

# Book Review: Foucault on the Arts and Letters: Perspectives for the Twentyfirst Century edited by Catherine M. Soussloff

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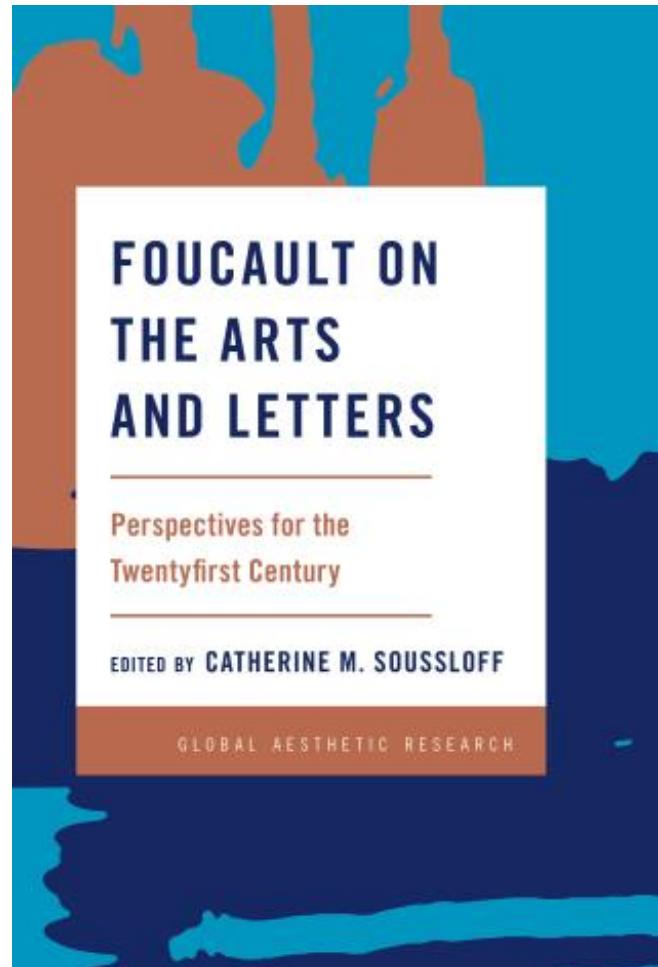
**Foucault on the Arts and Letters: Perspectives for the Twentyfirst Century**, edited by Catherine M. Soussloff, explores the oft-neglected intersection between the arts and Foucauldian political theory: namely, Michel Foucault's claim that aesthetic concerns were too frequently withdrawn from the political sphere and his determination to expose the relation between the two. The collection contributes to understanding Foucault's positions on various artistic domains as a way of generating insight into future cultural interpretation at a time when it has never been more expedient to do so, writes Joshua Sharman.

**Foucault on the Arts and Letters: Perspectives for the Twentyfirst Century**. Catherine M. Soussloff (ed.). Rowman and Littlefield. 2016.

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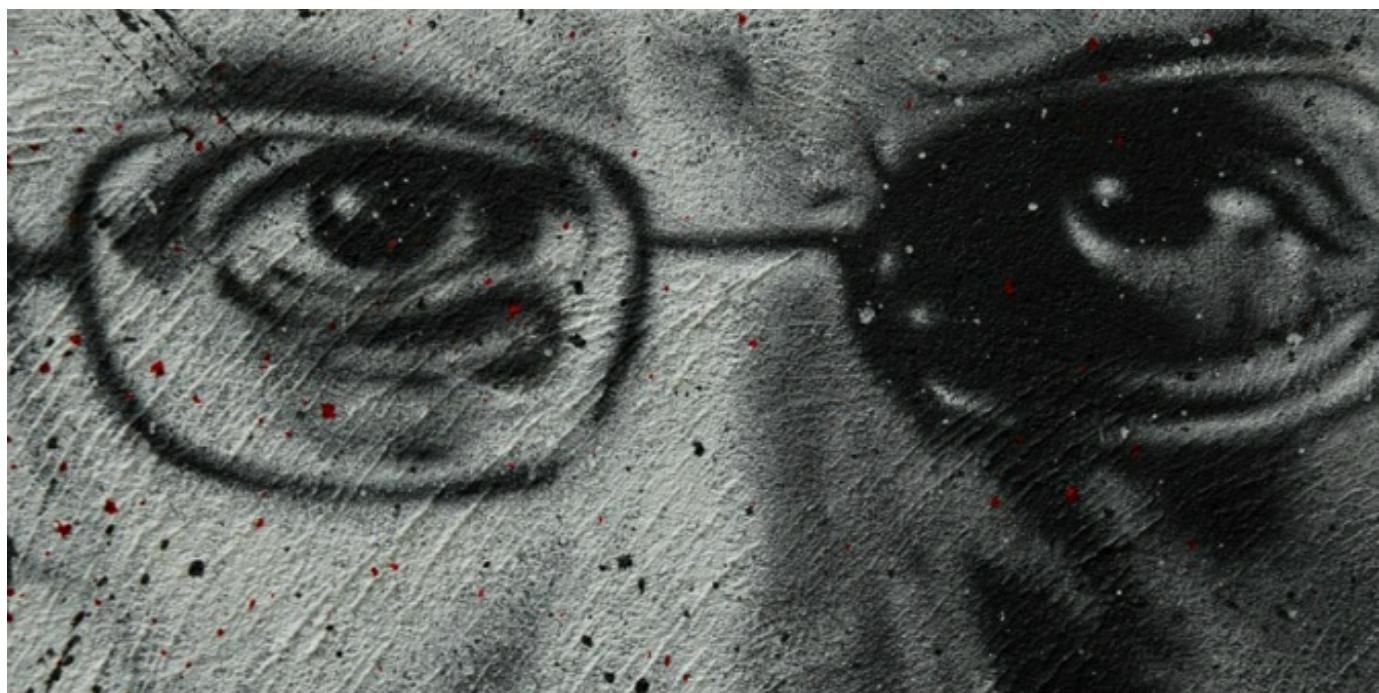
The central claim and task of *Foucault on the Arts and Letters: Perspectives for the Twentyfirst Century* is to reveal how Michel Foucault 'drew extensively from methods found in art and literary criticism' (xiii) as a way of 'thinking the self through the work of art' (xiv). It aims to achieve this through a diverse range of essays analysing Foucault's oeuvre within the context of different artistic and literary paradigms. The book is divided into four sections, each centred on a broad thematic area of analysis. The first is devoted to the visual; the second to the body; the third to heroic and tragic subjectivity; and the fourth to the aesthetics of transformation. A brief sketch of the first two will suffice, as the more developed chapters in the collection seem, to this reader at least, to be found in the second half of the book.

The first section begins with Dana Arnold's essay, which underlines 'the importance of locating invisibilities and silences in Foucault's overall project of the articulation of existence' (xiv). She locates within Foucault's critique of madness a conception of 'unreason' and 'the archaeology of silence' (xiv). This is followed up by Anton Lee, who draws out a 'post-Cartesian photography' in Foucault's single essay on photography and his final published text, an essay on US photographer Duane Michals. The key point here is how to understand the issue of subjectivity within the context of 'photographic visualisations of a shifting identity' (xv). The section is completed by a chapter looking at the work of French artist Jean-Luc Molène and how we might comprehend Foucault's revised concept of the archive in relation to critiques of art as an institution. It recommends a 'refusal to accept the evidence of photography and its appeal to



reality' (xv), remaining sceptical of visual practices that depend on a transparent conception of the archive for their functioning.

The second section introduces us to the concept of the body in relation to dance and music under a Foucauldian interpretation. Body and experience are portrayed throughout Foucault's writings, and his rendering of them is inspiration for two essays. The first deals with the relationship between dance and Foucault's notion of 'lived experience', showing the latter to be exemplified in choreographed dance techniques. The second demonstrates how there is a triadic relation between the piano étude, the disciplinary techniques imposed upon the body and the self-conscious production of the self in relation to the aesthetics of existence. These initial sections, whilst interesting and plausibly compelling to some degree, are in the final analysis tenuous in relating Foucault's concerns to those working further afield. It is not entirely clear, for example, that Foucault has much, if anything, to add to discussions on dance choreography.



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Turning to the more convincing elements of the collection and perhaps the most important in developing some of Foucault's central thematic concerns, Marisa C. Sanchez analyses the use that Foucault makes of Samuel Beckett's characters in his lectures and writings. She notes that both had the same question of subject formation grounding their work and that for Foucault, Beckett provides the means to 'explore the function of the author and discourse formation' (121). The key point that Foucault makes in interpreting Beckett is the conception of a 'break with a certain past, of a new starting point for a fundamentally different kind of discourse', which allows literary texts to operate as 'ways of exiting from philosophy' by collapsing the distinction between the philosophical and its negation.

For both writers, the way discourse operates is important for dissolving this division. They envisage language as a 'permeable surface through which new possibilities could be created beyond existing or perceived limits' (123). In this way, Foucault imagines that 'the author is a process of interpretive practice' (124), and embarks on an analysis of the 'network of external and internal systems that exercise control over discourse' (124). Sanchez remarks that in doing so, Foucault stakes his claim to an interdisciplinary approach within the university: one that aims to overcome the 'limitations imposed on discourse by the very formation of discrete disciplines' (124). There is more to say on the relationship between Beckett and Foucault, but Sanchez succeeds in clarifying initial points of contact between the two arranged around three issues: a love of ambiguity, scepticism of ideology and concern for figures lacking

visibility within modern societies. The possibility remains for these intersections to be developed along wider philosophical lines.

In 'Aesthetics Transformed', Catherine M. Soussloff, the collection's editor, analyses Gilles Deleuze's *Foucault* by focusing on the 'primary significance of vision and "visibilities"' in Foucault's thinking as a whole (149). In *Foucault*, Deleuze presents the former's 'theory of visibility' as providing crucial evidence of a distinctive philosophical method. Soussloff focuses on the importance of the role of paintings within Deleuze's argument. She achieves this by highlighting the significance of the actual paintings and painters named by Deleuze and described by Foucault in his writings, as well as the role of 'paintings as bearers of meanings intrinsic to a particular artistic practice with a distinctive historical and conceptual apparatus' (149).

Soussloff notes that Foucault's contribution in his writings to visual arts is perspicuously lacking. Instead, what is crucial is his interest in 'vision, visibility, and the visual' (150). For example, in his analysis of the painting 'The Temptation of St. Anthony', Foucault contrasts 'the painting's approach to the subject of madness with the written discourse of the same historical period' (150). This disjunction between painting and writing is useful in showing that painting offers 'a particular kind of visibility not available in language', whilst art history offers 'methods of classification of significance to "the world"' (151). Deleuze claims Foucault to be therefore 'a new archivist' who, using a unique method, refused the traditional techniques of 'formalisation' and 'interpretation' (something Deleuze himself focuses on explicitly in his earlier works: *Proust and Signs*, for instance). What Soussloff succeeds in offering is an important insight into an obvious similarity in the kinds of representational accounts of meaning that Deleuze and Foucault were trying to oppose.

Overall, the collection of essays is valuable for emphasising the method by which Foucault's work can dissolve the standard opposition between philosophy and topics usually viewed as being outside its remit. Although some of the earlier essays may fall short in demonstrating a convincing link between the political and the aesthetic in Foucault's work, the collection nonetheless reinforces the need to develop political concerns alongside aesthetic ones and does this, for the most part, successfully.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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