Interview with Madeline Chapsal
Translated by Mark. G. E. Kelly

Editor's Note: This interview, conducted by Madeline Chapsal in 1966, was first published as 'Entretien avec Madeleine Chapsal, 'in *La Quinzaine littéraire* 5, May 1966, pp. 514–519. This copy is taken from *The Journal of Continental Philosophy*, 1:1, 2020, pp. 29-35. Footnotes attributed to the editor are those of the editor of the piece as it appeared in *The Journal of Continental Philosophy*. Footnotes marked 'T/N' are those of the translator.

Chapsal: You are thirty-eight years old.[1] You are one of the youngest philosophers of your generation. Your latest book, *The Order of Things*,[2] attempts the examination of something that has changed completely in the last twenty years in the domain of thought. For example, according to you, existentialism and the thought of Sartre are in the process of becoming museum pieces. You inhabit — and we inhabit without being aware of it — a totally renewed intellectual space. *The Order of Things*, which partly unveils this newness, is a difficult book. Can you give me a relatively simple answer (even if this is at the expense of accuracy) to this question: where are you in this book? Where does it leave us?
Foucault: Very suddenly, and without any apparent reason, we noticed, about fifteen years ago, that we were a very, very long way away from the previous generation, from Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's generation — the generation of *Les Temps Modernes*, which had been our guide to thinking and our model for existing.
Chapsal: When you say, "we noticed," who is "we?"
Foucault: The generation of people who turned twenty only after the war. We saw Sartre's generation as a generation who were certainly courageous and generous, and who had passion for life, for politics, for existence. But we, for our part, discovered something else, another passion: a passion for the concept and for what I shall call the "system."
Chapsal: As a philosopher, what was Sartre interested in?
Foucault: Roughly speaking, confronted by a historical world that the bourgeois tradition, which no longer recognised itself in it, wanted to regard as *absurd*, Sartre wanted to show that on the contrary there was *meaning* everywhere. But Sartre's use of this expression was very ambiguous: it was at one and the same time an observation and a command, a prescription. There has to be meaning, which means that we must give a meaning to everything, a meaning which was itself very ambiguous: it was the result of a deciphering, of a reading, and it was also something obscure which happens in spite of everything to us in our acts. For Sartre, one was at the same time a reader and a punch card operator of meaning: one discovered meaning and one was acted on by it.
Chapsal: When did you stop believing in "meaning?"
Foucault: The point of rupture occurred the day that Lévi-Strauss, for societies, and Lacan, for the unconscious, showed us that *meaning* was probably only a sort of surface effect, a shimmering, a foam, and that what persisted through us deeply, what came before us, what sustained us in time and space, was the *system*.
Chapsal: What do you mean by system?
Foucault: By system, I mean any set of relations which maintain and transform themselves independently of the things that they link together. It has been possible to show, for example, that although Roman, Scandinavian, and Celtic myths appear to have very different gods and heroes from one another, the organisation which links them (these cultures which were un- aware of one another), their hierarchies, their rivalries, their traditions, their arrangements, and their adventures, obey a single system.[3] Recent discoveries in the field of prehistoric archaeology similarly allow a glimpse of a systematic organisation governing the

[1] T/N: This statement of Foucault's age would actually seem to be incorrect. Foucault's 39th birthday fell on the 15th of October, 1965. Since the interview makes immediate reference to *The Order of Things*, published in French only a month before the interview appeared, in April 1966, it would seem that Foucault at this time must already have been 39.
[2] Editor's Note: Sartre's well-known autobiography *Les Mots* ("The Words"), was released three years before Foucault's *The Order of Things*. The actual name of Foucault's text is *Les Mots et les Choses*, which means literally "Words and Things." There is an implicit rebuke of Sartre in this title, which strongly suggests that Sartrean existentialism had forgotten about *things*.
[3] T/N: This is a reference to the thought of Georges Dumézil, who is mentioned by Foucault again later in the interview.

arrangement of figures drawn on cave walls. In biology, you know that the chromosomal helix carries in code, in an encoded message, all the genetic markers that will allow the future person to develop. The importance of Lacan comes from the fact that he has shown how, through the discourse of sickness and the symptoms of neurosis, there are structures, the very system of a language — and not a subject — that speaks. Before all human existence, all human thought, there was already a knowledge, a system, which we are rediscovering.

Chapsal: But then, who is producing this system?

Foucault: What is this anonymous system without a subject? Who is thinking? The "I" has exploded (look at modern literature) — it is the discovery of the "there is." There is a *on*.[4] In a certain way, we are returning here to the point of view of the seventeenth century, with this difference: we are not putting man in place of God, but rather in the place of an anonymous thought, of knowledge without a subject, of a theory without an identity.

Chapsal: What does this matter to those of us who are not philosophers?

Foucault: In all epochs, the way in which people reflect, write, judge, and speak (including in the street, in everyday conversations and writings), even the way in which people feel things, how their sensibility reacts, their whole conduct is controlled by a theoretical structure, a *system*, which changes with the era and the society — but which is present in all eras and all societies.

Chapsal: Sartre taught us freedom. Do you teach us that there is no real freedom of thought?

Foucault: One thinks within an anonymous and limiting thought which is that of an epoch and of a language. That thought and that language have their laws of transformation. The task of contemporary philosophy and of all those theoretical disciplines that I have named for you is to bring to light this thought before thought, this system before any system. It is the depth on which our "free" thought emerges and glitters for a moment.

Chapsal: What would the system be today?

Foucault: I have attempted to uncover it — partially — in *The Order of Things*.

Chapsal: In doing that, were you beyond the system then?

Foucault: In thinking the system, I was already constrained by a system behind the system, which I did not know, and which peels back to the extent that I reveal it, that it reveals itself.

Chapsal: What becomes of man in all this?[5] Is this a new philosophy of man which is in the process of being constructed? Does not all your research depend on the human sciences?

Foucault: Superficially, yes. The discoveries of Lévi-Strauss, of Lacan, of Dumézil belong to what it is convenient to call the human sciences; but what is characteristic of all this scholarship is that it not only effaces the traditional image we had of man, but in my opinion it all tends to render the very idea of man useless, in scholarship and in thought. The most ponderous legacy that comes down to us from the nineteenth century — and of which it is high time we rid ourselves — is humanism.

Chapsal: Humanism?

Foucault: Humanism has been a way of resolving, in terms of morality, values, and reconciliation, problems that could not be solved at all. You know what Marx says? Humanity only poses problems that it can solve. I think we can say: humanism pretends to solve problems which it cannot pose!

Chapsal: But which problems?

Foucault: Ah well, the problems of the relations between man and the world, the problem of reality, the problem of artistic creation, happiness, and all the obsessions which absolutely do not deserve to be theoretical problems. Our *system* is absolutely not concerned with them. Our current task is to free ourselves definitively from humanism, and, in this sense, our work is political work.

Chapsal: Where is the politics in that?

Foucault: To save man, to rediscover man in man, etc. It is the end of all these long-winded ventures, both theoretical and practical, aimed at reconciling, for example, Marx and Teilhard de Chardin (ventures drowned

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[4] T/N: The French pronoun *on* may be translated by various pronouns in English — as "we", "you", "they", or "one" — depending on context. Here, I have left it untranslated because Foucault is invoking the status of the *on qua* unspecified, anonymous subject, which has no ready equivalent in English.

[5] T/N: I have translated the copious references to *l'homme* in this interview literally as "man." Contemporaneous English would certainly have rendered such references as "the human" or "humanity," but even if the genderedness of the French term is not as immediately confronting as it is for the English word, the genderedness is still arguably part of the concept Foucault is critiquing so I have opted to retain it in the translation.

in humanism that have for years rendered all intellectual work infertile). Our task is to free ourselves definitively from humanism, and it is in this sense that our work is political work, insofar as all the regimes of the East or West pass out their bad goods under the flag of humanism. We have to denounce all these mystifications, like today, inside the Communist Party, where Althusser and his courageous companions are struggling against "Chardino-Marxism."

Chapsal: How far has this thought already penetrated?

Foucault: These discoveries have a very strong penetration among an ill-defined group of French intellectuals that includes the mass of students and less senior teachers. It is quite obvious that there are resistances in this area, especially from the human sciences. The demonstration that one never exits knowledge or the theoretical is more difficult to apply in the human sciences (in literature in particular) than when it comes to logic and mathematics.

Chapsal: Where did this movement come from?

Foucault: It takes all the monoglot narcissism of the French to imagine — as they do — that they are the ones who have just discovered this whole field of problems. This movement developed in America, England, and France, starting from work done immediately after the First World War in the Slavic and German-speaking countries. But whereas "new criticism"[6] has existed in the United States for a good forty years, and much great logic work has been done there and in Britain, a few years ago you could still count the number of French linguists on your fingers. We have a hexagonal consciousness of culture that makes it, paradoxically, possible for de Gaulle to pass for an intellectual.[7]

Chapsal: What this means is that the cultivated gentleman [*l'honnête homme*] feels himself outmoded. Is this a condemnation of conventional education, or is it more just about specialists?

Foucault: What is condemned is not the cultivated gentleman, but our secondary education (controlled by humanism). We absolutely do not learn the fundamental disciplines that would allow us to understand what is going on in our vicinity — and, above all, what is happening elsewhere. If the cultivated gentleman, today, has the impression of a barbaric culture, bristling with statistics and acronyms, this impression is only due to a single fact: our educational system dates from the nineteenth century and one still sees reigning there the most bland psychology, the most obsolete humanism, categories of taste, and of the human heart. It is neither the fault of what is happening nor the fault of the gentleman, if he has the feeling of no longer understanding anything; it is the fault of the organisation of education.

Chapsal: Nevertheless, this new form of thought, statistics or no, appears to be cold and quite abstract.

Foucault: Abstract? I would reply thus: it is humanism which is abstract! All these *cris de cœur*, all these claims about the human person and about existence are abstract, which is to say cut off from the scientific and technical world which is our real world. What makes me angry about humanism is that it is now this screen behind which the most reactionary thought takes refuge, where monstrous and unthinkable alliances are formed: they want to combine Sartre and Teilhard, for example. In the name of what? Of man! Who would dare speak ill of man? And yet, the effort currently being made by people of our generation is not done in order to claim man is *contrary* to knowledge and technology, but is precisely to show that our thought, our life, our manner of being, even our most everyday manner of being, are part of the same systematic organisation and therefore depend on the *same* categories as the scientific and technical world. It is the "human heart" which is abstract, and it is our scholarship, which wants to connect man with his science, with his discoveries, and with his world, which is concrete.

Chapsal: I think so.

Foucault: I will respond to you that we must not confuse the soft warmness of compromises with the coldness which belongs to true passions. The writers who please us the most, we "cold" systematicians, are Sade and Nietzsche, who, in effect, spoke "of the sickness of man." Were they not also the most passionate writers?

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[6] T/N: In English in the original.

[7] T/N: The roughly hexagonal shape of metropolitan France leads the French to informally refer to their country as "the hexagon."