Foucault Studies

From the End of Man to the Art of Life: Rereading Foucault's Changing Aesthetics
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ABSTRACT: In Foucault's writing throughout the 1960s, in which he foregrounds the critical function of language and signification, works of art and literature – and works of avant-garde art and literature in particular – appear prominently and are the objects of sustained theoretical investment. In the 1970s, however, as Foucault moves away from his earlier concern with language's capacity to dissolve "man" and begins to concentrate instead on the ways in which man is governed, works of art and literature no longer possess the same political promise for him and drop out almost completely from his writing. Yet the question of aesthetics does not disappear for him entirely, and, in his final years, he returns to it, though with his analysis now directed at what he calls an "art" or "aesthetics of life." In this paper, I examine these developments with the aim of drawing out the connections between Foucault's changing view of aesthetics and the larger transformations that take shape within his overall project. Against this background, I argue that Foucault's call for an art of life, in which the individual develops techniques for continually reinventing his or her existence, does not necessitate abandoning the avant-garde aesthetic practices that he had previously advocated. Rather, I assert, his conception of an art of life – when read in conjunction with his theorization of critique as a "permanent" questioning of the limits imposed on us – offers a new framework for reimagining both the function of those practices and their legacies in culture today.

Keywords: Foucault; Aesthetics; Life; Critique; The Avant-Gardes

From his earliest writings, the question of aesthetics plays a crucial role for Foucault. Yet as with so many areas of his work, Foucault's relation to aesthetics is marked by significant shifts and reorientations. During the 1960s, in which the function of language and signification is of central concern for him, aesthetic activities are repeatedly placed in the foreground of his writing. Works of art and literature – and primarily works of avant-garde art and literature – appear prominently and are the objects of sustained theoretical investment. Thus, the literary activities of Roussel, Bataille, Blanchot, Robbe-Grillet, and others all figure in central ways into Foucault's thinking in this context, as do the works of various painters, including Magritte and Manet. Yet Foucault's engagement with these practices clearly does not take shape in traditional aesthetic terms. He does not invoke the

category of the aesthetic to identify a disinterested experience of pure contemplation or of the beautiful.[1] Nor does he employ this category to determine what, at its core, distinguishes the work of art from other kinds of objects or entities. Rather, he traces a different kind of aesthetic encounter, one in which works of art or literature are defined by their distinct capacity to disrupt and undermine the episteme out of which they arise and, in turn, to open experience to another mode of thought. His aesthetic concerns thus serve, throughout the 1960s, both to link him to other French theorists of his generation and to delimit the specific contours of his work.

In the 1970s, however, as Foucault moves away from his earlier emphasis on language and signification and begins to concentrate instead on the exercise of power and the ways in which life is governed, works of art and literature no longer possess the same meaning for him and drop out almost completely from his writing. Yet the problem of aesthetics does not disappear for Foucault entirely, and, in his final years, he returns to it, though now with his analysis directed not at literature or visual art but at what he characterizes as an "art" or "aesthetics of existence." It is these developments that I trace here, with the aim of drawing out the connections between his shifting view of aesthetics and the larger transformations that take place in his overall project. My analysis therefore follows from previous studies of Foucault that examine the key role that aesthetic concerns play for him over the course of his career. Yet my argument also diverges from such studies, which tend to focus both on bringing to view the different but interrelated ways that Foucault theorizes works of art and literature and on addressing the centrality of aesthetic considerations to his method more broadly. Thus, in one well-known account, Foucault is seen to develop a "paraesthetic" mode of analysis, one in which works of art and literature are understood to unravel existing aesthetic categories in the service of a more fundamental contestation of social limits or constraints.[2] Or, in another, Foucault is read as theorizing the work of art as an "event," with the effect that his conception of the artwork is taken not only to challenge longstanding views of aesthetic representation, but also to form the basis of his genealogy of modernity.[3]

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[1]   James Faubion develops this point in detail in his introduction to *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault*. See Faubion, "Introduction," *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984* (New York, The New Press: 1998), xv-xxiv.

[2]   David Carroll, *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 107-130.

[3]   See Joseph J. Tanke, *Foucault's Philosophy of Art: A Genealogy of Modernity* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009). Where Carroll's account addresses Foucault's concern with both literature and visual art and links Foucault's approach to that of other contemporaneous French theorists, Tanke's focuses specifically on Foucault's engagement with visual art, which it does in a notably comprehensive way. For an analysis of Foucault's work that addresses similar issues, though in terms oriented more towards the

Although my argument is informed by these accounts, my aim is somewhat different. Rather than ask how we might derive from Foucault's varied assessments of aesthetic practices a comprehensive critical framework for conceptualizing works of art and literature in a new way, I instead consider the implications of Foucault's shift away from such works in his late writing. Specifically, I consider how this move away from literature and visual art and towards an art or aesthetics of life might in fact connect back to the avant-garde modes of aesthetic activity that he had previously advocated. I argue that if such avant-garde practices play an increasingly limited role for Foucault from the mid-1970s onward – and if this is in part because the significance of these practices changes fundamentally for him during this period – then this does not mean that such practices simply become inconsequential to the critical enterprise towards which he now turns. Rather, in his efforts to rethink his own earlier viewpoint, and thus to rethink the problem of how to respond to the forces that increasingly circumscribe and define our everyday lives, he is led to theorize the status of aesthetics in contemporary culture in new terms. And the result, I conclude, is that, even as Foucault's late writing appears to leave little space for the avant-garde aesthetic practices that had once been central for him, his work in this context nonetheless creates an opening for critically reimagining both the function of those practices and their legacies in culture today.

I.

In the conclusion to *The Order of Things*, Foucault famously asserts that the figure of man, as an invention of the modern episteme, has entered into crisis. If man, Foucault argues, serves as the "locus" of modern discourse, of that discourse in which the transcendental and the empirical are continuously both separated and layered on top of each other, then man's future is tied to that of modern discourse itself.[4] Yet this discourse, he says, now faces its own unraveling, and man, as a consequence, is now threatened with his own disappearance. "In our day," Foucault writes, "it is not so much the absence or the death of God that is affirmed as the end of man."[5] The reason for this, Foucault contends, the reason that we now confront the end of man, is that the existence of man, as a modern concept, is bound, in the modern episteme, to the function of language. Language, as such, is granted a place in *The Order of Things* that the other two "'quasi-transcendentals'" of the modern episteme – life and labor

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problem of visuality than of the artwork, see Gary Shapiro, *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[4]   Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 322.

[5]   Ibid., 385.

– are not.[6] For it is language, according to Foucault, that, "in its being," serves to undo man, to "dissolve" him.[7] "From within language experienced and traversed as language, in the play of its possibilities extended to their furthest point, what emerges is that man has 'come to an end.'"[8] Language, in speaking man, also disperses him.

At issue for Foucault here, then, is not only the central place of language in the modern episteme, but also the political potential that, in this context, language now possesses. For if what unifies the modern episteme is a particular distribution of what can be seen and said, and if this distribution of the visible and sayable is unimaginable without the figure of man at its center, then what is necessary is to find ways to call this figure into question.[9] And it is thus through language, in its capacity to reorder and disperse modern knowledge, that the process of doing so – of calling man into crisis – can be set in motion.[10] This is why, at the end of *The Order of Things*, Foucault grants a privileged place to psychoanalysis and ethnology; both discourses, he says, employ language to bring the "unthinkable" to bear on modern thought.[11] Both, that is, take language as the "formal model" through which to "traverse, animate, and disturb the whole constituted field of the human sciences."[12] Yet it is not these two discourses alone, according to Foucault, that mobilize language to this end; literature, as well, he says, is crucial in this context.

Indeed, as he makes clear in the final pages of *The Order of Things*, it is in literature that, in the modern episteme, language's dispersive potential is pushed furthest. In the work of Artaud and Roussel, Foucault asserts, and then even "more purely" in that of Kafka, Bataille, and Blanchot, what emerges is a mode of writing that, in exposing "the being of language," brings the very limits of modern thought into view.[13] This is not, however, for Foucault, a matter of a literature that turns inward, of a "rarefaction of thought" that abandons the reality out of which it springs in order to renounce anything that fails to attain the purity of form for its own sake.[14] Nor is this a literature that comes from nowhere, that

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[6]   Ibid., 250.

[7]   Ibid., 379, 382.

[8]   Ibid., 383.

[9]   This formulation is developed by Gilles Deleuze in his book on Foucault, where Deleuze asserts that any given "stratum" or "historical formation" – what Foucault calls an episteme – is comprised of a particular "distribution of the visible and the articulable." See Gilles Deleuze, "Stata or Historical Formations: the Visible and the Articulable (Knowledge)," *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 47-8.

[10]   Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 387.

[11]   Ibid., 384.

[12]   Ibid., 381.

[13]   Ibid., 382.

[14]   Ibid., 384.

appears as if from a void as the radically new or originary. Rather, Foucault says, this literature emerges out of the same conditions that it works to disrupt.

> That literature in our day is fascinated by the being of language is neither the sign of an imminent end nor proof of a radicalization: it is a phenomenon whose necessity has its roots in a vast configuration in which the whole structure of our thought and our knowledge is traced.[15]

Such writing thus occupies, precisely for this reason, a threshold position; it appears both within and at the boundaries of the modern episteme.[16]

Literature, nonetheless, does not play a prominent role in *The Order of Things*; it emerges only at the book's end to reinforce Foucault's account of language. Yet this does not mean that literature, in *The Order of Things* or elsewhere in Foucault's work from this period, is of only peripheral significance. For literature, even if it is rarely Foucault's central concern, is consistently privileged in his writing throughout the 1960s for its ability to undermine established forms of knowledge.[17] This is particularly evident in his well-known 1969 lecture "What is an Author?" in which Foucault, foregrounding the practice of *écriture* in postwar France, addresses what he describes as the "ethics" of this practice.[18] Such writing, he says, in its emphasis on the limitlessness of signification, takes as its ethic or guiding principle "indifference" to authorship, to who is speaking or writing.[19] This indifference – as indifference both to a model of expression built on subjective interiority and to all signs of the particularity of the individual – is not, Foucault argues, a matter of retreating into the pure form of language.[20] Rather, what is at stake here, he says, is to deploy writing in the service of dissolving the subject; such writing, he contends, seeks to create "a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears."[21]

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[15]   Ibid., 383.

[16]   See John Rajchman, *Michel Foucault: The Freedom of Philosophy* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1985), 31-2.

[17]   This is not to say, however, that literature is never Foucault's central focus in the 1960s; during this period, literature emerges as a principal concern for him in a number of essays and in *Death and the Labyrinth*, his book-length study of Raymond Roussel. See Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth* (London and New York: Continuum, 1986).

[18]   *Écriture* [writing] refers to a mode of avant-garde literary activity prominent in France in the 1960s and associated, in particular, with the *Tel Quel* group. I return to Foucault's relationship to both *écriture* and *Tel Quel* in what follows.

[19]   Foucault, "What is an Author?" *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, 205.

[20]   Ibid., 206.

[21]   Ibid.

The task of writing, understood in these terms, is thus inseparable from the larger political project towards which Foucault's work in this period is oriented. This project, in setting its sights on the modern discourses of man, seeks to liberate thought from the forms of "individualization" that these discourses produce and impose.[22] If Foucault thus targets the concept of the author in particular, he does so because the author embodies the problem of individualization in a way no other figure does; "the notion of the 'author,'" he writes, "constitutes the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences."[23] The author, from whose interiority meaning is seen to originate, thus serves to reaffirm not only the subject's unified status but also the author's authority vis-à-vis the discourse to which his name is attached. As such, the author's function is to fix meaning and stop its movement, to keep at bay the threat that meaning's "dangerous proliferation" carries with it.[24] This threat – the "great danger" that unfettered signification carries – is, Foucault says, that of a "fiction that threatens our world."[25] And the form of this fiction that poses the greatest threat – the fiction that must at all costs not be allowed to be a fiction – is that of man himself. To do away with the author, to dispense with his function, is thus to allow fiction to reclaim its political potential – a potential imaginable only through a fundamental redistribution of the visible and the sayable. This redistribution, however, is not simply what awaits us in an unknown future; changes in our episteme, Foucault writes, are already underway:

> Although since the eighteenth century, the author has played the role of the regulator of the fictive, a role quite characteristic of our era of industrial and bourgeois society, of individualism and private property, still, given the historical modifications that are taking place, it does not seem necessary that the author function will remain constant in form, complexity, and even existence. I think that, as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author function will disappear, and in such a manner that fiction and its polysemous texts will once again function according to another mode, but still within the system of constraint – one that will no longer be the author but will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced.[26]

What comes into focus here, then, is the extent of Foucault's investment in the political promise of *écriture* and related forms of cultural activity – an investment that highlights Foucault's close link during this period to other French intellectuals of his generation, most

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22   Ibid., 205.
23   Ibid.
24   Ibid., 221.
25   Ibid.
26   Ibid., 222.

notably members of the *Tel Quel* group, with whom Foucault had been associated in the 1960s. Thus, for Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Philippe Sollers, and others, *écriture* emerges in this context not as a new literary category or genre, but instead as a distinct mode or form of writing, as an approach to writing in which the oppositions that structure modern thought – oppositions between the literary and the scientific, the theoretical and the practical, the poetic and the political, and so on – are continuously called into question and undermined.[27] Conceived on these grounds, *écriture* thus proceeds through the foregrounding of signification itself, through putting into operation what Barthes calls the "infinite deferment of the signified," with the aim as such of refusing any final meaning or interpretation, whether the author's or the reader's.[28] This is not to say, however, that *écriture* is oriented simply towards emphasizing the signifying capacities of language; rather, for its proponents, *écriture* is above all a matter of redefining the social function of language, of using language to disrupt the dominant conditions of meaning production and the forms of social life that those conditions reinforce. Indeed, as John Rajchman argues in his book on Foucault, what is at stake in the "debate over *écriture*" is the possibility of reconstituting culture in precisely these terms, of creating a new "avant-garde culture" that would "celebrate our 'decentered' relation to language" and that, while "nonhumanistic," would be nonetheless "nontechnocratic" and "committed to the left."[29] Yet for Foucault, as Rajchman also asserts, the notion that *écriture* might possess this potential – that it might be the starting point for generating a new culture and politics – soon becomes untenable, and, by the mid-1970s, language itself, as the foundation for Foucault's "skeptical tropes," is largely pushed to the side.[30]

Thus, in the 1977 interview "Truth and Power," Foucault makes explicit his contention that language can no longer be treated as the primary means through which to develop an analysis of the social world. This is not to suggest that Foucault abandons his investment in the concept of discourse and its relation to knowledge. The question of discourse and of discursive formations remains present throughout his work. Yet as with other lines of thought that persist in his writing, Foucault approaches this question in different ways as his viewpoint changes. What was missing from *The Order of Things*, he asserts, was a direct analysis of the forces that "govern" the field of possible statements: "what was lacking here was the notion of the 'discursive regime,' of the effects of power peculiar to the play of

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[27]   See Patrick ffrench and Roland-François Lack, "Introduction," *The Tel Quel Reader*, ed. Patrick ffrench and Roland-François Lack (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 4-6.

[28]   Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 158.

[29]   Rajchman, 10-11.

[30]   Ibid., 6.

statements."[31] As a result, he argues, the analysis of the social world should now proceed in a different direction. The focus should not be on examining the "symbolic field" or "signifying structures," but instead on constituting a "genealogy of relations of force, strategic developments, and tactics"; "one's point of reference should not be to the great model of language," he says, "but, rather, to that of war and battle."[32] This great model of language – the very model to which, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault assigned the task of unraveling the modern episteme – now, a decade later, is seen to be insufficient. The problems of history and social life can no longer be adequately understood or engaged with through language; what must instead ground analysis is the complex domain of war or conflict. In turn, it is the question of power – or of the relations of power that are generated by and that circulate through the social field – that now appears at the forefront of Foucault's work, and that dominates the texts he writes and the seminars he delivers in the mid- and late 1970s.

Yet this shift to power and its exercise – to the various mechanisms in the modern world through which individuals are molded as social subjects and through which populations are regulated and protected – involves not just a shift from language to relations of force, but also a fundamental rejection of the avant-gardist mode of writing to which he had, through the 1960s, assigned such great promise. On this point, Foucault writes:

> The whole relentless theorization of writing we saw in the sixties was doubtless a swan song. Through it, the writer was fighting for the preservation of his political privilege. But the fact that it was precisely a matter of theory, that he needed scientific credentials (founded in linguistics, semiology, psychoanalysis), that this theory took its references from the direction of Saussure, or Chomsky, and so on, and that it gave rise to such mediocre literary products – all this proves that the activity of the writer was no longer at the focus of things.[33]

If there was so much attention given to writing in the 1960s – and if this "relentless theorization of writing" was in fact driven by an ultimately fruitless effort to find for it legitimating scientific ground – all of this only serves, Foucault suggests, to make visible writing's increasingly inconsequential political function.[34] The harshness of this indictment,

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[31]   Foucault, "Truth and Power," *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Vol. 3, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1994), 114-15.

[32]   Ibid., 116.

[33]   Ibid., 127.

[34]   It is worth drawing attention here, in relation to Foucault's attack in this passage on the writer's desire for "scientific credentials," to the central importance given to the concept of "science" in *Tel Quel*. See ffrench and Lack, *The Tel Quel Reader*, 2-4.

however, is also, as Rajchman puts it, "autobiographical"; that is, Foucault's repudiation of the writing of the 1960s – of its relevance and its political potential – is clearly also a repudiation of a key element of his own viewpoint from that period.[35] What, then, is at the root of this radical reorientation in Foucault's thought? What is it that, in the 1970s, shifts in Foucault's view of things and leads him to abandon both language and the literary in his work?

<p style="text-align:center">II.</p>

In "The Subject and Power," written two years before his death, Foucault declares that the driving concern throughout his career has not been power but the subject. His ambition, he states, "has not been to analyze the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such analysis"; instead, he says, his objective "has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made into subjects."[36] Power, to whatever degree it emerges in his writing in the 1970s as a key theoretical category, does so, Foucault asserts, not as a discrete object of investigation, but rather as a means to examine the problem of the subject more fully. Yet this does not mean that Foucault, as his concerns change, approaches this problem in the same way. In his early work, this problem is addressed in relation to man as he comes to define the modern episteme – to man, as Foucault conceives it in *The Order of Things*, as both the subject of transcendental truth and the object of empirical knowledge. By the mid-1970s, however, it is no longer the dissolution of man that arises as the defining political imperative; the problem that man generates, and by extension the political response to this problem, is no longer conceived by Foucault in the same terms. This is not to say that the figure of man, as this figure comes to ground modern thought, is no longer an issue for Foucault; indeed, in his later work, he continues to call attention to the role that man plays in both the production of truth and the normalization of individuals. This is clear, for example, in *Discipline and Punish*, where Foucault reasserts his disdain for man as a social category: "The 'man' that the reformers set up against the despotism of the scaffold has also become a 'man-measure'; not of things, but of power."[37] Yet what has changed in this context is that Foucault no longer concentrates on the erasure of man; what he is concerned with now, rather, is the way in which man is governed.

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35   Rajchman, 35-6.

36   Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, 326.

37   Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 74.

There is, then, a shift in Foucault's work here in terms of what, in his late writing, he calls "problematization."[38] If throughout the 1960s, the problem of the subject – of how to get rid of the subject, of how to make it disappear within language – was central not only for Foucault but also for a whole generation of theorists and writers in France, then in the 1970s, this problem, even if it has not gone away, does not engender the same concern. If the subject remains a problem, it is no longer a problem in the same way – it is no longer a problem strictly of language and signification, it is rather a problem that breaks apart in a whole host of directions, and one that Foucault now rethinks along a new path. Insofar as this is the case, insofar as this shift in problematization can be registered in Foucault's work and in the seventies more broadly, there emerges in his writing from this period a crucial reorientation in his political project.

This reorientation comes into focus, to begin with, in the frequently noted transition that appears in Foucault's writing here, in which his earlier "archaeological" method is now supplemented by a second approach – a "genealogical" approach focused on the changing conditions under which individuals are shaped and normalized.[39] The implications of this transition, if they are visible throughout Foucault's later work, are made explicit in "The Subject and Power," where Foucault describes what he sees as three principal kinds of struggle: the struggle against "forms of domination" (which include ethnic and religious struggles); the struggle against "forms of exploitation" (in which labor is separated from what it produces); and the struggle against "forms of subjection" (against the mechanisms through which subjectivity is defined and regulated).[40] And while these three kinds of struggle, he says, are never mutually exclusive, it is the third – the struggle against subjection – that has, in the present period, become the most crucial to confront.[41] What we now face, Foucault

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[38] See, in particular, Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations: an Interview with Michel Foucault," *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 111-119. See also Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 11.

[39] The question of whether genealogy replaces or is used alongside archaeology in Foucault's writing of the 1970s remains open to debate. Foucault himself is ambiguous on the issue. In the 1983 interview "Structuralism and Post-structuralism," he asserts that "the word 'archaeology'" is one that he "no longer use[s]." However, in contemporaneous texts, including "What is Enlightenment?" – which I address in detail in what follows – Foucault explicitly identifies both archaeology and genealogy as key and complementary aspects of his own approach. See Foucault, "Structuralism and Post-structuralism," *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, 444-5, and "What is Enlightenment?" *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 125.

[40] Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 331.

[41] Ibid., 331-2.

argues, is a form of power that, in a mode specific to modern societies, is exercised continuously over both the life of individuals and the population as a whole. This form of power, as it comes to define Western politics from the late eighteenth century onward, is a matter of a whole new apparatus of government, one comprised of "individualization techniques and of totalization procedures," of forces and strategies that extend ceaselessly from "man-as-body" to "man-as-species" and that penetrate life more and more completely.[42]

It is thus towards the relations of power through which this happens – towards the forms and techniques through which life in all its possible incarnations and functions is managed – that Foucault redirects his attention. As such, he asserts, power relations need to be separated both from "relations of communications" and "relations of production."[43] While these three types of relations are always bound together – while they combine, he says, to form "block[s] of capacity-communication-power" – each must nonetheless be understood as operating in its own register.[44] If "power relations are exercised, to an exceedingly important extent, through the production and exchange of signs," one must still not confuse the exercise of power, as a specific kind of relation among individuals, with the modes of communication or signification that circulate in their own context.[45] Nor can power relations be conflated with relations of production, in which the development of "goal-directed activities" is of central concern.[46] This is because, for Foucault, power relations possess a specificity that distinguishes them. Power relations, insofar as they emerge out of particular arrangements of social life, are not a matter of direct coercion or violent domination. Rather, power relations, he argues, act on actions – they delimit a field of potential conduct; to exercise power in this way "is to structure the possible field of action of others."[47] What Foucault thus characterizes as governmentalization involves the process whereby the exercise of power has increasingly permeated every aspect of our everyday lives, and where

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[42]   Ibid., 332, and Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandra Fontant, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 1997), 242.

[43]   Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 338.

[44]   Ibid.

[45]   The opposition that Foucault develops here between power relations and relations of communication echoes his argument in *Discipline and Punish*, where, in a well-known passage generally read as an implicit critique of Guy Debord, Foucault distinguishes the exercise of disciplinary power from the effects of spectacle; "Our society," he writes, "is not one of spectacle, but one of surveillance ... We are neither in the amphitheater nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism." *Discipline and Punish*, 217.

[46]   Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 338.

[47]   Ibid., 341. Foucault reiterates this point in numerous places, including in the influential interview "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, 283.

this process, if it is not reducible to a matter of the state, has nonetheless "come more and more under state control."[48] Power relations, Foucault argues, "have become progressively governmentalized."[49] And it is therefore the task of analyzing and responding to this governmentality that, Foucault argues, has asserted itself with increasing political urgency: "the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the 'agonism' between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is an increasingly political task – even the political task that is inherent in all social existence."[50] It is no longer in the sphere of language, through "relations of communication," that our political situation can be either understood or contested.[51] It is now, instead, in the domain of life – at the level of how life is administered, managed, regulated, and made useful – that this situation must be confronted.

Insofar as this is the case, insofar as what now concerns Foucault is not the figure of man but how man is governed, it becomes clearer why works of literature, and works of art in general, no longer factor in the same way into his thinking. For in Foucault's early writing, his investment in literature is rooted principally in the literary work's relation to language –

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[48]   Ibid., 345. While governmentality persists as a key concept throughout Foucault's later work, the meaning of this concept shifts at points for him during this period. I follow his formulation of it in "The Subject and Power," where, as noted above, governmentality is implicitly defined as a mixture of "individualization techniques" and "totalization procedures," of discipline and biopower. Five years earlier, however, in *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault explicitly distinguishes governmentality from discipline. There, Foucault argues that a new "art of government" first appears in the sixteenth century, but is kept at bay by the mechanisms of sovereignty. However, with the rise of "population" as a defining political problem in the eighteenth century, this art of government is freed from the limitations previously imposed on it and now takes center stage politically. In turn, governmentality, which in this context is closely aligned with what he elsewhere calls biopower, enters into a triangulated relationship both with sovereignty, which does not disappear entirely, and with discipline, which develops alongside of and complements governmentality. Foucault writes: "we should not see things as the replacement of a society of sovereignty by a society of discipline, and then of a society of discipline by a society, say, of government. In fact, we have a triangle: sovereignty, discipline, and governmental management, which has population as its main target and apparatuses of security as its essential mechanisms." See Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2004), 103-5, 107-8.

[49]   Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 345.

[50]   Ibid., 343.

[51]   It is interesting to note here that Foucault, in "The Subject and Power," returns to the tripartite structure of life, labor, and language that he had emphasized sixteen years earlier in *The Order of Things*. In "The Subject and Power," however – in which he uses terms "relations of power," "relations of production," and "relations of communication" to refer to that structure – Foucault no longer privileges the category of language, as he had in *The Order of Things*. Instead, now foregrounding the exercise of power, Foucault gives priority to the category of life. See "The Subject and Power," 327.

in the work's capacity, in setting language in motion, to make signification "inexhaustible."[52] And it is this same capacity that Foucault, during this period, locates in works of visual art. Indeed, in his account of René Magritte, Foucault argues that Magritte's paintings challenge the same logic of representation that Foucault repudiates in "What is an Author?" Magritte's work, Foucault says, refuses to "affirm" the "bond" between original and copy, between "reality" and "representation."[53] Instead of "resemblance," Foucault asserts, what is emphasized is "similitude"; in Magritte's work, that is, there is no hierarchical division between original and copy.[54] Rather, there is only the play of "similitudes," of semblances that "proliferate" without "beginning" or "end."[55] With Magritte, then – as with Roussel or Beckett – what is at issue is the potential that exists in works of art and literature to disrupt the dominant regime of representation, to undercut the established system of communication within which man is seen to control language and give rise to truth. Yet when Foucault, in the mid-1970s, turns away from the project of dissolving man – because what is now central for him is the problem of how man is governed – he also turns away from works of art and literature. For works of art and literature, in Foucault's terms, operate principally within the domain of language and signification, and intervening in that domain, for him, no longer possesses the same political promise. It is for this reason that works of art and literature, however capable they might be of affecting established relations of communication, play an increasingly limited role in Foucault's later writing; in fact, in the four books that he publishes in the last decade of his life, literary and aesthetic activities are given virtually no attention at all.[56] Such activities, whatever significance they have, do not belong for Foucault to the register within which power is exercised and in which relations of power determine our lives and existence.

Foucault – in thus leaving behind language and with it works of art and literature, and in turning instead to the domain in which our lives are regulated and governed – now

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[52]   Foucault, "What is an Author?" 221.

[53]   Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, ed. and trans. James Harkness (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: 1982), 34, 47.

[54]   Ibid., 44.

[55]   Ibid., 44, 49. Foucault's assertion here that Magritte's paintings allow similitude to "proliferate" directly echoes the argument that appears in "What is an Author?" where Foucault talks about writing's capacity to produce this same kind of "dangerous proliferation." See "What is an Author?" 221.

[56]   This is not to say that Foucault, from the mid-1970s onward, no longer discusses literature at all. In his 1976 seminar *Society Must Be Defended*, for example, he offers a brief but detailed analysis of the function of tragedy in Racine. Yet here, his concern is with how Racine's literary activity reflects the changing conditions of seventeenth-century political life, not with the political function of literary activity itself in this context. See *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France*, 174-178. Foucault's final four published books are *Discipline and Punish* and then the three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*.

redirects his attention towards the question not only of governmentality, but also of how not to be governed, or, as he puts it, how not to be "governed quite so much."[57] What we now need to analyze, he argues, is both the ways in which our lives are managed – the techniques that are employed to govern us – and the strategies we might develop for opposing those techniques. Today, he writes, our aim is

> not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political 'double bind,' which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures.[58]

Refusing what we are, however, is, in Foucault's terms, not a simple task. It is not a matter of saying that we are "really" this and not that, nor is it a matter of saying that we can simply decide to be whatever we want. Rather, it involves determining, in relation to the specificity of our historical situation, what limits have been imposed on us, so that we might move beyond them.

This task of determining limits, then, is for Foucault grounded in a specific relation to our historical circumstances, in what he calls the "ethos" or "attitude of modernity."[59] This ethos or attitude, which Foucault traces back to Kant, emerges directly in Kant's account of what constitutes Enlightenment. According to Foucault, if Kantian critique seeks to determine the circumstances under which reason can be validly employed – to define "the conditions under which the use of reason is legitimate" – then the Enlightenment is the moment in which humanity, now capable of using reason legitimately, can do so "without subjecting itself to any authority."[60] The Enlightenment, that is, is the moment in which a certain kind of critical attitude appears on the historical stage – an attitude that refuses to accept as unquestioned the historical conditions imposed on man as subject. Yet this does not mean, for Foucault, that what connects us to the Enlightenment is an uninterrupted belief in the conception of rationality that appears in the eighteenth century; our connection to the

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[57]   Foucault, "What is Critique?" *The Politics of Truth*, 29. It is worth emphasizing here, if only in passing, that Foucault's critique of governmentality is not simply a critique of state power. In his well-known series of lectures on American neoliberalism in his 1979 seminar *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault makes clear that a system built on total opposition to state governance – here in the form of an economic matrix applied to every aspect of life – can also operate in the biopolitical mode. See *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008), 239-86.

[58]   Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 336.

[59]   Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 112-3.

[60]   Ibid., 111.

Enlightenment, Foucault says, is not a matter of "faithfulness to doctrinal elements."[61] Rather, the "thread" that links us to the Enlightenment is the "permanent reactivation" of a critical attitude, an attitude that asserts itself as the "permanent critique of our historical era."[62]

This critique, as it emerges in our present period, takes shape, Foucault argues, along very different lines than its Kantian predecessor. Where Kantian criticism aimed to establish the universal limits within which reason would necessarily have to restrict itself, critique now, Foucault says, focuses, in almost inverse terms, on determining the conditions through which our capacity for thought is constrained – through which the "truth" of the subject is constituted. Such critique, according to Foucault, is not "transcendental"; it does not seek to ground a "metaphysics."[63] Rather, Foucault says, this critique is both archaeological and genealogical – "archaeological in its method" and "genealogical in its design."[64] On the one hand, that is, the aim of this critique, as archaeological, will not be to define the "universal structure of all moral action," but to look at the discursive formations that organize our thoughts, statements, and actions.[65] And, on the other, this critique, as genealogical, will be concerned with moving beyond the historical conditions that shape us:

> it will not deduce from the form of what we are what is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think.[66]

Criticism now, in other words, will be defined by an ethos or attitude that involves not only the historical analysis of how we have been made into subjects, but also, in this analysis of what constitutes our limits, an insistent experimentation with breaking free from those limits – with making ourselves into something else.[67] This is the project that now underlies Foucault's work. But by what means, according to Foucault, might this project be pursued?

III.

In his late writing, Foucault turns his attention increasingly towards this question. If what is now necessary is that we remake ourselves, Foucault argues, if what we now need to

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[61]   Ibid., 119.
[62]   Ibid.
[63]   Ibid., 125.
[64]   Ibid.
[65]   Ibid.
[66]   Ibid.
[67]   Ibid., 132.

do is recreate the selves that define us, then this is not, he writes, a matter of creating a "new man."[68] Indeed, he says, this is an idea that has been promoted by "the worst political systems" of the twentieth century.[69] Nor is he asserting that we need to rediscover our "true" selves; clearly, the notion that there is a secret truth that determines us – a truth about us that our actions, however conventional or transgressive, will ultimately reveal and confirm – is one that Foucault, from his earliest works, devotes himself to discrediting. Rather, what is at issue for Foucault here is a process of self-making that proceeds without either origin or conclusion, that takes the self neither as a pre-given essence nor as an ideal goal to be realized later. As such, Foucault insists, the self that we aim to create does not ever fully materialize:

> Asceticism as the renunciation of pleasure has bad connotations. But ascesis is something else: it's the work that one performs in order to transform oneself or make the self appear which, happily, one never attains.[70]

For this reason, because Foucault conceives the self as neither given nor completed, he is asked, in a well-known interview with Paul Rabinow and Hubert Dreyfus, how he distinguishes his perspective from the position associated with Sartrean existentialism.[71] In answer to this question, Foucault states:

> I think that from the theoretical point of view, Sartre avoids the idea of the self as something that is given to us, but through the moral notion of authenticity, he turns back to the idea that we have to be ourselves – to be truly our true self. I think that the only acceptable practical consequence of what Sartre has said is to link his theoretical insight to the practice of creativity – and not that of authenticity. From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.[72]

If Sartre, like Foucault, begins with the premise that the "self is not given to us," then what separates their viewpoints, Foucault argues, is the fact that Sartre takes "creative activity" as an expression of the more fundamental relation that the individual "has to himself."[73] What

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68   Ibid., 127.
69   Ibid.
70   Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, 137.
71   Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: an Overview of a Work in Progress," *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, 253-280.
72   Ibid., 262.
73   Ibid.

matters for Sartre, that is, is the "authenticity or inauthenticity" of that relation, of the free choice that grounds the creative act.[74] The "writer," Sartre asserts,

> should commit himself completely in his work, and not in an abjectly passive role by putting forward his vices, his misfortunes, and his weaknesses, but as resolute will and choice, as this total enterprise of living that each one of us is.[75]

For Foucault, however, it is "exactly the contrary."[76] What is at issue is neither the authenticity of the writer's relation to himself nor the way in which creative activity expresses that relation. It is not the moment of individual choice that gives rise to creative activity; rather, it is creative activity that shapes the "kind of relation one has to oneself."[77] The self, Foucault argues, is the unfolding effect not of commitment and choice, but of continuous practices and techniques.

These practices and techniques, therefore, to the extent that they serve as the basis for this type of permanent work on the self, are guided, Foucault says, by an ethics – an ethics, he asserts, that develops along a path specific to our age. When Rabinow and Dreyfus thus ask him, in this context, how he defines this ethics – when they ask, "So what kind of ethics can we build now?" – Foucault offers the following response:

> What strikes me is the fact that, in our society, art has become something that is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life. That art is something which is specialized or done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life?[78]

The ethics that guides the practice of creating the self, as such, is for Foucault an "art" or "aesthetics of life."[79] But what exactly, in this context, does Foucault mean by aesthetics? It is clear, to begin with, that when Foucault uses the term aesthetics here, he is not talking about a mode of perception; he is not talking about *aisthēsis*. Rather, he is referring to a practice, a technique, a *technē*.[80] And this *technē* or technique is one that, Foucault says, is employed to

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[74]   Ibid.

[75]   Jean-Paul Sartre, "What is Literature?" *"What is Literature?" and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 46-7.

[76]   Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 262.

[77]   Ibid.

[78]   Ibid., 261.

[79]   Ibid., 255.

[80]   Foucault states, in this context: "One of the numerous points where I was wrong in [*History of Sexuality*] was what I said about this *ars erotica*. I should have opposed our science of sex to a contrasting

create a self; it is a technique that one applies to one's life. Thus, in the age of biopolitics – in an era in which, for Foucault, life is more and more managed and regulated through techniques that are increasingly subtle and encompassing, and in which our political task is in turn to discover how to escape the effects of those techniques – he calls for an ethics that makes life itself into a work of art.[81] If we are to evade the forms of biopower that surround us, that is, what we need to develop, he says, is an "art of life."

For Foucault, then, just as the question of how to erase man gives way, in the 1970s, to the question of how not to be governed, so the aesthetic practices that he had previously advocated – and which subsequently lose their privileged place in his writing – are now supplanted by this new "aesthetics of life." The work of art, that is, which had dropped out of Foucault's writing, now reappears in the domain of life. And if this reappearance is considered in relation to the question of ethics, it becomes clear, as well, that the ethics of writing that Foucault described in "What is an Author?" – as an ethics of indifference to who is speaking or writing – is now succeeded by this new ethics, by an ethics not of writing but of living, of permanent work on the self. And this means, finally, not that Foucault rejects the project that he put forward in *The Order of Things* and in related texts, but that this project is reconstituted along an entirely different axis. For while what remains constant for Foucault is an insistence that the self is a fiction, what is at issue for him is no longer, as it had been, exposing this fiction. It is no longer a matter, that is, of revealing that the category of the self is a fabrication put to use to ground modern regimes of truth and knowledge. Rather, what is at stake now is to find a way to make this fiction function differently – to create a self that escapes from the limits imposed on us by how we are now governed. And it is the refashioning of the self through an art of life that is the means to do this.

Yet does Foucault's emphasis on this kind of art of life – and his turn away, at the same time, from works of literature and visual art – necessarily mean that, following his argument, these two aesthetic models are incompatible? Is an aesthetics of life the only kind of aesthetic activity that, in his terms, is still politically relevant? These are not questions that

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practice in our own culture. The Greeks and Romans did not have any *ars erotica* (or at least it was not something very important in their culture). They had a *technē tou biou* in which the economy of pleasure played a very large role. In this "art of life," the notion of exercising a perfect mastery over oneself soon became the main issue. And the Christian hermeneutics of the self constituted a new elaboration of the *technē*." It is clear here that what he calls the "art of life," a phrase that he uses interchangeably with "aesthetics of life," is a "technique" of living, in both the descriptive and the etymological senses. Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 259.

[81]   For Foucault's most well-known account of the rise of biopower and of its pervasiveness in present society, see Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 135-145.

Foucault addresses directly; however, it is nonetheless useful here to revisit his discussion of the relationship between critique and Enlightenment. For in that context, in order to provide what he calls an "indispensable example" of the "attitude of modernity," Foucault turns to the history of art, and specifically to Baudelaire's classic account of nineteenth-century modernity, "The Painter of Modern Life."[82]

As Foucault thus explains it, there are several aspects of Baudelaire's description of the modern painter that are important to stress. First, Foucault says, if the painter of modern life is for Baudelaire the figure who "grasp[s]" modernity by recognizing what is "contingent" and "ephemeral" in his own time, then this is not simply a matter of the modern painter's "sensitivity to the fleeting present."[83] What is also key here, according to Foucault, is the attitude that the modern painter adopts towards modern life, an attitude characterized by the modern painter's "will to 'heroize' the present," his impulse to define what is singular about the period in which he lives.[84] Second, Foucault asserts, if the painter of modern life is, in Baudelaire's account, more than a mere "spectator," if this figure is more than just a "*flâneur*," then this is because the modern painter, though a dedicated observer of modern life, also puts his distinct "capacity for seeing" to creative use; beyond simply reproducing what he sees, the modern painter, through his work, expresses the "moral and aesthetic feeling" of his time.[85] This painter, that is, to the extent that he depicts "reality," also remakes reality into something different than what appears in front of him – the modern painter, in grasping his social world, also, Foucault writes, seeks to "imagine it otherwise than it is."[86] Third, Foucault argues, the painter of modern life, in his engagement with modernity, is concerned not with expressing inner truth but with creating his own mode of existence. In this sense, Foucault says, the modern painter, through the attitude that he adopts, aims to

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[82]   Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 114.

[83]   Ibid., 114, 116. See also Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1964), 12.

[84]   Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 114. In relation to this notion of "heroizing" the present, Foucault supplements his reading of "The Painter of Modern Life" with an earlier text by Baudelaire, "On the Heroism of Modern Life." See Charles Baudelaire, "On the Heroism of Modern Life," *The Mirror of Art*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 127-30.

[85]   Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 116. Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," 2, 12. While Foucault adheres largely to Baudelaire's text, he also reads that text somewhat selectively at points. Thus, Foucault does not address the idealization of the modern painter that grounds Baudelaire's argument, nor does he draw any attention to the historically specific social privilege that this idealization reflects. For an influential account of these issues, particularly as they apply to the gendered dimension of Baudelaire's conception of the modern painter, see Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," *Vision and Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 50-90.

[86]   Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 117.

produce himself: "Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself."[87] Yet this is not an undertaking that takes place everywhere. It is only in a specific domain, in the domain of art, that this attitude embodied by Baudelaire's modern painter can emerge:

> This ironic heroization of the present, this transfiguring play of freedom with reality, this ascetic elaboration of the self – Baudelaire does not imagine that these have any place in society itself, or in the body politic. They can only be produced in another, a different place, which Baudelaire calls art.[88]

In Foucault's analysis of Baudelaire, then, three things are linked: the ethos of critique that Foucault calls the "attitude of modernity," the practice of art, and the task of creating oneself. As a result, however, it also becomes possible here to broaden out the conception of an "aesthetics of the self" that Foucault presents in the interview with Rabinow and Dreyfus. For if the creation of the self is connected both with the modern critical attitude and with the production of works of art, then there can be no opposition, despite Foucault's suggestion to the contrary, between art as "something that is related to objects" and art that takes "life" as its focus. Indeed, Foucault draws attention, later in the same interview, to the close relationship between the development of technical skills, including the technique of writing, and what he calls the art of living:

> No technique, no professional skill can be acquired without exercise; neither can one learn the art of living, the *tekhnē tou biou*, without an *askēsis* which must be taken as a training of oneself by oneself: this was one of the traditional principles to which the Pythagoreans, the Socratics, the Cynics had for a long time attributed great importance. Among all the forms this training took (which included abstinences, memorizations, examinations of conscience, meditations, silence, and listening to others), it seems that writing – the fact of writing for oneself and for others – came … to play a sizeable role.[89]

Although Foucault is talking in this context about pre-modern practices, the implication of his argument for the present is nonetheless clear; forms of training that involve the production of objects – such as the production of written texts – can also function as forms of training the self. If Foucault therefore calls for an ethics that takes life as the object of an ongoing aesthetic practice, then this is not necessarily at the expense of other forms of

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[87]   Ibid., 118.
[88]   Ibid.
[89]   Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 273.

aesthetic activity. Such forms of activity, rather, should be understood, following his larger argument, as fully imbricated with the development of an art of life.

To the degree that Foucault's notion of an art of life thus opens up space for different aesthetic practices, it is also worth reconsidering, in this context, Foucault's contention that art today is conceived as something done only by "specialists," that it is identified only with the production of "objects," and that "life" itself is not recognized as a potential site for artistic activity.[90] For the idea of art as a specialized activity, entirely separate from everyday life, and concerned only with the creation of autonomous objects is one that artists, from the earliest of moments of the avant-gardes, have continually sought to challenge. Indeed, if there is a single impulse that runs through every avant-garde movement of the twentieth century – from the historical avant-gardes of the early part of the century (Dada, Surrealism, Soviet Constructivism, etc.) to the postwar or neo-avant-gardes of the 1950s and 1960s (Fluxus, French New Realism, The Situationist International, and so on) – it is the desire to merge art and life. In this sense, it is difficult not to view Foucault's call for an "art of life" – for making life itself into art – as a variation on this longstanding avant-garde desire. Yet to whatever extent this is the case, it would be a mistake to see Foucault here as simply reproducing an established avant-garde argument. For what Foucault's concept of the "art of life" makes possible, when looked at in this context, is a way not only to rethink the historical function of the avant-gardes, but to reimagine, as well, how that project might be reconstituted in our present context.

While what is common, then, both to Foucault and to the avant-gardes is the commitment to rework the relationship between art and life, Foucault conceives this relationship in terms that diverge sharply from the avant-garde position. That position, as summarized by Peter Bürger in his influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, is predicated on the view, first and foremost, that the spheres of art of life have been separated, and that, in order to repair a damaged social world, these spheres must be reconnected. It is this task, therefore – the task of reconnecting art and life – that the avant-garde takes as its project. And the avant-garde pursues this project, Bürger writes, by challenging what it sees as the "autonomy of bourgeois art" – a false autonomy that enables the artwork, in its institutionally fetishized form, to compensate for those "needs that cannot be satisfied in everyday life."[91] What the avant-garde attempts to do, as such, is to "negate" this false autonomy, with the aim of overturning the bourgeois "institution" of art and of "organiz[ing] a new life praxis"; the project of the avant-garde, in this sense, is to remake society, to create a new social order in

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[90]   Ibid., 261.

[91]   Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 49-50

which "art and the praxis of life are one."[92] What is thus at stake in this effort to reunify art and life, Bürger argues, is the possibility of replacing existing social relations with an entirely new social reality.

This is of course not what Foucault has in mind when he proposes an art of life. For just as he argues that an ethics of the self necessitates a practice that proceeds without end or telos – just as he asserts, that is, that we cannot, in producing ourselves, "know the truth about desire, life, nature, body, and so on" – so he insists, along the same lines, that a critique of our present cannot be grounded in already knowing the "truth" of social relations.[93] If our task, Foucault argues, is to remake ourselves by critically understanding the kinds of forces that have made us what we are, then this cannot be a matter, he insists, of appealing to the truth of a new or different social formation. The attempt to build a "critical ontology of ourselves," he writes – to rethink our existence historically and theoretically – requires that we "turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical. In fact," he continues,

> we know from experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions.[94]

And there can be little question that it is precisely this kind of project – the kind of project built on the promise of total social transformation – that has, virtually without exception, served as the motor behind avant-garde activity in the twentieth century. Yet if there is no reconciling the utopianism of the avant-gardes with the historicist model of critique for which Foucault argues, there is nonetheless a different perspective, one that concentrates not on the

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[92]   Ibid., 49, 51. Bürger's conception of the avant-garde remains the most canonical, but his argument has also been challenged. Among the most influential of these challenges is the one put forward by Hal Foster, who contests Bürger's view that the historical avant-garde failed in its project, but did so authentically, while the postwar or "neo-avant-garde" pursued this project only cynically. Against this view, Foster argues that, through a temporal logic of "deferred action," the project of the historical avant-gardes is "grasped" or "comprehended" only through its repetition by the neo-avant-gardes, a process of repetition that is thus potentially "endless." In this sense, for Foster, the avant-garde project is open to continuous re-enactment and elaboration. See Hal Foster, "Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?" *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1996), 20, 28-32.

[93]   Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 262. Foucault's point of reference here is not the avant-gardes but the culture of Northern California in the early 1980s. Still, it is not difficult to identify a similar logic at work in both contexts.

[94]   Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 126.

avant-garde's intentions, as Bürger does, but instead on its practices, that brings Foucault and the avant-gardes directly into contact.[95]

For from this perspective, what comes into focus is the fact that, in every avant-garde movement, three characteristics are always visible – characteristics that might thus be understood to form the basis of any avant-garde undertaking. These are, first, a relentless critique of existing social reality, second, a strictly experimental approach to aesthetic production, and third, proceeding from the first two, a continuous effort to develop alternative modes of everyday life. This is not to say that one finds the same critique, aesthetic practices, or modes of living from one avant-garde to the next; each confronts its own historical situation and responds to that situation in distinct aesthetic and political terms. Rather, what is at issue is that the three characteristics that define the avant-gardes here are the same as those that Foucault, in his account of Baudelaire, identifies with the attitude of modernity. And insofar as this is the case, it now becomes possible to rethink the relationship between Foucault's conception of an art of life and the project of the avant-gardes. For what now becomes clear is that the avant-gardes, when reread within this context, appear not as an isolated historical phenomenon but as a particular incarnation of the modern critical attitude that Foucault describes. It therefore does not make sense, from this vantage point, to see the avant-garde project, as Bürger and others do, as a failure – as a utopian fantasy that, in its obsolescence, we must now leave behind.[96] For if, as Foucault asserts, the attitude of modernity, as a "permanent critique of our historical era," is something that needs to be continually reactivated in new forms, then we can reconceive the avant-gardes, beyond their utopian ambitions, as adopting precisely this kind of critical attitude in relation to the historical circumstances that they confronted.[97] And this means, in turn, that the project of the avant-gardes, now resituated as part of the ongoing critical enterprise that Foucault envisions, is neither abandoned nor replaced by something new, but is instead continued by other means in the present.

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[95]   I use the term "historicist" here following Foucault's adoption of it in *Society Must Be Defended*, where he states that if we are to pursue any analysis of the relationship between "war and history," then "we must try to be historicists." This is because, he says, "No matter how far back it goes, historical knowledge never finds nature, rights, order, or peace." See Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France*, 172-73.

[96]   Alongside Bürger, one can think here as well of Jürgen Habermas's dismissive account of the avant-gardes in "Modernity – An Incomplete Project?" where Habermas describes the avant-garde project as a misguided and "failed attempt" to "force a reconciliation of art and life"; a "rationalized everyday life," Habermas writes, "could hardly be saved from cultural impoverishment through breaking open a single cultural sphere – art." See Habermas, "Modernity – An Incomplete Project," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 11.

[97]   Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 119.

If Foucault, then – in what for him is the age of biopower and governmentality – proposes an art of life, then this art of life, as an activity that responds directly to power's increasingly totalizing hold on life, has to be understood in turn as extending and elaborating practices that, in the domain of the avant-gardes, were already underway. Yet these practices, when reconsidered within the framework that Foucault lays out, also come into view here in new terms. For the art of life that Foucault envisions – to the extent that it develops in conjunction with a "critical ontology of ourselves," with an ongoing critique of the historical forces that have made us what we are – aims not at uniting art and life in a larger totality, but instead at escaping the increasingly encompassing mechanisms of power that now encircle us. And the way that this art of life takes shape, Foucault asserts, is through regular experimental practices that, as I have tried to show, also include aesthetic practices. Thus, if Foucault, in the mid-1970s, in turning away from his earlier concern with language and signification, turns away from works of art and literature as well, then this does not mean, in relation to his writing from this period, that the forms of avant-garde aesthetic activity for which he had previously argued are rendered irrelevant. For if, in this context, the problem with which Foucault is concerned shifts from the dissolution of man to the way man is governed – and if, as a result, the project that emerges for him is that of remaking our lives so that we might be governed less than we are – then aesthetic practices have a key role to play here. Such practices, that is, rather than being disconnected from our efforts to contest and move beyond the limits imposed on us, in fact strengthen and intensify those efforts. In our present culture, imagining what forms these practices might thus take, and how they might in turn be put to use, remains, as Foucault helps us to see, a crucial task to be pursued.

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