Foucault and Heterotopian Art

Abstract
Foucault’s reflections on a variety of visual art by Velázquez, Magritte, Manet, Gérard Fromanger, Paul Rebeyrolle and Duane Michals have provoked growing critical interest. Most considerations of Foucault’s thoughts on paintings and photographs tend to make substantial links with the main trajectories of his methods and projects. Although such an approach provides valuable insights, there is a tendency to advance an analysis that identifies Foucault’s intentional and developmental journey, tracing the story of the inevitable fate of ‘representational’ art. In contrast, this article contends that Foucault provides a series of heterogeneous reflections which puncture or cut through his work rather than bind it together. I argue that Foucault’s diverse and mostly marginal studies explore a miscellany of visual art as forms of heterotopia, exhilarating spaces to experience and inhabit that challenge customary ways of conceiving the world.

Key words: Foucault, space, visual art, heterotopia, difference, mirror

Different Spaces

The artist is an inventor of places. He shapes and incarnates spaces which had been hitherto impossible, unthinkable….. (Georges Didi-Huberman, 1990: 6)

‘The work of art – the object of interpretation – that is, that which is divided, split, antagonistic – in other words a heterogeneous site – is a totality only in the sense that it is the belonging together of differences’ (Andrew Benjamin, 1991: 38)

Foucault’s miscellaneous reflections on visual art include assorted allusions throughout his History of Madness (2006 [1961]), his well-known study of Velsáquez’s Las Meninas in the introduction to The Order of Things (1970 [1966]), some lectures on Manet presented in Tunis (2009a [1971], essays on Rene Magritte (1983 [1967]) and three responses to contemporary exhibitions by Gérard Fromanger (1999 [1975], Paul Rebeyrolle (2001a [1973]) and the photographer Duane Michals (2001b [1982]). Is it possible, or desirable, to find a common thread running through these diverse studies with their widely differing subjects, contexts and purposes? Soussloff (2009: 734) suggests that Foucault should be seriously considered as an historian of art, a specialist in European painting, and also argues
that he conducted a ‘systematic’ study of painting following a deliberately chronological
order that begins in the seventeenth century in his essay on Velásquez’s *Las Meninas*
(Foucault, 1970 [1966]). In this line of argument, Foucault deliberately progressed to the
mid-nineteenth century in his lectures on Manet (Foucault, 2009a [1967-71]) before he
‘moved on’ to consider twentieth century surrealism with an essay on Magritte (Foucault,
1983 [1968]). Tanke (2009) offers a thoroughly nuanced and stimulating analysis of
Foucault’s essays on visual images, recognising the distinctiveness and diversity of each
endeavour¹. He generally avoids making claims of an all-embracing consistency in Foucault’s
reflections, and provides discerning arguments of how Foucault’s wider thought emerges
through his essays, yet he too wishes to retain that Foucault has an ‘overall approach’ that
adds up to a coherent ‘philosophy of art’ (Tanke, 2009: 5). Like Soussloff, he traces an
intended journey, for example, arguing that Foucault ‘tracks Manet’s rupture’ with
representational art ‘through’ the work of the French expressionist Paul Rebeyrolle (Tanke,
2009: 86). More significantly, Tanke takes a rather unFoucauldian approach to the history of
ideas², arguing that Foucault traced the journey of representational art, or the ‘voyage of
modern painting’. As is well-known, Foucault’s approach to the history of ideas, or as
Blanchot (1987: 74) describes it, his ‘negative theology’ rejected all forms of ‘genesis,
continuity, totalisation’ (Foucault, 1972[1969]: 138) which relied on the assumptions of the
subject’s intentions and motivation or any sense of an underlying consistency to historical
development. Although Tanke (2009: 56) recognises that this negativity is at the heart of
Foucault’s archaeological method, he nevertheless goes on to insist that painters as diverse as
Manet, Magritte, Fromanger and Rebeyrolle are all part of an overall ‘endeavour’ to escape
and surpass representation. Reading Foucault’s studies backwards from the standpoint of his
final lecture courses given in 1984 (Foucault, 2011 ), in which Foucault briefly refers to
certain forms of modern art as a possible reactivation of an ethical stance found in Greek
antiquity, Tanke (2009: 13) argues that Foucault’s essays trace the voyage towards a ‘post-
representational destiny’.

In what follows, this essay takes up many of Tanke’s insights, particularly his point
that instead of asking ‘What do these works mean?’ Foucault asks ‘What do these works do?’
(Tanke, 2009: 92). In examining how Foucault goes about responding to this question, I will
distinguish his approach from positions taken up by certain French art historians who have
utilised various branches of structuralist and post-structuralist theoretical perspectives. The
contrast is made in order to highlight what Foucault does in his varied essays on visual art
and what he does not do. Some of the key figures in this loosely tied ensemble of art historians include Daniel Arasse, Herbert Damisch, Georges Didi-Huberman and Louis Marin. All of these writers have worked at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris and have generally operated outside the traditional academic radar (see Saint and Stafford, 2013). Although each takes a distinctive path, they all critique traditional history of art’s preoccupation with stylistic, contextual and iconographic analyses. They consider art as a theoretical object and that ‘painting not only shows, it thinks’, or offers an ‘idea’ that provokes thought (Damisch, 1994: 405). They share multi-disciplinary, or perhaps more accurately, an anti-disciplinary approach, to visual images, believing that traditional art history tends to reduce interpretation to a limited body of discursive knowledge. In this light, these visual theorists acknowledge Panofsky’s (1997) ground-breaking enquiries, particularly his ‘Perspective as Symbolic Form’ and the recognition that painting served as both ‘site and instrument of an intellectual project’ (Damisch, 1994: 14) but thoroughly critique his later work which attempts to encapsulate the ‘final meaning’ of work of art, a concluding iconographical stage of interpretation.

The trend to concentrate on the ‘detail’ in elucidations of works of art with the overarching question of meaning involves, for Didi-Huberman (2005: 230), a process of getting closer to then cut up, prune and separate out, entailing a certain violence, before the writer starts to put back together, accounting for everything, without remainder. Accordingly, something always escapes such a strategy. In contrast, the experience of a work is conceived as an operation or situation, ‘where space is opened up and transformed’ (Demorand, 2001: 44). The argument in this article is that although Foucault’s fleeting forays into the spaces of visual art generally eschew the type of theoretical perspectives that these new French art historians introduce – particularly structuralist and psychoanalytical strategies – his essays nevertheless grapple with this enigmatic element of ‘difference’ that escapes traditional discursive interpretations. The diverse visual images that draw Foucault are studied as sites that challenge the viewer to respond in ways that escape the ‘net of discourse’ (Damisch, 1994: 262). Although Foucault’s studies of visual art are in many respects peripheral, they nevertheless overlap with some of the concerns of modern French art historians, but from the non-strategic position of a non-specialist.

Between 1966-67, when he was studying Velsáquez’s Las Meninas and the work of Magritte and Manet, Foucault was also reflecting on certain extraordinary textual and socio-
cultural spaces that he labelled ‘heterotopia’. Bourraud (2009: 17), in introducing Foucault’s talks on Manet, briefly refers to the notion of heterotopia to explain Foucault’s approach to the paintings. Harkness (2008: 5), translator of Foucault’s essay on Magritte, goes as far as to suggest that both Foucault and Magritte are ‘cartographers of Heterotopia’. I have elsewhere discussed Foucault’s rather inchoate notion of heterotopia as it relates to both cultural and institutional places and baffling and disruptive textual spaces (see Johnson 2006 and 2013), as well as his wider spatial methods of thought (see Johnson, 2008). The concept of heterotopia is highly contested. Some have dismissed it outright (see particularly Harvey, 2000). Others, who have taken up and explored heterotopia, such as the geographer Soja (1996), have acknowledged its lack of clarity and incompleteness. Yet despite its limitations and weaknesses, Foucault’s long-term partner, Defert, has devoted an extensive essay on the notion and Faubion, the editor of Foucault’s Essential Works in English, has written a particularly persuasive interpretation. Extending my previous work, the contention of this essay is that heterotopia is best understood as an approach to exposing and exploring different spaces and that it can be usefully applied to Foucault’s interest in the unsettling features of visual art.

Heterotopia is born through amusement. The first reference occurs in Foucault’s ‘preface’ to The Order of Things (1970 [1966]). According to Foucault, the starting point for this book was his laughter when reading the now famous passage by Jorge Luis Borges in which he recounts the baffling classification of animals found in an imaginary Chinese Encyclopaedia:

(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied (j) innumerable. (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies (Foucault, 1970 [1967]: xv).

The passage made Foucault (1970 [1966]: xv) explode with laughter as it seemed ‘to break all the familiar landmarks of my thought – our thought’ and all the customary ways of dividing up the world in order to understand it. For Foucault, this totally strange, wonderful taxonomy questioned the ‘limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that’ (original emphasis). What fascinates Foucault is not so much the incredible juxtapositions found in Borges’ enumeration, but how they form an ‘unthinkable space’ (xvii) by
questioning the very grounds from which we conceive the world. All the usual ways of relating words and objects are thoroughly disrupted. He compares such ambiguous textual space with the tradition of ‘utopias’, a place (topos) that is both nowhere (outopia) and a good place (eutopia). Borges’ invention, in stark contrast, is a ‘heterotopia’, a different or another (heteros) place. According to Foucault’s admittedly very limited characterisation, utopias, however fantastic, present an ordered, coherent whole, whereas Borges’ scheme shatters language itself and utterly undermines the usual ways in which words, things and images are drawn together. As with the inventions of Raymond Roussel, who Foucault (1987 [1963]) so admired, the disorder provokes a space in which ‘fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately’ (Foucault, 1970 [1966: xvii). The art historian Didi-Huberman (2010: 5) refers directly to Borges’ heterotopian space, that ‘atlas of the impossible’, to explain how certain artists:

bring together things outside of normal classifications, and glean from these affinities a new kind of knowledge which opens our eyes to certain unperceived aspects of our world and to the unconscious of our vision….

The more frequently explored notion of heterotopia (Foucault, 1998 [1967]), based on notes from a lecture given to a group of architects, is an adapted and extended version of a previous radio talk (Foucault, 2009b [1966]) that explores features of cultural and institutional spaces that reflect the wider world but simultaneously invert or transform it. Through the application of six principles, Foucault’s broadly structuralist, or at least relational account, presents a baffling array of spaces that are in different ways separate worlds within the world, spaces of escape, containment, rest, pleasure and transformation. In the radio talk, he quotes from Louis Aragon’s Le Paysan Les Paris (1953). The champion of surrealism describes the experience of entering a brothel ‘serious and alone’, finding a refuge, a mirror into a different space that is both dark and yet enchantingly bright. Aragon says you enter these enigmatic places as one might ‘another country’ and for Foucault (1998 [1967]: 184) they are examples of spaces of ‘illusion’ that denounce all the customary spaces ‘within which human life is portioned off, as being even more illusionary’. Aragon refers to brothels, public baths and gardens as places of, and for, dreams and mad invention. Foucault also refers to these sites in his own classification of heterotopias but goes on to include the spaces of cemeteries, asylums, prisons, fairs, magic carpets, museums, ships and many more. Heterotopias are both real and unreal spaces, captured in Foucault’s radio talk (2009b [1967]) in the transformation that children evoke – boats, dens, wigwams, spaceships - when playing
on their parent’s bed, inventing impossible and perilous worlds of the imagination. Essentially, heterotopias offer for Foucault (1998: 185) a ‘reservoir of imagination’ \([\text{la plus grande réserve d'imaginaire}]\). What characterises all these spaces is a separation from, and a tension with, the remaining quotidian space, but in the sense of related qualities, or resemblances, rather than any formal dichotomy, or opposition. As Faubion (2008: 31) argues, these spaces have no:

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\text{…single or affective register or effect, but appear instead to oscillate between or to combine countervailing imagistic or rhetorical currents…}
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For Foucault, these spaces are ‘represented, contested and reversed’, or encompass ‘temporal discontinuities’ \((\text{découpages du temps})\), or combine several spaces that are incompatible in themselves. Like the effect of the mirror, they also offer the enigma of a ‘placeless place’ or as Defert (1997: 275) explains, a space of transformation ‘where I am and yet am not’.

Foucault seems fascinated with the divergent ambiguities of \(\text{emplacements}\) – to use his favoured word when describing heterotopias – across a dazzling variety of textual, social and visual creations\(^{10}\). Although he does not go on to explore the notion of heterotopia further in his work, I wish to show that the fascination for such different spaces surfaces in his reflections on a diverse set of images that transport us somewhere else, to a different world that we can inhabit, experience and share: spaces that overturn or transform the everyday. Although some of his studies of visual art have influenced art historians, my contention is that they can be simply understood, outside the context of scholarship, in relation to Foucault’s on-going curiosity about, and pleasure in, the existence and invention of different spaces, or to return to his lecture on heterotopia, the possibility of spaces that:

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\text{…..suspend, neutralise, or reverse the set of relations that are designated, reflected, or represented [réfléchis] by them’ (Foucault, 178).}
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**Making *Las Meninas* Dance**

Foucault’s initial idea of textual heterotopia is the stimulus for his deliberations in *The Order of Things* (1970 [1966]), as it questions the very ground of the establishment of order in our culture, or those basic codes that govern perception, language and practice. Immediately after these reflections on heterotopia, we find the frequently celebrated study of Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*, Foucault’s most recognised writing on a work of art. I do not wish to add to the ever-mounting elucidations of this masterpiece and Foucault’s response to it,
except to pinpoint what might be called heterotopian moments of disruption in the painting, as if Borges’ presence anachronistically fractures the space. The famous painting (fig 1) depicts the painter himself composing a portrait of King Philip IV and his wife Mariana. We see the back of the canvass and the Infanta Magarita with her entourage of spectators. We do not see the models except as reflected in a small mirror at the back of the room next to an open door:

![Fig.1: Velázquez’s Las Meninas (1656)](image)

On-line gallery: [Museo Nacional Del Prado, Madrid](https://www.museodelprado.es/en/).

Also explore: Picasso’s *Las Meninas* Series
On-line gallery: [Museu Picasso, Barcelona](https://www.museupicasso.org/en/).
The complex, intrinsically perplexing painting, has puzzled critics and generated many conflicting interpretations, some of which have opposed Foucault’s reading (see Alpers, 1983, Searle, 1980 and Snyder, 1985). Searle (1980: 477) asks: ‘why after over three centuries does Las Meninas continue to bother us? Why did Picasso, for example, paint some forty-five studies that responded to it?’ The study of the painting is used by Foucault to illustrate key features of the underlying cultural codes of the classical period, or the ‘age of representation’ and, at the same time, subtly hint that the space hovers at the threshold of modernity, where for the first time ‘man’ will become the complex and profound subject and object of knowledge (Foucault, 1970 [1966]: 312.) Alpers (1983: 35) asks why a philosopher such as Foucault should produce the ‘most serious and sustained piece of writing’ on Las Meninas. Her answer is that the ‘interpretative procedures ‘of the traditional discipline of art history made such an endeavour ‘unthinkable’. In contrast, Mitchell (1995:60) suggests the problem with art history was that it made the painting ‘far too thinkable’ (original emphasis) and Foucault introduced a new way of speaking about the masterpiece. However, Damisch (1994: 443) argues that in France, at least, Foucault’s reflections were received as a mere fable or conceit. He suggests that the resistance to Foucault’s reading of Velázquez outweighs any positive influence and partly blames Foucault himself for this, as the marvellously brief study is a mere ‘emblem’ in the context of a complex book. For Damisch, the analysis is illustrative, but no more and Foucault does not here or elsewhere consider painting as a ‘distinct object of historical study’.

Soussloff (2009: 740) argues that the study does initiate Foucault’s progressive reflections on painting from the seventeenth century to the present day. Both Soussloff and Tanke suggest that each of Foucault’s essays on visual art tackles a problem of representation anchored to a specific historical era and pinpoint overlaps between specific questions that Foucault was working through in his wider projects. Yet to concentrate on this relationship is to anchor the essays down. Foucault does not use the diverse network of theoretical tools that modern French art historians employ, but at the same time confirms Marin’s conclusion that painting can possess mysteries and enigmas beyond the bounds of language and conceptual understanding (see Guiderdoni, 2013). Whatever the merits of displaying the ideals and multiple facets of classical representation, Foucault also makes Velázquez’s painting a spatial dance, a bewildering and disconcerting play of space. Even in this, his most accomplished, scholarly reflection on art, he releases and diversifies the work to become a space of ‘bedazzlement’ (Didi-Huberman, 2005: 248). The studio room depicted in the painting
becomes an enigmatic, troubling place. For example, the painter observes us observing the painting, setting up a ‘whole complex network of uncertainties, exchanges and feints’ (Foucault, 1970[1966]: 4). The whole painting is depicted as a series of spatial movements, an unstable ‘ceaseless exchange’ as the subject and object, observer and model ‘reverse their roles to infinity’ and, with a Rousselian quality (Foucault, 1987[1963]:80), ‘renders forever unstable the play of metamorphoses’. Crucially, the mirror in this painting does not fix us; it breaks and opens up, or in Foucault’s words, produces an ‘irruption rather than a reflection’ (5). Critics have pointed out that the painting was produced for the sole viewing of King Philip IV and mention of multiple observers is utterly anachronistic (see Arasse, 2003). However, Foucault is not so much concerned with the historical ‘truth’ of the painting; he rather deepens the play and complexity of the space and never lets it settle.

The doubling mirror, traditional in Dutch painting of the time, is the fundamental disruptive space in the painting (see Manning, 2008). Although it is ignored by the gaze of all those depicted, the space of the mirror is described as producing a ‘violent movement’, an utter element of surprise that ‘leaps’ from the painting as it depicts the king and queen who are in different respects both invisible in the painting and visible through the mirror. As is often remarked (see Boyer, 2008), Foucault seems captivated by the operation and multiple effects of the mirror, discussing it extensively in his book on Roussel (Foucault, 1987 [1963]:94-96) and in talks on the ‘utopian body’ as well as heterotopia (2009[1966]). Mirrors have a utopian and heterotopian quality, producing a thoroughly disruptive experience of a ‘placeless place’. In his lecture on heterotopia, Foucault says that a mirror is utopian in that it produces a distance from our body, a separate unreal space, but also:

the mirror functions as a heterotopia in the sense that it makes this place I occupy at the moment I look at myself in the glass both utterly real, connected with the entire space surrounding it, and utterly unreal... (Foucault, 1998: 179)

The effect of the mirror is to generate a disruption that Merleau-Ponty (1994: 359) suggests acts as the ‘instrument of a universal magic that changes things into spectacles, spectacles into things, me into others, and others into me’. In Foucault’s meditations on the mirror and the gaze, there is a hint of both Merleau-Ponty and Lacan which is occasionally if obliquely acknowledged (see Foucault, 2009[1966]: 14). According to Lacan (1972: 72), Merleau-Ponty broke the simple relation between the eye and the mind that is at the heart of the Descartes subject. Lacan asserts that ‘things look at me although I see them. We see only
from one position but we are observed from all sides’. Damisch (1994: 126) adds the question: ‘what is seeing if what I see sees me?’ suggesting that some paintings ‘tame’ the disturbance of the gaze whilst others appeal to its labyrinthine qualities. Andrew Benjamin (1991:15) argues that it is the mirror in paintings that ‘introduces onto and into the surface a disruption of the surface…. a space within the field of the painting over which mastery can never be asserted’. Foucault goes out of his way to unravel or release Las Meninas, to make it a different, troubling space. Soussloff and Tanke discuss the troubling aspect of later ‘modern’ painting that occupies Foucault, but in Didi-Huberman’s (2005: 229) words, the art of painting itself, modern and pre-modern, has an endless capacity for ‘dissimulation’ and can never be fully ‘assimilated’. Foucault does not close off Las Meninas within a definitive if complex archaeological reading; he demonstrates and celebrates Didi-Huberman’s general claim that ‘the number of things we do not make out of painting is confounding’.

OVERTURNING THE EVERYDAY

Fig 2: Magritte’s Ceci n’est pas une pipe (1926)

Interactive gallery: Musée Magritte, Brussels.

Apart from the ‘ceaseless exchange’ of observer and observed that he sets free in his study of Velasquez’s famous painting, Foucault also generates further questions regarding the endless relationship between language and ‘the visible fact’ (1970 [1966]: 9). As noted previously, the irreducible and perplexing relationship between words, things and images is at the heart of Borges’ heterotopian text. Soussloff suggests that Foucault’s reflections on some of Magritte’s work are a development of these ideas on the complexities of representation, but it should be acknowledged that this theme had been at the heart of Foucault’s earlier and much wider studies of madness, literature and medicine. In his brief essays on Magritte’s
famous series of paintings in which the enlarged precisely painted image of a pipe is underscored with the neatly hand-written ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’ (fig 2) Foucault (1983[1967]) explores an alternative heterotopian relationship between words and images. He traces the seeming contradiction of the statement as an entangling and disentangling ‘calligram’ that ‘aspires playfully to efface the longstanding distinction between text and image, each side attacking the other but at the same time refusing to be separated (32).

Foucault is here conceiving art as a contest, an overthrowing of oppositions or a taxonomic breakdown that is also found in the confusion of the vertical and horizontal in Dubuffet’s work, or Pollock’s opening up of painting as a ‘space of play’, or the collapse of the distinction between representation and action in some of Mondrian’s work (see Damisch, 1984 and Bois, 1990). For Foucault (1983[1967]: 49), the canvasses become complex games that play, ‘run, proliferate, propagate, and correspond’. Whether through the combat of word and image ,or in Magritte’s other strange juxtapositions and transformations of familiar objects, unforeseen, contingent distributions emerge, evoking ‘mystery’ to use Magritte’s favoured word (57). Overall, Magritte’s paintings are described by Foucault as ‘translations with neither point of departure nor support’ (52), offering a striking resemblance to Foucault’s account of textual heterotopias that incite:

‘a worse kind of disorder than that of the incongruous, the linking together of things that are inappropriate; I mean the disorder in which a large number of possible orders glitter separately ….. in such a state things are “laid, “placed”, “arranged” in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a common place beneath them all’ (Foucault, 1970[1967]: xvii)

As in Les Liaisons dangereuses (fig 3) the last of Magritte’s paintings to be discussed by Foucault in his essays, where a nude woman holds a mirror that almost hides her but reflects another view of her from behind, there are no customary reference points. With Magritte’s paintings, we come close to Foucault’s description of utterly different textual heterotopias and there is a surplus enthusiasm and delight in the interminable games that Magritte plays, producing the ‘instability of a disorientated volume and an unmapped space’ (54). As with Roussel’s writing and Foucault’s examples of socio-cultural heterotopias, the spaces open and close, reveal and hide, invite and discourage. As he states in his lecture on heterotopia, everyday reality is overturned, disturbed, mirrored and doubled, producing emplacements
that ‘suspend, neutralise, or reverse the set of relations that are designated, reflected, or represented [réfléchis] by them’ (Foucault, 178). Both *Las Meninas* and

Fig3:
*Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1936)

Interactive exhibition: The Mystery of the Ordinary

Magritte’s paintings offer lessons about the history of representation, but there is also here an imaginative, disruptive lens that opens up divergent lines across Foucault’s spatial studies and his studies of space. Didi-Huberman (2005: 31) distinguishes the ‘visible’ and the ‘visual’ in art. The former is something identifiable, descriptive, imitative, closed and recognisable, whilst the latter has a singular power, an immediate event: an interruption.

Foucault (2001b [1982]) explores this relationship, a tension that exposes a ‘different space’ through the power of the visual, in Duane Michals’ Magrittean photographs with their strange collocations of everyday objects, alterations of scale and jolting temporal discontinuities (fig 4). Duane Michals offers a different spatio-temporal logic through his photographs. He rejects the tradition of photography that tries to capture what are out there, his narrative sequences, for example, opening –up a myriad of questions that interrogate the description presented. Through juxtaposing a series of images, through scribbling text under or over images, through using double exposures, the work also concocts a sense of what is in-between, the invisible, the feeling and the movement of time. Duane Michals makes things
happen, often with a sense of playful irony and fun. As with Magritte, mirrors and windows are prevalent, distorting and opening up uncertainty and endless ways of travelling through the images. Foucault (2001b [1982]: 1069) suggests that the juxtaposition of images brings both the ‘power of dream and the invention of thought’. The photographs do not simply remain outside ourselves to view as we please; they have the power to operate upon us, come towards us and transport us ‘exciting pleasures, provoking anxieties, ways of seeing..’ (1063).

Foucault’s (2009a [1971]) thoughts on Manet also reveal how his paintings produce unexpected, troubling spaces. Foucault had intended to write a book on Manet, signing a contract with the provisional title ‘Le Noir et la surface’ (Eribon, 1991: 190). All that is left of this project are transcripts of lectures he gave in Tunis. Although he asserts from the start that he speaks as a non-specialist, the lectures are perhaps the closest that Foucault comes to taking on the style and voice of a traditional art historian. Yet the lectures have provoked little response from art historians and are Foucault’s perhaps least innovative studies of visual images. For Foucault, Manet provides a ‘deep rupture’ in art by for the first time since at least the quattrocentro, playing with ‘the material properties of the space on which he paints’ (Foucault, 2009 [1971]: 29 original italics). Until this point, painting had encouraged viewers to forget that they were looking at a painting in two dimensions in a fresco, a panel or frame. Foucault explains how this masking or illusion is produced through a manipulation of space, lighting and the positioning of the viewer and then illustrates through the analysis of thirteen
paintings how Manet systematically disrupts these three practices by inventing an alternative ‘picture object’ (31). In many respects Foucault’s comments repeat most of the key points made by Bataille (1955) a decade or so earlier. For example, Bataille argues that Manet approached a painting from a ‘strictly painterly angle’, the objects represented being a ‘mere pretext for the act of painting’ (81). He also elucidates how Manet ‘is unwilling to concede what has always been taken for granted: that the picture is meant to represent something’ (102). Overall, Bataille amplifies how Manet was a revolutionary painter who made modern painting possible.

Fig 5:

Édouard Manet’s A Bar at the Folies-Bergère, (1882)


However, in his final study of A bar at the Folies-Bergère (fig 5), probably Manet’s last and one of the most celebrated of his paintings (see Bradford and Collins, 1996), Foucault does offer a striking heterotopian reading that reverberates across his reflections on
Defert (2001: 49) thought that Foucault saw the painting as the inverse of *Las Meninas*, but I would suggest it is more the refracted image. Representing a barmaid with a huge mirror behind her which reflects her back and the occupants of the bar at the splendid *Folies-Bergère*, the work offers a series of disjunctions between the space in front of the mirror and the space within the mirror. But the canvass also presents a ‘place at once empty and occupied’ (Foucault, 2009a [1971]: 70), a placeless place. We are invited to occupy simultaneously ‘two incompatible places: one here and the other there’, echoing Foucault’s (1998 [1967]: 181) description of heterotopias as having the ability to ‘juxtapose in a single real space several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves’. Foucault’s discussion of the painting concentrates on the displacement of the viewer, by undermining altogether any stable position to view the painting and inducing a feeling simultaneously of ‘enchantment and malaise’ (2009a [1971]:78). Many have commented on the incompatibilities presented by the mirror in Manet’s painting (see Collins, 1996) but suggestively for Flam (1996: 165) ‘the whole world in the mirror seems to exist in another kind of space’. In this final lecture on Manet to survive, Foucault pinpoints something that escapes the iconic or semantic analysis, exploring the painting as a tangible event or operation that sets something in motion, that transports. With regards to the visual works he found exciting, Foucault (see 2001b: 1063 82) describes them as spaces that are like mechanisms or apparatuses which ‘glide towards me’, or places that he can ‘get inside’, or that open up ‘endless passages’. Similar to his discussion of non-discursive heterotopia, they are spaces through which we are ‘drawn outside ourselves’ (Foucault, 1998 [1967]: 177).

**VISUAL EXPLORATIONS**

In his response to Duane Michals’ photographs, Foucault (2001b [1982]: 1063) comments that he prefers ‘forms of work which don’t advance as a work, but open themselves because they are experiments [*experiénces*]’, operating somewhere between feeling and thought. The French word *expérience* is closer to the English ‘experiment’ but in Foucault’s use it retains a dimension of involvement (see Tanke, 2009). Foucault is attracted to, and often immerses himself in, art that might be described as an ‘experiment-experience’. Perhaps the most distinct example is found in his brief, passionate response to a series of paintings known as *Dogs* (fig 6) by the French expressionist Paul Rebeyrolle (1926- 2005). Here Foucault (2001a [1973]) reflects again on how visual spaces have the potential to work in tandem, to move and involve rather than fix. The essay is the only overtly political writing...
on visual art, mirroring Foucault’s campaigning with prisoners to improve their rights and conditions.

Fig 6:  

L’Espace Paul Rebeyrolle, Eymoutiers – exhibitions, resources, images.

Ten mixed media works portraying imprisoned dogs raging against and eventually overpowering their caged confinement are exhibited in a deliberately enclosed room suggesting that the viewers, like the dogs, are inside a ‘heterotopia of deviation’: the prison (Foucault, 1998:178 [1967]. For Foucault, the series of paintings do not offer a simple narrative of the dogs escaping; rather they form together an ‘irruption’, a flight of power. The paintings depict a response to the petty, repetitive brutality and constant menace of prison life, the dogs tearing at metal grilles, with vertical planks of wood and wire mesh actually clued to the large canvasses. Rebeyrolle was one of the first artists to import heteroclite
objects amongst painted elements, creating in this case complex yet lucid spaces of ‘perpetual rebellion’ (Leydier, 2010: 33). The final canvases, moving from shades of grey and white to an effervescent blue, show the walls of the prison cracking, opening an ‘intense joy’ and ‘frisson of electricity’, or in Foucault’s words, the birth of a ‘new space’ (2001a [1973]: 1270-1). The multi-media technique works simultaneously on the surface and outside the canvas. Moreover, the actual ‘act’ of painting shifts through the canvasses, propelling a force of power that takes off and, tellingly, leaves us behind in the prison of the exhibition hall. The exhibition space, somewhat like contemporary art installations, becomes inseparable from the works of art, an encompassing part of a disruptive experience. For Foucault, the result is not the representation of political force; it is the enactment of that force that we cannot share as such but that challenges and exposes the viewer’s political position. We are caught somewhere between the inside and outside of prison, confronted with a demonstration that proves, for an uncompromising Foucault at that time, escape does not happen through windows but through the ‘triumphal collapse of walls’ (1272). The political intent is explicit but the manner in which Foucault responds to the painting is also revealing. He emphasises the texture and painterly features of the visual objects that reinforce the political thrust. The art becomes both object and method: an apparatus and space of escape.

In contrast to the angry and politically committed response to Rebeyrolle’s expressionist art, Foucault’s (1999 [1975]) essay on Gérard Fromanger’s pioneering figurative paintings offers a very different study of the allure of visual spaces that hover between an experiment and an experience. Foucault titles the essay ‘photogenic paintings’ which captures Fromanger’s use of photographs as the starting point for his visual explorations. Foucault begins his essay by describing how in the late nineteenth century the birth of photography produced a mad frenzy in the visual arts, introducing techniques with:

‘a new freedom of transposition, displacement, and transformation, of resemblance and dissimulation, of reproduction, duplication and trickery of effect’ (Foucault, 1999: 83)

Emphasising the play of images, he celebrates a time when there was a popular practice of exploring the boundaries of photography and painting before the introduction of ‘puritan codes’ stifled the mischievous, often trivial, games of amateurs and assorted bootleggers (Foucault, 2001a [1973] 88). With more than a hint of nostalgia, Foucault regrets that in the
period of formalism and abstraction, such fun became out of bounds for ‘serious’ artists and the play of images was left to the power of marketing and political persuasion. He asks if it were possible to return to this ‘madness’ that has been contained by ‘technicians, laboratories and businessmen. In Fromanger’s paintings, he finds the ‘play’ and transformation of the image taken to a new height of intensity.

As noted previously, Foucault was drawn to Duane Michals’ work, a self-taught photographer who explored some of the basic tricks that so excited the early experiments of amateur photographers. In a different context, Fromanger also rediscovers the joy and love of photography and its transformative potential in painting. The essay in many respects distils the fascination with the possibilities of the space of painting that Foucault conveyed in all his essays on visual art, the magic that produces images that are both an apparatus and a practice, literally a ‘work’ of art. Using a technique of painting directly over a transparency projected on a canvas screen, Fromanger converts the image, creating something that is neither a photograph nor a painting but, echoing lines from his essay on Rebeyrolle’s canvasses, a sort of ‘electric flash of the flight between the two’ (91). With blocks of dominant primary colours, the canvasses multiply the visibility of a specific event – from pedestrians walking by shop fronts to rioting prisoners tearing up the roof of a prison - and transform it into a ‘thoroughfare’, provoking a dispersion of inter-connected images (fig 7). The canvasses do not ‘capture images: they pass them on’ and we are left with utterly different spaces: images that are also, mirroring Bataille’s (1955: 38) comments about Manet’s paintings, playful ‘operations’. The unique dispositifs offer the exploration of an ‘infinite series of new passages’ and, as with Roussel’s heterotopian writing, there is no ‘secret’ or underlying meaning to discover behind the unlimited series of images-events-passages, but rather a release into the crowd who are invited to join the ‘game’ (Foucault, 1999[1975]: 103), a term along with ‘play’ that is repeated throughout Foucault’s essays on Manet, Magritte and Duane Michals.

Fig 7
Fromanger introduces exhibition
‘Annoncez la couleur!’
held in Perpignan
(5 April – 29 June 2014)
One of Fromanger’s photogenic paintings, which Foucault turns to towards the end of his essay, sets off a network of associations with his various other studies of ‘different spaces’. For Foucault, the glittering painting ‘A l’Opéra de Versailles. Portrait de Michel Bulteau, le plus grand poete du monde’ highlights the association with the chandeliers reflected in the mirror in Manet’s famous painting A Bar at the Folies-Bergère (fig 5). Foucault invents the title ‘Bar at the Folies Royales’ to depict Manet’s mirror ‘shattering into fragments’. It is as if Fromanger has taken Bataille’s (1955: 111) description of Manet’s mirror, as a ‘luminous wonderland’ in an ‘explosive festival of light’, to another level of concentration and visibility. The mirror in Fromanger’s painting transforms the poet Michel Bulteau into a spectacular, radiant transvestite, as the usual images and order of the world take flight and leave behind just the ‘event of their passage’ (Foucault, 1999 [1975]: 103). The canvass becomes a heterotopia par excellence, a space of illusion where customary emplacements are splendidly and mischievously ‘represented, contested and reversed’ (Foucault, 1998: 178 [1967])

CONCLUSION

Davidson (2001: 128-137), in explaining his Foucauldian approach to the history of psychiatry, refers to the art historians Wölflin and Schapiro, who explore the constraints of a particular period on artists and how they cannot just express anything, but work unconsciously within certain polarities, confines and methods of seeing things. Veyne (2010: 102) also suggests that these writers were anticipating to some extent Foucault’s
archaeological method, citing Wölfflin who, in the early twentieth century, distinguished between art as the ‘history of expression and art as an internal history of form’. In contrast, this article has illustrated that something else is going on in Foucault’s writing on visual art. A widely diverse set of images are conceived as a ‘different’ space that not only goes against the grain of the time - and therefore exposes that grain – but also produces a different world, or ‘spaces which had been hitherto impossible, unthinkable’ (Didi-Huberman, 1990: 6). Didi-Huberman (2005: 17) argues that in responding to the visual, you must think outside, or even the opposite of, the specialist’s accepted classifications. Foucault’s mostly non-theoretical responses work outside the specialist’s habitus without the strategic outlook of the ‘expert’ whether the art historian or the philosopher of art. As Foucault (2001c [1975]: 1574-5) confesses in an interview, his approach to writing about painting is very different from the way he tackles his major studies and ‘one of the few things I write about with pleasure and without fighting against anything at all’, without it being a part of an overall ‘strategy’ or set of ‘tactics’. Across his studies of art, it is possible to trace a developmental theme concerning a crisis of representation from the seventeenth century ideal through to Manet’s anticipation of non-representational art, to Magritte’s complete rupture of the mimetic, but beyond this there is also a transversal line that explores how art can expose a different form of space, an opening that can transport us elsewhere, an adventure of imagination (Foucault, 1998: 185 [1967]). He does not anchor a painting down to this or that; he sets it free by exploring its potential difference from the realms of ‘normative space’, splintering the familiar (Foucault, 2009 [1971]: 78). Foucault (2001b [1982]: 1063) explores how visual heterotopias can challenge and confound our expectations, ‘exciting pleasures, provoking anxieties, ways of seeing’. As Defert (1997: 276) recounts in his history of this bewildering spatial idea, the ‘minor language’ of heterotopia written between 1966-7 is ‘one of those literary games in which Foucault took such pleasure’, but he was increasingly taken up with the ‘ascetic demands of writing’ and his involvement in political struggles. The fleeting explorations of the possibility of spaces that ‘suspend, neutralise, or reverse’ our expectations emerge exhilaratingly in these diverse essays on visual art. As Defert (1997: 275) describes heterotopia, these visual spaces also offer ‘ruptures in ordinary life, imaginary realms, polyphonic representations’.
Notes

1. For further responses to Foucault’s interest in visual spaces, see also Barr’s stimulating thesis (2007) and Shapiro (2003).

2. The modes of history that Foucault rigorously tries to undermine are grounded in one way or another on a psychological model (the subject’s intentions, motivations, interpretations and meanings); a spirit of the age model (a continuous, total, unified, idealised world view); a biological model (rational progress, historical development, influences, returns and completions); or, finally, a theological or aesthetic model (transcendence, creation, originality, invention) - see Foucault (1972: 172-3) and Flynn (2005: 6-13).

3. For a lucid and invaluable introduction to the contributions of modern French art historians see Saint and Stafford’s Modern French Visual Theory (2013).

4. In 1967, Foucault reviewed two works by Panofsky favourably, suggesting that Panofsky recognised the complexity of the relationship between the image and text and had an approach to art that undermined the dominance of discourse (Foucault, 2001e [1967]:649).

5. In 1952, Borges published a selection of essays about world literature, maths, metaphysics, religion and language (1975). One essay concerns the ‘analytical language of John Wilkins’ that reminds Borges of a Doctor Franz Kuhn who discovered a Chinese Encyclopaedia entitled ‘Celestial Empire of Benevolent Knowledge’. Foucault quotes a certain classification of animals:

6. Whether Foucault was aware of it or not, it is also worth noting that heterotopia is originally a medical term referring to a particular tissue that develops at another place than is usual. The tissue is not diseased or particularly dangerous but merely placed elsewhere, a dislocation (Lax, 1998: 114)
This quotation comes from Didi-Huberman’s (2010) introduction to an exhibition that explored and responded to the unfinished ‘Mnemosyne Atlas of images’ composed by the art historian Aby Warburg between 1924 and 1929.

Foucault was invited to speak to the Cercle d’études architecturales (Circle of Architectural Studies) and gave his lecture in Paris. He was reluctant to publish the lecture at the time, although some excerpts appeared in the Italian journal L’Archittetura (Foucault, 1968 [1967]), but shortly before his death, he agreed to its publication to coincide with an exhibition held in Berlin in 1984, published as Des espaces autres (Foucault, 2001f [1967]: 1571). Throughout the article, I refer to the translation by Hurley, entitled ‘Different Spaces’ (Foucault, 1998). As I have argued elsewhere (Johnson, 2008), I think this version captures the essential relational quality of heterotopia.

The notion of heterotopia has produced a cottage industry of applications (see Johnson, 2014). It provoked early responses in architectural theory (e.g. Porphyrios 1982; Tafuri, 1987; Teyssot 1998). Amongst many interpretations, Hetherington’s (1997) sociological and Soja’s (1996) geographical perspectives have been particularly influential. Defert (1997) and Faubion (2008) have produced original responses. The relationship with urbanism is addressed in a comprehensive collection (Dehaene and De Cauter, 2008). Harvey (2000) and Saldanha (2008) are some of the notion’s sternest critics.

It is noteworthy that Genocchio (1995: 43) in closing his seminal essay on heterotopia suggests that the concept of heterotopia overlaps with some of the ambitions of artists who have invented various ‘multivalent public installation projects’ exploring and experimentally testing the contingent nature and customary boundaries of space. He cites as an example the displacement and contradiction found in an environmental installation by Australian artist Denis del Favero. Defert (1997: 281) also closes, even clinches, his historical analysis of the concept of heterotopia by evoking the art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who produced an
'experimental heterotopian environment’ involving twenty-four Manhattan billboards depicting photographs of a bed with imprints of two heads on a pillow, evoking a range of questions about the relationship between private and public responses to sexuality. Other contemporary art has been interpreted as heterotopian, perhaps most notably Birringer’s (1998) reflections on Makrolab, a communications, research and living space started by Marko Peljhan and first realised during Documenta X in Kassel in 1997.

For Damisch (1994) a ‘proper’ history of Las Meninas should encompass an analysis of Picasso’s re-workings in his studies of 1957 as well as involving the histories of Jan van Eyck’s paintings, Brunelleschi’s experiments and the series of Urbino perspectives. Overall, Damisch found that the ‘origin’ of perspective is to be understood in geometrical and not historical terms (see conversation in Damisch and Bann, 2005)

For Foucault (2006 [1961: 16]), the birth of the modern conception of madness is in part about the actual dismantling of a time when ‘the beautiful unity between word and image, between that which figured in language and said by plastic means, was beginning to disappear’. With a rather nostalgic tone, Foucault describes a crack that opens between the ‘cosmic experience’ of madness through ‘fascinating forms’ and the distance produced by ‘critical’ experience (25). Bosch, Brueghel, Thierry and Durer line up behind their images, evoking ‘the tragic madness of the world’ but this is diluted and finally expunged with the measured introduction of humanist, scientific and moral traditions: an ‘appropriation’ of madness. The complex relationship between words and things is also the central exploration in Foucault’s (1987 [1963]) extended study of Raymond Roussel’s avant-garde literature. In different ways, Roussel’s books play out a game of identity and difference, or the same and the other, for instance, exploring how the possibilities of describing a single object are infinite and the possibilities of interpreting different levels of meaning of the description of
that object are also endless. For Foucault, Roussel, like Borges, exposes heterotopian sites of a bewildering play of representation, contestation and reversibility, a fictional ‘game by which things and words designate one another, miss one another, betray one another, and hide one another’ (Foucault, 1987 [1963]: 150). Likewise, Foucault’s (1973 [1963]) study of the birth of pathological anatomy echoes in a different context Roussel’s torturous experiments, as Foucault sees this in part as the emerging of a profound visibility or a new relationship between space, perception, language and death. Here Foucault traces the painstaking attempts to bind and match language to a visibility of the gaze, before the final shift towards pathological anatomy arrives when touch and sensation replace the labours of description. Certain objects are allowed significance, literally brought to light in a new redistribution of the body. Here imaginary and real spatialisations reinforce each other. Foucault (1963 [1973]) shows how the restructuring of the environment of the clinic towards the final years of the eighteenth century brought this new visibility and closeness to the actual body. The medical gaze within the clinic is as demanding and thorough as that of natural history. It is the gaze of an expert, a doctor, supported by an institution and provided with new tools to intervene and calculate.

13 Such divergent lines that work through different forms of heterotopia have perhaps some similarity to Deleuze’s (1992: 162) description of Foucault’s conception of a dispositif, composed of ‘lines of visibility and enunciation, lines of force, lines of subjectification, lines of splitting, breakage, fracture, all of which criss-cross and mingle together’.

14 Foucault (2001b [1982]) was responding to a retrospective of Duane Michals’ photography held at the Musée a ’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

15 Bourraud (2009: 17), in introducing Foucault’s essays on Manet, briefly refers to the notion of heterotopia to explain Foucault’s approach to the paintings. Harkness (2008: 5), translator
of Foucault’s essay on Magritte, goes as far as to suggest that both Foucault and Magritte are ‘cartographers of Heterotopia’.

16 For more extensive responses to Manet’s paintings, see for example Clark (1999) and Rubins (2010).

17 Shapiro (2010: 304) considers that Foucault presents Manet’s work as an experimental undermining of the disciplinary world of a visual regime encapsulated in Bentham’s concept of the panopticon. In my articles on heterotopia (see below) I argue that these spaces do not for Foucault offer anything radically ‘other’; they suspend rather than oppose the normative.

18 The essay appears in a catalogue for an exhibition by Paul Rebeyrolle at the Maeght gallery in March 1973 during Foucault’s most active political period in which he was heavily involved in promoting the Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons (see Macey, 1994: 323).

19 Foucault’s (1999 [1975]) essay on Fromanger appeared as a preface to a catalogue for an exhibition at the Galerie Jeanne Bucher.

20 In this respect, Foucault’s responses to art may have some resemblance to the quality that Lacan (1972: 73) finds in Roger Caillois’ non-specialist thoughts on painting.
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