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François Caillat, director. *Foucault Against Himself* [Foucault contre lui-même] 52 min. DVD. (Icarus Films, 2014). \$390.00 U.S.

Review by Mark Meyers, University of Saskatchewan.

This film offers a fascinating, thoughtful, and sympathetic portrayal of the life and work of philosopher-historian Michel Foucault (1926-1984), elegantly directed by François Caillat and presented in this version with an English title and subtitles. Co-produced by Arte France, the French Institut national de l'audiovisuel (INA) and the Factory, the video uses an unnamed narrator to convey basic facts about Foucault's academic career, political activities, and major works. Its core, however, lies in the remarks offered by the five scholars interviewed for the project—philosopher and social theorist Geoffroy de Lagasnerie; historian Arlette Farge; art historian Georges Didi-Huberman; literary critic Leo Bersani; and Didier Eribon, author of a widely-acclaimed biography of Foucault and other texts about twentieth-century French intellectuals. These commentators focus not on the details of Foucault's life, but on the critical implications of his leading ideas, enabling the film to proceed thematically rather than chronologically. Indeed, we do not learn anything about Foucault's post-secondary education until late in the film, and even then it is subordinated to a discussion of how this thinker's thoroughly normative academic trajectory, which culminated in his election to the Collège de France in 1970, allowed him to pursue a research agenda that was anything but normative. Thanks to the talent of the interviewees for making complex ideas clear, and probably to some skillful editing, the commentary is at once consistently sophisticated and accessible.

In four “chapters” and an epilogue, the film covers Foucault's theory of power, his political activism, his ideas about the so-called “death of man,” and his relationship to the American counter-cultural currents—most notably the gay liberation movement—that he experienced first-hand during visits to the University of California at Berkeley in the early 1980s. The interviewees also touch on Foucault's unpatronizing style as an activist, his aversion to any kind of dogmatism, and his interdisciplinary research methods. As for Foucault's place in French intellectual history, the film limits itself to glimpses: Eribon discusses the criticism Marxists and others leveled at him in the 1960s and explains how his late work on the history of sexuality was informed by his rejection of psychoanalysis. Foucault's relationship to other thinkers receives scant attention, and no one situates his work in the broader context of French postmodernism. Historians will likely wish there had been more discussion of how Foucault's methods challenged and enriched their discipline, while feminists, critical race theorists, and postcolonial studies scholars might similarly regret the film's failure to mention how Foucault's work has by turns inspired and frustrated them. That said, there are other places to get this kind of information, and the film is stronger for not having gotten bogged down in the details of Foucault's intellectual context or legacy.

Visually the production is first-rate. Interviews unfold in one of the reading rooms of the former main site of the Bibliothèque nationale on the rue de Richelieu, with its signature green lamps glowing gently in the background as they would have when Foucault worked there, which he did regularly. The verbal text and background music dovetail well with the film's images, many of which come from archival footage,

either of interviews Foucault gave or of events that help illustrate his life, from the creation after May 1968 of the experimental University of Vincennes (where he taught briefly), to the French prison mutinies of the early 1970s (which informed his activism on behalf of prisoners), to a 1981 gay festival held on Castro Street in San Francisco (similar to those he may have attended). I caught only one technical glitch: at one point during the interviews, the on-screen text erroneously identifies Eribon as Bersani.

Any author or director seeking to do justice to Foucault's biography faces two related challenges. How, first, does one go about representing the life and thought of someone who so thoroughly rejected the modern humanist notion that an author's writings must be pervaded by some fundamental unity, and that they must bear the trace, however faint, of their lived experience? Indeed, Foucault resisted attempts to pin down his identity, authorial and otherwise, remarking in a now famous line, "Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same. Leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write."<sup>[1]</sup> This was also the man who in *Discipline and Punish* showed how, since the eighteenth century, the practice of "turning real lives into writing," which had formerly been reserved for the powerful or notorious as a way of remembering and mythologizing them, was gradually applied to children, patients, delinquents, and garden-variety criminals. These marginal subjects became objects of "individual descriptions and biographical narratives" written by various experts, frequently in case reports, for the purpose—not necessarily expressed—of disciplining, dominating, and controlling them. The representation of such lives thus became a mechanism not for glorification, but for "objectification and subjection (*assujettissement*)."<sup>[2]</sup>

The potentially disciplinary and normalizing function of modern biographical representation frames a second challenge that faces (or should face) those who try to depict Foucault's life: how to acknowledge the relevance of his socially marginal status as a gay man without reducing his life, his work, or their relationship to that status—without, that is, tapping into what Wendy Brown has called "the deepest terror of every socially marked human being...that no matter what we write, think about, or say, no matter how we fashion ourselves and our work, we will be incessantly returned and reduced to this single marking, that it will be produced again and again as 'the truth' of our being, our thinking, our worldly endeavors."<sup>[3]</sup> Pulling this off demands careful consideration of how Foucault's marginal sexual subjectivity may have shaped some of his intellectual concerns (and was thus not simply a "private" matter).<sup>[4]</sup> It also requires some critical reflection about the fact that his status as a sexual outcast coexisted dynamically with the privileged position he enjoyed as a highly prominent upper middle-class white male intellectual. If we insist on considering Foucault's life experience as one of the many conditions of possibility for his work, this dual, contradictory, and irreducible subject position as both outsider and insider should inform our thinking.

The film deals with each of these challenges indirectly but reasonably effectively given its length and scope. In the remarks that open the film, Lagasnerie acknowledges the discontinuous, multiform, and contradictory quality of Foucault's work and suggests that one could be forgiven for wondering what, if anything, held the oeuvre together apart from its author's name. But rather than attempt to draw out any unifying themes or concepts, Lagasnerie explains that Foucault defined the act of writing as incompatible with the very notion of an "oeuvre," thinking of it instead as a self-depleting endeavor. As a result, Foucault constantly "wrote against himself," taking up where one book left off only to undo it in the next. Probably because this documentary is directed at a general audience rather than at professional historians, Lagasnerie does not mention that Foucault's concept of writing as a means of disrupting rather than shoring up identity (whether of the author or the oeuvre) paralleled his essentially Nietzschean view of the historian's task not as a search for origins and outcomes, but as an effort to write critical genealogies of any number of categories—sexuality, madness, the body, and even "truth"—whose meanings in the present had been presumed to be self-evident, natural, stable, or, in other words, ahistorical. Since those meanings enable various relations of dominance when left unchallenged, the project of examining them genealogically and exposing their historicity implies that historical scholarship, like writing, is not only a critical and disruptive enterprise, but also one that is implicated in a struggle over the power to define

key social categories and ultimately to determine what counts as truth. As for the meaning of his own life and work, Foucault did everything he could to keep it slippery, and the film both acknowledges and respects this effort, rather than, say, historicizing it in its own right.

In its final chapter, the film tacitly takes up the second challenge I have described. Leo Bersani, who had arranged Foucault's visiting professorship in the French Department at UC-Berkeley, offers thoughtful comments about how Foucault's personal life enriched his philosophical and historical work, especially during the periods he spent in California. He describes Foucault as very open and generous toward what he was seeing and experiencing in San Francisco's gay and sadomasochistic communities, noting that he found in them new and alternative ways of relating to others that were, he adds, not simply about sex, but about reimagining the boundaries of social experience. Bersani does not elaborate, but one might guess that Foucault became interested in S/M partly because of the ironic awareness among its practitioners that it is a game, playful even as it is serious, thoroughly constructed even as it is real. Eribon, in an earlier segment, noted that Foucault himself had said that contact with gay communities in the U.S. informed his late work on how subjects might create and transform themselves.

Bersani's remarks form part of a broader discussion of the dynamic between Foucault's "life on the margins" and his "place at the center." Thus he notes Foucault's ability, during visits to places such as California, to be an "entirely different being" from that which one expects of the stereotypical Collège de France professor, attributing that agility to the freedom that that very post afforded him. Lagasnerie points out the "beautiful contradiction" between the supreme legitimacy of Foucault's academic credentials (studies at the Lycée Henri IV and the Ecole Normale Supérieure; a doctorate from the Sorbonne; the *agrégation de philosophie*; his appointment to the Collège de France) and the traditional illegitimacy, at least as objects of academic study, of Foucault's main research areas (the insane, prisoners, sexuality). Didi-Huberman reinforces this point in an elegant excursus on how Foucault used the power of his position to pursue a highly nomadic, deterritorializing, interdisciplinary research agenda—one that took him into fields as diverse as linguistics, psychology, and theology; that mixed history and philosophy; and that led him to write about the modern world as well as the ancient one. Invoking philosopher Gilles Deleuze's distinction between *science royale* and *science nomade*, he highlights how Foucault's transgression of academic boundaries worked against the common tendency for fields of knowledge to establish cordoned-off fiefdoms with their specialist-kings and gate-keeping experts.

By the end of the film, we thus get a good sense of the interplay between power and subversion in Foucault's intellectual practice, as well as some acknowledgement of a connection between that practice and Foucault's personal life. And yet, more might have been done to theorize that relationship. Perhaps because the commentators are too beholden to Foucault's conception of authorship, it does not occur to anyone to reflect on how the contradictions they emphasize mimic the structurally ambiguous status, as at once hegemonic and subversive, of Foucault's own subject position. Nor does anyone consider whether Foucault had to pay a price in closeted-ness, at least early in life, to gain the academic credibility and acceptance he would ultimately enjoy. Foucault's well-known dictum that "where there is power, there is resistance" was not something that applied only to his objects of study; he himself embodied it.

Despite the fact that, for this viewer at least, the film might have theorized the relationship between Foucault's life and work more explicitly and synthetically, it remains a welcome addition to the existing biographical literature on Foucault, none of which does a particularly adequate job of doing this either, as David Halperin has astutely argued.<sup>[5]</sup> The documentary addresses Foucault's major ideas efficiently and rigorously, and could be used to great benefit in undergraduate and graduate seminars, especially when assigned along with some of Foucault's own work and perhaps Halperin's extended and unsurpassed review of the three major biographies of Foucault.

## NOTES

[1] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 17.

[2] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 192, quoted in David M. Halperin, "The Describable Life of Michel Foucault," in *Saint-Foucault: Toward a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 127.

[3] Brown makes this comment in the context of a persuasive argument that James Miller, in his controversial biography of Foucault, taps into precisely this fear. Wendy Brown, "The Passion of Michel Foucault," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 5.2 (1993): 140+. Literature Resource Center. Web. 25 April 2016.

[4] David M. Halperin addresses this point and related issues in "The Describable Life of Michel Foucault," pp. 126-185, his extended review of the three major biographies of Foucault: Didier Eribon's *Michel Foucault*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); David Macey's *The Lives of Michel Foucault: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993); and James Miller's *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993). Halperin and others have argued that Miller fails spectacularly to meet either of the two challenges I have described. In addition to Brown's review of Miller cited above, see Lisa Duggan, "Biography=Death," review of *The Passion of Michel Foucault* by James Miller, *The Village Voice*, May 4, 1993, 90-91; and James Guillory, "The Americanization of Michel Foucault," review of *The Passion of Michel Foucault* by James Miller, *Lesbian and Gay Studies Newsletter*, July 1993, 35-37. See also Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault et ses contemporains* (Paris: Fayard, 1994), 22-30; 45-59; and Roddey Reid "Foucault in America: Biography, 'Culture War,' and the New Consensus," *Cultural Critique* 35 (Winter 1996-97): 179-211.

[5] On this point, however, Halperin draws a clear distinction between the deeply problematic biography by James Miller and the otherwise excellent biographies by Eribon and Macey.

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