The essay stresses Foucault's formulation of the historical emergence of the body as the nexus of power/knowledge relations which give rise to what he termed a 'politics of the body'. Given the convergence of these issues with Foucault's later interest in themes of sexuality it is surprising that the question of gender (and the politics of gender) is so understated in Foucault's writings. Even more surprising, however, looking back to when this essay was written, was how few feminist appropriations of Foucauldian analysis there had then been. Yet it would seem obvious that Foucault's analysis of the (sexualised) body as the object and vehicle of forms of power/knowledge has a significant bearing upon feminist analyses of patriarchal control over women's bodies, be it in the domains of science, medicine or art; and that his notions of disciplinary power and the regimes and techniques of surveillance lend themselves to feminist critiques of the subjugation of women as the objects of both knowledge and desire. Such things are, of course, never so simple and, as recent studies reveal, the relationship between Foucault and the politics of feminism is far from unproblematic, not least for the fact as previously noted that his earlier studies are at the very least ambivalent as to the prospects of resistance to the operations of power in modern societies. However, my own guess as to why Foucault was not—at least until the later 1980s—as central a figure in feminist academic studies as one might have expected, is that the period in which his work was rapidly gaining attention in Britain and the USA coincided with growing influence of Freudian psychoanalytical theory, rekindled initially through the work of Jacques Lacan. Thus it was that Freudian and post-Freudian models of subjectivity and sexual identity gained ground seemingly at the expense of the types of analysis offered by Foucault and this was certainly the case with regard to much of the critical and theoretical work on visual representation, particularly with regard to photography. One hope for the future would be that Foucault's conception of a history of subjectivity would be able to take its place alongside psychoanalytical theory to produce a more adequate basis for thinking of ourselves and thus for ourselves.

**On Foucault:**

Disciplinary Power and Photography

Recently the writings of the French historian and philosopher, Michel Foucault, have been increasingly widely reviewed in this country and if their reception has not always been entirely favourable the consensus has been that they merit careful consideration. Foucault's influence, however, has been largely confined to the realms of academia. Thus one suspects that the potential value of his ideas to cultural practitioners working within an oppositional politics has yet to be fully realised. It is, therefore, with the aim of extending the audience for his ideas that I shall attempt here briefly to recapitulate the principal components of Foucault's work, to trace the trajectory of his arguments and to assess the importance and use of his conclusions for a contemporary cultural politics of photography.

**Power/Knowledge**

Foucault's writings are notoriously 'difficult' but the challenge to the reader is not so much at the level of language or terminology but with his general refusal to acknowledge the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines. The main body of Foucault's work can be said to be located within the history of ideas or more specifically within the history of science. Initially, however Foucault's points of departure seem bewilderingly diverse: from his earlier studies of psychology in *Madness and Civilisation* (1961) and the birth of modern medicine in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), through the much more apparently eclectic grouping of philosophy, biology and political economy to be found in *The Order of Things* (1966) to the study of criminology in *Discipline and Punishment* (1975) and finally to the projected six volume analysis in *The History of Sexuality* (1976). Yet behind the investigations of these varied phenomena lie two central interconnecting themes: the development of certain forms of rationality which posit 'man' as both the subject and object of knowledge; second, the complex relations bonding power and knowledge which are implicit to such forms of rationality. The historical focus of Foucault's work has thus been that moment when man constitutes himself in Western culture as both that which must be conceived of and that which must be known, that is, the period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Prior to this, he has argued, there was no specific domain of knowledge proper to 'man' himself. The modern notion of man as a unitary and ultimately knowable subject is the product of an his-
historical process and one that is formulated in the appearance of all that we understand today by the human and social sciences. Foucault's work can then best be viewed as an attempt to understand how the human and social sciences became historically possible, to map out the conditions that enabled their emergence, and to indicate the consequences of their existence.

The fulcrum of these investigations has been the idea that the human and social sciences represent not only the emergence of new forms of knowledge about 'man' but also the development of new forms and modalities of power over man. The reflexive relations of power and knowledge which Foucault has sought to define require a fundamental shift in our usual understanding of these concepts. Thus power cannot be regarded only, as it often has been, as a negative force which makes itself known through the operations of repression, exclusion, limitation or censorship. Power must also be recognised in its positive forms when it enables the production of knowledge:

Foucault's insistence on the recognition of the positive, productive characteristics of modern modalities of power offers an alternative to the ideological critique of science in which power appears only as a corrupt or distortive force. If the knowledges of 'man' provided by the human and social sciences are able to serve the needs of power this is not attributable to the veil of ideological mystification but to their ability to define a certain field of empirical truth, what Foucault has called a 'politics' or 'regime of truth'. Power, therefore, does not stand outside of truth as the potential transgressor of the boundaries of legitimate scientific knowledge; power is itself already truth and the very terrain upon which knowledge is possible:

The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power; contrary to the myth whose history would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protected solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish between true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

Foucault is not necessarily concerned with the 'correctness' or otherwise of the concepts, methods and content of the modern sciences but with the effect of power which is linked to the institution and functioning of an organised scientific discourse within society. It is a question of what and who governs scientific statements so as to constitute a set of propositions, a discursive formation, which is accepted as true; at this level it is not so much a matter of knowing what external power imposes itself on science, as what effects of power circulate among scientific statements.

Disciplinary Power

Foucault's most widely read work, Discipline and Punishment, first published in 1975, returns to the analysis of a single discourse/institution relation which had provided the structure of his earlier studies of Madness and Civilisation and The Birth of the Clinic. It charts the origins of the prison and the development of modern penology during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But in this work especially, the implications of Foucault's analysis reach far beyond his immediate subject matter, and the broader theme of the book is the emergence of an entirely new form of power and means of domination which define, what Foucault has called, a 'disciplinary society'. The emergence of this new form of power is traced through the changes which occur in the concept of punishment from a system of retribution to a system of reform. It involves the gradual replacement of types of punishment which are spectacular, ritualistic and manifestly violent, and in which the body of the offender was the direct and immediate target of retribution, by a more modest, discrete and subtle means of correction and training whose target was no longer the body of the offender but his 'soul', understood in terms of subjectivity, consciousness and personality. It would, says Foucault, be a mistake to see these changes simply as the inevitable triumph of reason over barbarism, the replacement of a tyrannical and brutal regime by a more humane and benevolent system. It was, of course, precisely these things but it was also the implementation
of a more pervasive and more calculated form of power at the heart of which lay the exercise of discipline:

Discipline may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a ‘physics’ or an anatomy of power, a technology.  

Foremost amongst this ‘technology’ of disciplinary power are the mechanisms of surveillance for which Jeremy Bentham’s ‘Panopticon’ provided the ideal model. As originally envisaged by Bentham, the Panopticon was an architectural construction: a central tower is enclosed by a circular building whose cellular spaces are open on the inside and their occupants exposed to the unremittent gaze the tower affords. In this field of uninterrupted visibility, in which only the observer remains unseen, it becomes possible to compare individuals to each other and to impose a system of formal equality, thereby exercising a normalising judgement. Yet by providing the measure of comparison the mechanisms of surveillance make it possible to gauge differences between individuals. Surveillance is above all an exercise of hierarchical observation. The Panopticon was the perfect manifestation of disciplinary power and the principles of its functioning—if not replication of its architectural form—could be utilised in a variety of contexts other than the penal institutions for which it was intended. In the extension of its mechanisms of surveillance and in the coincidence of the organisation of the prison, the hospital, the school and the factory, the disciplinary technology of ‘panopticism’ became diffused throughout society. Thus whilst the initial development of the technology of disciplinary power may have been directed towards prohibitive and repressive functions its subsequent proliferation indicates an inherently productive and positive capacity.

Discipline and Punishment stakes out more clearly than any other of Foucault’s writings the conception of the necessary interdependence of power and knowledge, a conception of power/knowledge relations. Indeed it would be impossible to conceive of the emergence of the forms of disciplinary power without the emergence of an accompanying field of knowledge which permeates and sustains them. The specific techniques of surveillance, documentation and administration of individuals which are constitutive of the forms of disciplinary power are the product of those new ‘rationalities’, those new kinds of knowledge about ‘man’, the human and social sciences. The provenance of the human and social sciences cannot be located in some disinterested search for pure knowledge since their origins are bound to

the birth of those disciplinary institutions—the prison, the asylum, the hospital, the school, the factory—of what Foucault has called, the ‘carceral network’.

The carceral network, in its compact or disseminated forms, with its systems of insertion, distribution, surveillance, observation, has been the greatest support in modern society of the normalising power. The carceral texture of society assures both the real capture of the body and its perpetual observation; it is, by its very nature, the apparatus of punishment that conforms most completely to the new economy of power and the instrument for the formation of knowledge that this very economy needs. Its panoptic functioning enables it to play this double role. By virtue of its methods of fixing, dividing, recording, it has been one of the simplest, crudest, also most concrete, but perhaps most indispensable conditions for the development of the immense activity of examination that has objectified human behaviour....I am not saying that the human sciences emerged from the prison. But, if they have been able to produce so many profound changes...it is because they have been conveyed by a specific and new modality of power: a certain policy of the body, a certain way of rendering the accumulation of men docile and useful. This policy required the involvement of definite relations of power; it called for a technique of overlapping subjection and objectification; it brought with it new procedures of individualism. The carceral network constituted one of the armatures of this power/knowledge that has made the human sciences historically possible. Knowable man (soul, individuality, consciousness, conduct, whatever it is called) is the object-effect of this analytical investment, of this domination—observation.  

Foucault's concept of power/knowledge relations as integral to the existence and functioning of the modern human and social sciences takes one beyond the idea that power is always located and emanates from a central nexus of domination whether this is seen as an individual, a ruling class or the state to a conception of multiple forms of domination which permeate the social fabric. Power is not so much possessed as exercised through the myriad institutions and discursive practices that exist at all levels of social life. Clearly this has consequences for the analysis of power hence the concept formulated by Foucault of a ‘microphysics of power’ which seeks to reveal how the mechanisms of power in a disciplinary society operate routinely at the level of everyday life, localised in the minutiae of social relations, present in the prosaic encounter of criminal and criminologist, patient and doctor, pupil and teacher, child and parent.

The Politics of the Body
A consistent theme in Foucault’s work and, in particular, in his
analysis of discipline has been with those forms or tactics of power which have been directed towards, perhaps one could say inscribed upon, the body. These forms or tactics of power are not manifest as physical violence—indeed the body is touched as little as possible. Rather it is the case that this power is realised only by the subjection of the body as the object of knowledge, and the function of this power lies in its ability to extract knowledge, not pain, from the body. It is, I believe, in this analysis of how and why the body becomes, at a certain moment in time, the nexus of power/knowledge relations in a disciplinary society that Foucault's work has been of the most profound importance. His concern with and historical conception of the body, or, more precisely, with those discourses of the body which are always historically situated, has permitted an understanding of the entry of the body into the sphere of politics:

The body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it: they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies and to emit signs. The political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection...the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjugated body.¹

Foucault's earlier historical studies cover the period of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The developments of those phenomena he is concerned with are therefore contingent to a series of profound demographic, political, social and cultural changes consequent upon the rise of industrial capitalism. The question is whether the emergence of the forms of disciplinary power which Foucault has analysed in terms of quite specific discursive and institutional practices are related to these other levels of the social formation and, if so, in what manner are they related. He is careful to distance himself from a simple causal relation based upon the Marxist principle of economic determination:

I believe that anything can be deduced from the general principle of the domination of the bourgeois class. What needs to be done is something quite different. One needs to investigate historically, and beginning from the lowest level, how mechanisms of power have been able to function....We need to see how these mechanisms of power, at a given moment, in a precise conjuncture, and by means of a certain number of transformations, have begun to become economically useful.⁶
Foucault goes on to suggest that it is not the exclusion of the criminal and the insane which served the interests of the bourgeoisie but the techniques and procedures themselves of such an exclusion. It was the actual mechanisms of disciplinary power, the apparatuses of surveillance, which become politically useful and lent themselves to economic profit. In the case of the factory or workshop discipline may have been evoked as a moral incentive but the importance of discipline increasingly become one of maximising productivity and thereby the profitability of labour. The physical division of space and the imposed segregation of individuals, the carefully controlled rhythm of activities and the imposition of rigid temporal sequences, became common features of both the prison and the workplace. It is this ‘economy’ of power which distinguishes discipline and which prompts Foucault to view it as one of the great inventions of bourgeois society and as a fundamental instrument of industrial capitalism and the type of society which is its accompaniment.

The emergence of a disciplinary society corresponds to a particular historical conjuncture: the growth of new modes of production centred upon the factory and the increase of population concentrated within urban communities. The mechanisms of discipline which Foucault describes at length in Discipline and Punish, gave rise to a political anatomy of the body, a certain way of rendering the accumulation of men docile and useful. The techniques of disciplinary power enabled the improvement of the efficiency and profitability of labour. In so far that discipline is a power which engages and infiltrates the physical capabilities of individuals caught within its mechanisms we can speak of a politics of the body. But disciplinary power also engaged the body as a ‘species’ body and it gave rise to a ‘politics of population’, the focus of which was a series of regulatory controls effective at the level of the ‘social’. As the problems caused by the rapid expansion of urban populations became more evident the need for political control and intervention became more necessary. In this context the body took on a new and crucial importance as the bearer of those qualities of fertility, health and sickness, strength and weakness, which were seen as vital to the future of society and the nation as a whole. Hence we can understand the significance and importance of the proliferation of the discourses of sex in the nineteenth century analysed by Foucault in The History of Sexuality. Contrary to the popular myth what is involved in this ‘incitement to discourse’ is not a renunciation of pleasure nor a rejection of the flesh but an intensification of the body through the concern for its health and vitality. The organisation and the articulation of the discourses of sexuality in the nineteenth century produced a new conception of
the body which became the focus of discipline not only as a means to render it more productive but also more morally and physically healthy. The effect of this was to subject the body in an ever more detailed way to endless medical and psychological examination and to the mechanisms of surveillance.

Photography and Power
Photography has been historically important to the formation of the discourses of the body which have been such a vital constituent of disciplinary power. In part this was due to the widespread belief in the objective nature of the photographic process which ensured its privileged position in the procedures of scientific investigation and which meant that the photographic image would be regarded as a form of empirical truth or evidence of the real. But clearly involved here was not the discovery of pre-existent truths which the camera so meticulously revealed but the construction of new kinds of knowledge about the individual in terms of visible physiological features by which it is possible to measure and compare each individual to another. Photography, therefore, was contingent to other methods used in the observation and classification of individuals, forming a part of the mechanisms of surveillance and the exercise of a normalising, disciplinary power.

The compilation of photographic records, often used in conjunction with techniques of physiological measurement and written documentation, became common practice for a variety of scientific disciplines. The employment of photography in the fields of anthropology, medicine and criminology, in particular, draws together a whole series of discursive operations levelled at the body and organised along the axes of race, class or gender. Subject to the gaze of the camera the body became the object of the closest scrutiny, its surface continually examined for the signs of its innate physical, mental and moral inferiority. From this science of corporeal semiotics there emerged new forms of knowledge about the individual and new ways of mapping depravity. These simple, almost banal images cannot reveal the full complexity of the power/knowledge relations which lie behind their surface but, as John Tagg has indicated, they retain the traces of their functioning:

The body isolated; the narrow space; the subjection to an unreturnable gaze; the scrutiny of gestures, faces and features, the clarity of illumination and sharpness of focus; the names and the number of boards: these are the traces of power, reduplicated in numberless images, repeated countless times, whenever the photographer prepared an exposure, in police cell, prison, consultation room, asylum, home or school.
The historical investigation of photography as a mechanism of surveillance in the exercise of disciplinary power remains an important initiative. The work of John Tagg, myself and others have begun this task through a series of analyses which have concentrated upon the uses of photography in the late nineteenth century within such fields as criminology, medicine, anthropology and eugenics. But an historical perspective is only necessary and defendable as a means of helping us to understand the present and allowing us to create the appropriate and effective means of working strategically within the relations of power and knowledge which currently endure. The force and value of Foucault's ideas are owed to the fact that we continue to live in a society which is characterised, perhaps increasingly so, by the forms of discipline and mechanisms of surveillance which he has identified. However, a major criticism of Foucault's work has been that it creates a picture of society in which the presence of power is so pervasive, so diffuse and polymorphous that it would appear to make implausible any form of resistance. Foucault's response has been to insist that wherever there is power there is the potential for its resistance. But just as the forms of power are localised and specific so should be the forms of resistance. We must engage power at the points of its application and operation; that is, within the particular domains of knowledge and the particular institutions through which it is operative. This means that there cannot be an overall strategy for an oppositional cultural politics of photography; on the contrary it is necessary to develop alternative ways of working with photography, and to develop different photographic forms and devices suitable to the varied contexts in which the photograph is placed and used.

Reference Notes

1 Quoted in Alan Sheridan, Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth, Tavistock, London, 1980, p.131.
4 Ibid., pp.304-5.
5 Ibid., pp.25-6.
6 Foucault, Power/Knowledge, pp.100-1.

Further Reading

Since this essay was first published, and since Foucault's death, the
number of books and articles on his work has grown enormously. The following is a bibliography is an extended version of that given in 1985 but it represents a small fraction of the current literature. The most complete listing to date of books and articles by and on Foucault is given in James Bernauer and David Rasmussen, eds, The Final Foucault, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1988.

**Major texts by Foucault**


NB: dates given in brackets refer to the publication of the original French edition.

**Works on Foucault**


**Works on Photography with Reference to Foucault**

• David Green, 'A Map of Depravity', *Ten.8*, no.18, 1984.
• Roberta McGrath, 'Medical Police', *Ten.8*, no.18, 1984.
• Frank Mort, 'The Domain of the Sexual', *Screen Education*, Autumn 1980, no.36.