucault writes that he does nothing but tell stories ("récits"). Stories slowly appear as a work of displacements, relating to a logic of metonymy. Is it not then time to recognize the theoretical legitimacy of narrative, which is then to be looked upon not as some ineradicable remnant (or a remnant still to be eradicated) but rather as a necessary form for a theory of practices? In this hypothesis, *a narrative theory would be indissociable from any theory of practices*, for it would be its precondition as well as its production.