Pontins was the first of two holiday camps on the island of Jersey, part of the channel islands which are located approximately 10 miles north of the French coast. It stood atop the remote, 80 foot cliffs on the North coast of the Island for a total of 54 years. The camp was originally built prior to the second world war in the early 1920s. Constructed cheaply out of wood it housed a very basic level of accommodation but, more importantly, gave people what they wanted, which was a hassle free, all inclusive holiday.” (Ward, n.d.) The camp closed down at the start of World War II under the occupation of the Germans in 1939 and was ‘used as a base for the forces who damaged the camp to the extent it was going to cost a lot to repair.’ (Ward, n.d) In 1961 Fred Pontins purchased the site and on the footprint of the old, rebuilt the camp. It functioned successfully until it was closed down and abandoned in 2000. A drawn out legal battle over the future of the land ensued (BBC News, 2010). Meanwhile, it became the perfect playground for adolescent exploration both metaphorically and physically. In those moments we were in another world. We were free from the rules and pressures of society. It allowed us an unrestrained exploration of different parts of culture and history in the way we wanted, in anyway we chose, yet always framed within the existing cultural symbolisms and historical layers of the architecture itself. Over the years the nature of the abandoned architecture allowed a shift in my experience of these places as I developed and added my own layers of meaning and memories. The combined fear of being caught and the creepiness for the place created a sense of adventure. My historical reverence for the island is a direct result of these series of experiences which will always remain with me. It was finally demolished early this year of 2015.

Engrained within the fabric of the building itself are layers upon layers of memories and experiences from radically differing moments throughout history. They are
shadows of our past selves. Within its walls it sheltered honeymooners to Nazi’s and finally adolescents. Throughout time it truly harboured the most extreme ideals of utopian and dystopian society. French philosopher Michel Foucault introduces the concept of heterotopia in order to explain spaces such as this which bring together layers of cultural meaning and relationships which are ‘simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.’ (Foucault, 1984, p3). There are a number of different types of heterotopia which Foucault explores through six principles. He explains that heterotopias are ‘a constant of every human group’ but that there is no consistent form which they take. However, within these six principles he highlights four main categories of heterotopia which will be termed now and discussed in greater detail at the relevant points within the essay. There are heterotopias of crisis, deviancy, illusion and compensation as well as heterotochronies and chroniques (Ibid, 1984). Through the application and analysis of these principles, this essay explores the ways in which Pontins acted on multiple levels as a heterotopia. Initially as a result of extreme societal shifts within history from a holiday camp to a war camp and subsequently how my role as an adolescent in bringing function to the abandoned space helped to fulfil these principles of a simultaneously multi layered heterotopia.

Foucault begins by introducing the concept of utopia as a ‘placeless place’ which ‘have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society’ (Ibid, p3). He then brings in the idea that although these places are fundamentally unreal spaces, ‘it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.’ (Ibid, p4). The heterotopia is this ‘location in reality,’ a place where a physical attempt at achieving ‘an effectively enacted utopia’ within society is explored. (Ibid, p3). The level at which it successfully achieves this state is dependent primarily on the users and what it is being used for. Foucault’s second principle suggests ‘society, as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion’ (….) ‘The same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another.’ (Ibid, p5). These differences in function are reflected in the different types of category. Thus the way in which Pontins achieves multiple layers of heterotopia are through a layering of different functions over time.

The function which Pontins was originally designed for, was in order to serve as a heterotopia of compensation. The role of the heterotopia of compensation is to ‘create a space that is other, another real space as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.’ (Ibid, p8). This is the closest functioning example of utopia within our real world. He gives colonies as an example of this. During its heyday as a holiday camp, Pontins functioned in many ways as a colony itself. The only difference being that it was shell of temporary visitation rather than being permanently inhabited. Furthermore, the architecture created was all in attempt to allow, briefly, a place where families and honeymooners could escape to and experience a meticulously crafted, condensed vision of utopia of fun and relaxation. However, the fact that it was only ever, and could only ever, be a brief version of this means that it is also a heterotopia of illusion. This is the alternate category to the heterotopia of compensation. The role of the heterotopia of illusion is to ‘create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the site inside of which human life is partitioned.’ (Ibid, p8) The example he gives for this are brothels. Pontins functions on a similar timescale to the brothels in that the sole reason why they work is because the user experiences a brief illusion of utopia. This illusion is finite, since utopia does not exist, it cannot be sustained beyond a visiting of these places. Foucault suggests that these spaces ‘present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down.’ (Ibid, p3).

If utopia is ‘society in a perfected form’ then the ‘society turned upside down’ is the dystopia, the polar opposite. The concept of dystopia is interchangeable with the idea of utopia in that they are both ‘placeless places’ (Ibid, p4) and ‘fundamentally unreal spaces’ (Ibid, p3) thus they function in exactly the same way, but to opposite effects. In the context of Pontins, dystopia comes into effect when the German’s occupied it during the war. As a result of this function changed, so the category of the heterotopia was transformed from a physical manifestation of utopia into the oppressive dystopia of the Nazi base. Thus this radical cultural shift rendered it a place ‘for individuals who are in relation to society and to the human environment … in a state of crisis’ or a ‘crisis heterotopia’ (Ibid, p4). Foucault lists the ‘military service for young men’ as an example of a crisis heterotopia. (Ibid, p4). Therefore Pontins acted as a crisis heterotopia where it experienced sudden radical shifts from a heterotopia which strove to be an ‘effectively enacted utopia’ (Ibid, p3); when it functioned as a holiday camp, to the other polar opposite where it functioned as an effectively enacted dystopia; when it was occupied by the Nazi’s and when it was initially abandoned.

After Pontins was abandoned as a result of the violence enacted upon the architecture by the Germans, it underwent the second heterotopic transformation. However it was not the act of abandonment which was the rendered it so, but only through my use of the abandonment and third functional shift: From a crisis heterotopia to a deviant heterotopia. Thus it complies with Foucault’s idea of the deviant replacing the crisis heterotopia. (Ibid, p5). This is true to an extent for Pontins in that only through my use of the abandonment, and therefore a second function shift was it able...
to achieve the state of a heterotopia of deviation. This being a space for behaviour which is ‘deviant in relation to the required mean or norm.’ (Ibid, p5). Our act of entering the forbidden site proves this. Abandoned spaces are often where adolescents find themselves. I believe this is because the abandoned architecture draws parallels with the teenage condition in that we are in a liminal period between childhood and adulthood. Our individual crisis is a reflection of the societal crisis which rendered the space abandoned in the first place. Thus we are naturally drawn to these crisis heterotopias. Foucault specifically states both adolescents and forbidden places (ibid, p4) as possible combinations of site and user to produce a crisis heterotopia. In the context of abandoned architecture, social deviancy is an unavoidable component of this and thus it is through our exploration of the space which subsequently transforms it into a deviant heterotopia. (see fig. 5.)

This demonstrates that it is the way in which the space is used that defines the type of heterotopia it functions as. Although the users of the Pontins site changed radically over time; holiday makers to Nazi’s to adolescents, all three of these heterotopic stages of Pontins’ life continued to exist alongside each other. Focault’s third principle is that ‘the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.’ Pontins underwent not a transformation of replacement, but a transformation of addition, a layering of the radically differing societies who used the space over time. Thus what I experienced as the final user of the site was a twisted vision of utopia, a broken mirror, which resulted in heterotopias of crisis and of deviation: The full impact of the layering of social juxtapositions.

I experienced this through what Focault calls ‘The mirror’ (Ibid, p4). The mirror is primarily a physical manifestation of utopia which allows these juxtapositions to transcend time and occur simultaneously. ‘I believe that between utopias and these (...) heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience which would be The mirror.’ (Ibid., p4) Although I did not realise or understand it at the time, I found and experienced this during my first visit to Pontins. I found it in the lobby, one of the most vandalised, decaying spaces of the site and the first internal space we encountered. A postcard, depicting a sepia image clearly set in the 60s of families on the Plemont bay beach (see fig.6). Foucault states that because the mirror is a bridge between utopia and heterotopia it therefore functions as both. ‘The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. (...) But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy.’ The image on the postcard acts in this way as it depicts a perfectly constructed utopian scene of familial summer happiness, one which could never truly exist for a sustained amount of time either side of the act of the photograph being taken. The fundamental purpose of the postcard itself is to distribute the idea that you have experienced a glimpse of utopia (the holiday) to someone who is not actually with you. However in reality the sender knows that this does not actually represent their entire holiday at the site. Foucault elaborates on this, stating that ‘the mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass,’ (or in this case when the postcard is observed by the receiver) ‘at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point, which is over there.’

Thus postcard fulfills this in that it was indeed ‘at once absolutely real’ because it was taken at a real point in time, of real people. However in recording and therefore preserving this moment it deems it absolutely unreal and since that moment has passed, it can only be perceived through the virtual point of the image. This is precisely what happened in that moment, observing the image under the torch beam; the contrast between the warm sepia seaside and the dystopian atmosphere of my surrounding architectural destruction (see fig. 7) combined in such a way created a surprising emotional experience and of both happiness and sadness. The best way to describe it was sense of nostalgia but confusingly for a time which occurred before I was born. Although at the time I acknowledged this surprise of emotion, I did not understand why and could not express it. In retrospect, and with Focault’s theories in mind, I can begin to comprehend this moment as an experience of the mirror and that the strange sense of nostalgia was possibly, as Foucault suggests, the feeling of
being able to ‘see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; (...) a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent’ (Ibid, p4). The virtual space in this case being the frozen, infinite image which means that it transcends time so that these juxtapositions could be experienced when I discovered it over a decade later. Subsequently the mirror allows the experiencer to then transcend time in that only through the juxtaposition of the extreme dystopia of the site and the extreme utopia of the image was I able to fully understand what the other meant.

Foucault directly addresses this relationship between heterotopias and time within his fourth principle. He states that ‘heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time; the heterochronies and heterochroniques, elaborating that ‘the heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time.’ Again, this is how the mirror functioned. The heterochronies are those which ‘accumulate time, for example museums and libraries’, and the heterochroniques, those which deal with ‘time in its most flowing, transitory precarious aspect.’ Pontins functioned as both of these. It was a heterochrony in that the abandonment allowed an accumulation of time to build up as layers and which is what allowed me to experience the mirror. Furthermore, the architecture itself served as a physical accumulation of time, both in the way it decayed in its abandonment and how it was added through adolescent use of the space such as graffiti (see fig. 8.), (see fig. 9.) and the dummy placed in the corner (see fig. 9.). When first visiting the site I distinctly remember that the only comforting thought in the decay was the the accumulation of time through the clear presence of past. But it was also a heterochronique in its ultimate demolition. However in being able to acknowledge the temporality of the space whilst I was experiencing it meant that I valued my time there as finite and therefore became much more poignant as rite of passage.

Foucault explores the rite of passage, or sense of ritual, further in his fifth principle of heterotopias as almost ritualistic through its entrance ‘either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications’ in order to gain a specific set of experiences. Pontins adheres to the idea that, ‘in general the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place.’ (...) ‘To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures.’ This is partly true in that to get in to Pontins you must drive due to its isolation and in order to get into the site you have to crawl under twisted metal barriers and climb through the broken window of the main reception. (see fig. 8.) However these are purely physical barriers. All the other sites which Foucault uses as examples have some sort of accessibility constraint on them which is a result of the overruling society in that specific location. Specifically with the examples for the adolescent heterotopias of the boy’s boarding school and the girls honeymoon place, they were extremely gender specific. Away from society, Pontins defied the discrimination of both gender and class, in this sense it much more like a utopia, however it was the only the temporal nature of our experience which allowed this to be true.

At this stage of Pontins life, and the point at which my experience took place, the abandoned architecture starts to stand out from other categories of heterotopia in a number of key ways. The first is that these spaces are not chosen by society. All the examples Foucault gives, the boys school, the cemetery, the farms in Brazil etcetera as he puts it, are designed to function in a ‘specific way’ within the boundaries of social rules. However this is not the case with abandoned architecture which is the product of circumstance; a conscious withdrawing of society. This lack of societal rules means that there is no specified function as with all other examples. Therefore the function is the way in which we choose to experience it. This also means that the individual experience of such a place is completely unique to that person depending on the reason they have chosen to go there and the mindset they have entered with. The fact that I revisited Pontins a number of times with different groups of people and for different reasons proves that the fluidity of the architecture allows for different rites of passage. In many ways, these trips to Pontins were rituals, but not in the same sense that Foucault only talks about ‘hygienic’ or ‘religious’ rituals. There were all the parameters of a ritual, we could only go in the cover of darkness. One person drove us all, this person had more on the line and therefore responsibility as it was their car and
most easily caught. The first time was explorative; we were a small group, our friend had just passed his driving test. The drive takes you down the winding green lanes intrinsic to Jersey and finally to the wild top 80 foot cliffs of the north of the Island. The place was already considerably vandalised, remnants of previous groups of friends that had been there and taken the same rite of passage as us was the only comforting thought in the decay. This was the time I found the postcard. The second time I went was for my friend’s photography project. This time I drove myself and three of my friends up. It was a completely different experience, I felt more comfortable and able to produce a creative response to the surroundings rather than the fear and excitement I felt the first time. (see fig. 10.).(see fig. 11). Thus abandoned architecture allows history to be present in the creation of new memories. Although all buildings allow this to some extent, the beauty of decay is that society as we know it is removed from the experience, creating a passive shadow of society, this being the decaying building itself, where the rules and pressures of our cultures disappear leaving us with a twisted image of our past selves. Like looking into a broken mirror. These shards of history vary radically depending upon the time period in which we are peering into.

In conclusion, Pontins functioned as, and eventually exceeded, all principles of heterotopia as theorised by Michel Foucault through the transformation of three main stages of function within it life. This allowed it to embody the heterotopias of crisis, deviancy, illusion and compensation as well as heterochronies and chroniques simultaneously. Ultimately all three of these heterotopic stages of Pontins’ life existed alongside each other, it underwent a transformation of addition, a layering of the radically differing societies who used the space over time. As the final user of the site, what I experienced was the full impact of these juxtapositions. Furthermore, making the journey there, we gave one last use to the site which allowed it to truly become a fully fledged heterotopia. The beauty of the abandoned is that society as we know it exists as a shadow; we are aware of its presence embedded within the surrounding architectural shell, but the functionality of the culture is gone, leaving a passive, twisted image of our past selves. These shards of history vary radically depending upon the time in which we are peering into. For architecture such as Pontins we glimpse a brief utopia of abundance, prosperity and leisure, yet overshadowed with the harrowing, dystopian oppression of the war.

As an adolescent in this space, we had the freedom to consider, invert or reject these juxtapositions of cultural history as we pleased. Over the years the fluid nature of the abandoned architecture allowed a shift in my experience of these places as I developed and added my own layers of meaning and memories. The temporality of the space itself meant that I acknowledged my time there as finite and valued it much more as rite of passage. However in this space of temporality, I experienced the ultimate contrast of societal extremes; the utopia of the image and the dystopia of the site which combined to create a twisted vision of utopia, a broken mirror into the past. All of which I can only comprehend through Foucault’s principles of heterotopia.

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IMAGES


Figure 3. Ibid.

Figure 4. Unknown. (1960) Newspaper advertisement.


Figure 6. Anon. (1964). Postcard found in Pontins

Figure 7. Authors own. (2011). Main Lobby.


Figure 9. Authors own. (2011). Main Hall

Figure 10. Ibid.

Figure 11. Ibid

Figure 12. Ibid. Elliot

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