

## Interpretations of Heterotopia

Foucault's accounts of heterotopia remain briefly sketched, provisional and at times confusing. Genocchio (1995: 37). notes a clear inconsistency between the presentations of the notion in the preface to *The Order of Things* and the later lecture. Deaene and De Cautier (2008a: 28), who have produced the most recent English translation of the text, consider that the lecture is incomplete in that it does not fully address Foucault's third stage of 'emplacement' in his brief history of space. Soja (1996:162) suggests that Foucault's ideas are not only incomplete; they are also 'inconsistent' and at times 'incoherent'. A specific instance can be found in the way he presents his first 'principle' in his lecture. Foucault first of all suggests that it refers to the way heterotopias are found in all cultures with no universal form and then goes on to suggest two 'major types' relating to crises and deviation. However, this typology is not followed through explicitly in his following principles and examples.

More significantly, Genocchio (1995:39). questions whether anything and everything could be described as an example of heterotopia. The illustrations are so wide and diverse that most if not all social sites share some aspects. One way of revealing this weakness is to take an example and consider whether all associated sites are heterotopic in any sense. For instance, the illustration of the Polynesian village, which both 'abolishes time' and yet also compresses it into a short vacation, may lead to the consideration of other types of vacation sites. Are cruise liners, themed hotels and safari parks 'different spaces'? More widely, what about leisure parks, caravan sites or beaches? Are we not led into the realm of the everyday rather than the different? Where do we draw the line? The same enquiry could be taken with his example of the prison. If we include the prison as a 'different space', and the other 'deviation heterotopia' that Foucault associates with it – boarding schools, psychiatric hospitals, barracks, old people's homes – where do we stop? If we are inclusive here, does this not create an imbalance in that these institutions, as Foucault reveals in his other work, have more in common with each other than with festivals, cemeteries, brothels and so on? In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault outlines four different principles which characterise the spatial distribution of prisons, schools, factories and naval hospitals in the late eighteenth century without mentioning heterotopia (1979:141-149). The fact that Foucault never returned to the concept of heterotopia directly, despite concentrating on the detailed and

complex spatial arrangements within a range of institutions, at least raises some doubts as to its potential usefulness (see also Harvey, 2000: 185 and Saldanha, 2008)

A major problem with Foucault's account of these spaces therefore concerns the question of the extent of their 'difference' and how such difference can be measured. It must be admitted here that Foucault's argument is not helped by the use of various absolutist phrases suggesting that heterotopias are 'utterly' different from 'all' the others. In perhaps the most sustained critique of Foucault's concept, Saldanha forcefully argues that such terminology undermines the whole schema. She claims that Foucault's notion is fundamentally defective because it is based on structuralist fallacies and reduces spatial difference to a 'quasi-transcendent totality' (2008: 2081). In particular, Foucault sets heterotopias against a backdrop of a static or whole 'society'. Her overall interpretation encourages such a reading, as she considers that heterotopias are essentially oppositional, on the 'wild edges of society', although she also suggests that they can work either to retain a stable social formation or 'propel it forward'. Foucault does use some rather uncharacteristic absolutist terminology which is compounded by problems with the original text and subsequent English translations, however, Saldanha does not recognise the difficulties with the translations, even to the extent of reproducing obvious mistakes by Miskowiec (e.g. 'suspect' for *suspendent*).

Saldanha also tends to seize upon a few phrases and quotes them out of context, often ignoring Foucault's qualifications, or missing an ambiguous relational dimension to his account. For instance, Foucault's text suggests that these spaces are described as 'utterly' different 'from all the emplacements that they reflect or refer to' and not as Saldanha claims from 'all the rest' of space. There is a connection, a complex relationship with other sites as well as a difference; they are 'connected with all other emplacements, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralise, or invert the set of relations designated, reflected, or represented by them' (1998a: 178). The link with the remaining space produces many variances or contradictions, a dynamic changing relationship that is almost the opposite of Saldanha's concept of a static totality. Another example of Saldanha's misleading quotations concerns Foucault's description of heterotopia as 'a sort of counter-site'. Not just ignoring the qualification, Saldanha paraphrases by adding a double emphasis, suggesting the space is 'precisely, a *counter-site*' (2008: 2083). Such amplification of Foucault's text leads to a sense of resisting something total. A final instance, providing perhaps the greatest distortion of Foucault's text, concerns her use of the phrase 'slice of time' (*découpages du temps*). The

phrase appears in regard to Foucault's fourth principle concerned with 'heterochronia'. These different spaces form an absolute break with time (the cemetery), accumulate time (the library) or are linked to time fleetingly (the festival or fair). *Découpages* generally refers to cutting out. Interestingly, Hurley, unlike Miskowiec, translates *découpages du temps* as 'temporal discontinuities' rather than 'slice of time', emphasising the variance of breaks or cuts in time. Saldanha does not address the ambiguity of the phrase, but rather makes 'slice of time' the fundamental underlying principle of heterotopia, arguing that the concept embraces a particular, bounded notion of space and misses the diversity and unevenness of spatial change. Foucault's classifications are confusing here, but to suggest that this passage refers to something whole and static ignores the examples that Foucault provides and the clear sense of the diverse ways these spaces cut up time, including various degrees of disruption.

Saldanha argues that spatial differentiation should be 'analysed in its mobile and non-dialectical workings, as emergent, multiscalar, and contested' (2008: 2082). I argue that this is *exactly* what heterotopia does. Heterotopia is above all a relational conception that certainly shares some structuralist features, but it does not imply a closed or complete system, or hidden structures that designate absolute difference. In claiming that heterotopias are 'sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually realisable' (1998a: 178), Foucault definitely captures a quasi-structuralist perspective, for example, identifying a space that is both real and virtual. But as is well documented (see, for example, Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982), Foucault's encounter with structuralism is never purist. Even during his most structuralist moments, in his analysis of discursive practice, Foucault rejected 'claims to find cross-cultural, ahistorical, abstract laws' of total space (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 56-8). In his introduction to his lecture, Foucault stresses repeatedly that we live in an 'ensemble of relations' but this is a thoroughly 'heterogeneous space', not a bounded total entity. Difference is produced through a play of relations or resemblances rather than through sharing common or essential elements or features. Heterotopias are not separate from society; they are distinct emplacements that are 'embedded' in all cultures and mirror, distort, react to the remaining space. Importantly, Foucault underlines the point that they have a variety of changing functions; they are historically localised and mutate at different periods. Rather than being static, Foucault's account seems to celebrate the discontinuity and changeability of existence.

### **Some Heterotopian Studies**

The biography of the concept has a significant place within the overall context of what is often called a 'spatial turn' in social theory (Crang and Thrift, 2000) and a related 'postmodern turn' within human geography (Minca, 2001). Seminal works within these theoretical developments include Jameson's focus on space in *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) and the English translation of Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991). Spatial theories have been explored in relation to the structure of language, the process of writing, themes of identity and experience, and notions about new forms of global communication. Crang and Thrift have looked at such developments with a sceptical eye:

Space is the everywhere of modern thought. It is the flesh that flatters the bones of theory. It is an all-purpose nostrum to be applied whenever things look sticky (2001:1).

Within the context of this 'spatial turn' Foucault's work generally, and the concept of heterotopia specifically, have been excavated and thoroughly examined from countless angles. Foucault's open-ended and ambiguous account of heterotopia has probably provoked more discussion and controversy than any other of his minor texts, articles or interviews. Apart from stimulating three distinct English translations, it has received sustained responses from Defert, Foucault's long-term partner (1997) and also Faubion (2008), the editor of the English translation of Foucault's *Essential Works*. The notion of heterotopia has also generated a host of conflicting interpretations and applications across a range of disciplines, particularly: architecture, history, social and cultural geography, literary studies, sociology and urban studies. I will look in detail at two of the most comprehensive applications of the concept in the following sections, but first I provide a summary of diverse wider uses and tease out a few important questions.

Foucault's concept has particularly provoked responses in architectural theory. In an article first published in 1980, later translated as 'Heterotopias and the history of spaces' (1998), Teysot offered the very first discussion of heterotopia, referring both to the account in the preface to *The Order of Things* and the original lecture to architects (through various excerpts that had appeared in an Italian journal in 1968). In an ingenious attempt to marry the two versions, he uses the term to explain the significance of institutions organised around health measures in the eighteenth century as described by the historian Perrot. Following Perrot,

Teyssot formulates the various hospitals and facilities within a grid with eight classifications of patients that seem as bizarre to us today as Borges' encyclopaedia, for example, one group referring to 'foundlings above the age of nine, the indigent, bastards and so forth'. For Teyssot such a description of these strangely ordered institutions counters any simple linear or evolutionary history of hospitals; it introduces 'discontinuity', which he argues is a key notion in *The Order of Things*: the 'disjunctions... between one particular ordering and the next' (Teyssot, 1998: 300).

In contrast, Porphyrios uses the concept in a thorough reevaluation of Alvar Aalto's architecture (1982). He argues that heterotopia helps to identify a fundamental category of Aalto's design method that opposes trends within what Porphyrios calls 'homotopic' modernism (110). Discontinuity, gaps and fragments are embraced rather than the smooth continuities of modernism. A 'heterotopic sensibility' introduces difference rather than drawing elements together and juxtaposes dissimilar things in order to produce 'cohesion through adjacency'. Heterotopic organisation is able to fragment and relate simultaneously, an accretional process:

where the fringes intermingle, where the extremities of the one denote the beginning of the other, there in the hinge between two things an unstable unity appears' (3)

Tafari also uses the term to try to capture a certain architectural sensibility, but this time provocatively highlighting the designs of Giambattista Piranesi as a forerunner of the avant-garde (1987: 40). Piranesi's spatial distortions are likened to the way heterotopia undermines language and the customary means of holding words and things together. According to Tafari, the very foundations of architectural language are embraced by Piranesi as precarious, demanding a commitment to constant variation of form (42). Summarising the various architectural interpretations of heterotopia, Urbach argues that the notion has been used narrowly to identify and commend particular architectural works and projects (1998). He considers that the term has become a 'name tag' for the architecture of a given period and loses its crucial 'contingent, relational character'. Unfortunately, Urbach's alternative, undeveloped interpretation is, as I will go on to argue, a simplistic, binary notion that heterotopia fundamentally 'dissolves, destabilises and interrupts power' (351-52).

Rotenberg (1995) focuses on the 'extraordinary places' of garden architecture and explores some of their historical development of formal gardens through the framework of Foucault's six principles of heterotopia. He uses the principles in order both to distinguish 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' places and to provide some consistent bench marks over time. Overall, through tracing how powerful groups have used municipal resources to shape public space, he highlights 'the persistence of an unresolvable opposition between the symbols of order and the symbols of liberty' (9). He argues that from the second half of the eighteenth century this opposition has shaped the thinking of each new landscape regime. He produces many compelling accounts of how the philosophy and design of gardens incorporate, display, and legitimate dominant political forces. Unfortunately, although he makes some convincing points about these different spaces of contradiction, spatio-temporal ambivalence and fantasy, his central dichotomy seems to be too simple and tends to jar with his use of heterotopia. Garden philosophy and practice are reduced to a battle between those who promote tidy geometrical designs (e.g. Absolute monarchists within the 'French' style) and those who promote the uninhibited growth of nature (e.g. libertarian Republicans within the 'English' style). This leads to self-evident, overblown generalisations, such as 'through this imposition of control, the aristocratic proclaimed his limitless power' (54) and 'the baroque landscape in Vienna dwarfed the individuals, reducing their wills and desires' (62), or provocative but unsubstantiated comments such as the English landscape is a 'delusion of freedom which hides the gravest inequities of the industrial transformation of capitalism' (85).

Although Rotenberg explains how these dichotomies were played out in contradictory ways, for example, how the gardens of liberty were 'elaborate stage sets' and as deliberate as the baroque gardens they annulled' (86), his argument hinges on the crude distinction between 'places of control and places of power'. The former are public spaces where those 'who control the agenda for metropolitan planning use landscape to enshrine their model of the relationship of the person to the state', and the latter are 'domestic gardens in which individuals use landscape to display their model of the relationship of the person to nature' (17). Here the simple antithesis misses the rich couplings that can take place between the two modes of power and how people can be governed *through* these couplings. Put another way, the use of Foucault's notion of heterotopia is set within a non-Foucauldian, top-down notion of power.

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The brief account of Borges' discursive heterotopia has also become, often rather casually, associated with post-modernist approaches (see McHale, 1992: 250; Lyon, 1994: 99). Connor goes as far as to suggest that heterotopia 'offers a name for the whole centreless universe of the postmodern' (1989: 8). More modestly, Vattimo uses the general term heterotopia to describe the productive features of a postmodern era driven by the mass media and communicative technologies. He encapsulates the emergence of post modernity as a transformative aesthetic experience based upon plurality of different 'worlds' (1992: 68-9) As I will investigate later in this essay, other theorists, using both the accounts of heterotopia, but tending to concentrate on the lecture to architects, have produced comprehensive arguments tying the notion explicitly to the birth of modernity (Hetherington, 1997) as well as principles within post-modernity (Soja, 1995, 1996). More widely, the notion has been used to underpin, supplement and invigorate a range of research from the role of imported prints in early colonial Calcutta (Eaton, 2003) to the process of organisational entrepreneurship within management theory (Hjorth, 2005). The notion of Foucault's 'different spaces' can be found scattered across literary studies (see Bryant-Bertail, 2000 and Meerzon, 2007), science fiction studies (see Somay, 1984 and Gordon, 2003) and curriculum and childhood studies (see Sumaura and Davis, 1999 and McNamee, 2000). A dazzling variety of spaces have been explored as illustrations of heterotopia, which make Borges' now famous classification seem quite tame:

- 1) Arab-Islamic architecture (Tonna, 1990)
- 2) An environmental installation (Genocchio, 1995)
- 3) The Museum of Pacific Island Culture (Kahn, 1995)
- 4) The Citadel-LA – the civic centre of Los Angeles (Soja, 1995)
- 5) The Palais Royal, masonic lodges and early factories (Hetherington, 1997)
- 6) Vancouver's New Public Library (Loretta, 1997)
- 7) A performance prototype (Birringer, 1998)
- 8) Local Exchange Trading Schemes (North, 1999)
- 9) Women's colleges at the turn of the nineteenth century (Tamboukou, 2000)
- 10) Sites in Fascist Italy (Burdett, 2000)
- 11) Landscapes (Guarrasi, 2001)
- 12) Gated communities in South African security parks (Hook and Vrdoljak, 2002)
- 13) Buddhist Site of Swayambhu in Kathmandu Valley (Owens, 2002)
- 14) Underground bandrooms in Hong Kong (Kit-Wai Ma, 2002)

- 15) The Nineteenth century ship narrative (Casarino, 2002)
- 16) Pornographic sites on the internet (Jacobs, 2004)
- 17) The cybercafé (Liff, 2003)
- 18) Chinatown in Washington DC (Lou, 2007)
- 19) The shopping mall (Kern, 2008; Muzzio and Muzzio-Rentas, 2008)
- 20) Masculinity practices along the Tel Aviv shoreline (Allweil and Kallus, 2008)
- 21) Burial sites in Kinshasa, Congo (De Boeck, 2008)**
- 22) The vampire (Davies, 2008)
- 23) Patterns of disclosure among heterosexuals living with HIV (Persson and Richards, 2008)
- 24) The group dynamics of a Climate Camp (Saunders and Price, 2009)

As Ritter (1998: 14) comments, many of the various uses are ‘not only contradictory and opposed to each other but also in some cases completely incomparable’. A recent collection of over twenty essays by mainly architects, planners and urbanists, *Heterotopia and the City* (Deaene and De Cautier, 2008a), demonstrates clearly various contradictions both within individual essays and more profoundly between some of the contributions. One clear example centres upon the function of the shopping mall. Many of the writers include this site in their lists of typical heterotopias. The editors of the collection do so explicitly in their introduction (5). However in their substantive essay, the editors put forward an emphasis on ‘play’ and holiday in all its guises, arguing that heterotopia is above all a liminal space, a break from normality (2008b). Drawing inspiration from the categorisations of space found in the ancient Greek city and specifically Hippodamus’ triad of space, they argue that heterotopias are spaces of free time, both ‘anti-economical’ and ‘non-political’.

Does this square with the shopping mall? Possibly, but in another essay Muzzio and Muzzio-Rentas summarising much of the recent urbanists’ debate, describe the mall as the ‘contemporary icon of American culture, an exemplar of US social and commercial values’, a space of ‘economic, social, cultural and political activity’ (2008: 139). Kern confirms this reading, suggesting that in the ‘heterotopian world of the shopping mall, there is social homogeneity and social order’ (Kern, 2008: 106). Can the site be both socially homogenous and a break from normality? Perhaps, but this seeming contradiction is not addressed. It is more difficult to see how such sites can be both a centre of political activity and non-political, or at the same time commercial and anti-economical. Many authors in this collection tend to

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take one side or the other and leave an overall contradictory or at least confusing sense, although some essays hint at an underlying 'double logic' within heterotopia, both sustaining and undermining normalcy (see Boyer, 2008: 54 and Heynen, 2008: 322). This double logic is I think a possible key to interpreting heterotopia. It returns to the crucial importance of the relational aspect of the concept. In a sense heterotopias do not exist, except in relation to other spaces. Heterotopia is more about a point of view, or a method of using space as a tool of analysis.

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