# Brief History of the Concept of Heterotopia

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# 1. Annotated bibliography of Foucault's texts on heterotopia (French and English translations).

1. Foucault, M (1966) 'Préface' in *Les mots et les choses*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard 7-17

[The first mention of the term heterotopia, in relation to text by Jorge Luis Borges, is found in the preface to *Les mots et les choses*]

2. Foucault, M. (1968) [1967] 'Des espaces autres', *l'Architettura*, 13: 822-23.

[Some excerpts from a talk given to a group of architects, in which Foucault outlines the notion of heterotopia in relation to institutional and socio-cultural spaces, were published in the above Italian journal. The talk was a development of the second part of a radio broadcast he had given the previous year on the theme of utopias and heterotopias – see 9 and 11]

3. Foucault, M. (1970) [1966] 'Preface' in *The Order of Things*, Andover, Hants: Tavistock, xv-xxiv.

[English translation of 1]

4. Foucault, M. (1984) [1967] 'Des espaces autres. une conférence inédite de Michel Foucault',*Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, 5: 46-49

[This is fuller version of the talk given to a group of architects, based on transcripts – see 2]

5. Foucault, M. (1986) [1967] 'Of other spaces', trans. J. Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, (16): 22-7

 [first English translation of the talk]

6. Foucault, M (1997 [1967]) 'Of other spaces', trans. Lotus, in N. Leach (ed.) *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, London: Routledge, 330-336

[second English translation of talk]

7. Foucault, M. (1998) [1967] 'Different Spaces', trans. R. Hurley, in J. D. Faubion (ed.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault Volume 2*, London: Penguin, 175-185

[third English translation of the talk]

8. Foucault, M. (2001 [1967]) 'Des espaces autres', *Dits et écrits II, 1976–1988*, Paris: Gallimard, 1571–81

[this is a tidier French version of the talk in posthumous collection of Foucault's writings]

9. Foucault, M. (2004) [1966] *Utopies et heterotopias*, CD: INA, Mémoire Vive

[an audio recording of the radio broadcast – see 2]

10. Foucault, M. (2008) 'Of other spaces, 1967' trans. M. Dehaene and L. De Cauter, (eds.),*Heterotopia and the City*, London and New York: Routledge, 13-30

[fourth English translation of the talk]

11. Foucault, M. (2010) [1966] 'Les Corp Utopique, Les Hétérotopies', with introduction by D. Defert. Clamercy: Éditions Lignes

[text of radio broadcast – an English translation is apparently under consideration]

## 2. Shaking the order of things

Foucault's first reference to the concept of heterotopia appeared in 1966 in his preface to *Les Mots et les choses*, later translated into English as *The Order of Things* (1970). According to

Foucault, the starting point for his book was the reading of a passage by Jorge Luis Borges in which he recounts the baffling classification of animals found in an imaginary Chinese Encyclopaedia. In 1952, Borges, an Argentinean philosopher and writer, published a selection of essays about world literature, maths, metaphysics, religion and language (Borges, 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:

> (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: xv).

The passage made Foucault 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*' (1970: xv – original emphasis). What interests Foucault is not just the amazing juxtapositions found in Borges' enumeration, but the fact that such juxtapositions are impossible except in the space of language, a contradictory 'unthinkable space' (xvii). 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. 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 (see Lax, 1998: 114). According to Foucault's very limited characterization, utopias, however fantastic, present an ordered, coherent whole, whereas Borges' scheme shatters language itself and utterly undermines the usual ways in which words and things are drawn together. Utopias move in step with our language, whereas Borges presents a thoroughly disturbing textual space (xviii). Heterotopias are disquieting and undermine language:

> they desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilise the lyricism of our sentences  (xviii)

Such a loosening of words and things (the French title of Foucault's book making the point more explicit: *Le Mots et les choses*) becomes the initial stimulus for Foucault's deliberations because it raises questions about the establishment of order in our culture, or those basic codes that govern perceptions, language and practice. Foucault goes on to investigate a formal history of 'order', literally how things are divided up, compared, classified and arranged from the seventeenth century onwards.

## 3. The games children play

In the same year as the publication of *The Order of Things*, Foucault gave a talk on the radio channel 'France Culture' as part of a series on utopia and literature. In the talk, Foucault rather playfully reflects on the possibility of studying systematically a range of 'different spaces' that somehow challenge or contest the space we live in. The focus is now on cultural and social sites rather than textual spaces. The broadcast (Foucault, 2004 and 2009a) is fascinating as it follows the same shape as the later better known lecture, but with some distinctive features both in content and style. His opening illustrations of the concept refer to various children's imaginative games, mentioning Indian tents and dens in gardens as well as all the games played on or under the covers of the parents' bed:

> These counter-spaces ……. are well recognised by children. Certainly, it's the bottom of the garden; it's the Indian tent erected in the middle of the attic; or still, it's … on their parent's bed where they discover the ocean, as they can swim between the covers, and the bed is also the sky, or they can bounce on the springs; it's the forest as they can hide there; or still, it's night as they can become ghosts between the sheets and, finally, it's the fear and delight of their parents coming home……. (Foucault, 2009a – own translation

The children's inventive play produces a different space that at the same time mirrors what is around them. The space reflects and contests simultaneously. Foucault outlines a number of these 'counter-spaces' that are in different ways outside the ordinary, including cemeteries, brothels, prisons, asylums and holiday villages. He goes on to explain that such sites can be found in all cultures and suggests that there could be a 'science' of these extraordinary spaces, a 'heterotopology'. He outlines how in 'primitive culture' there are different spaces set apart for some form of rites of passage, or initiation, whilst in the nineteenth century, amongst privileged classes, this setting apart can be seen in boarding or military schools. He suggests that modern heterotopian sites relate more to enclosing some form of deviation

rather than marking a stage in life. Foucault gives the rest home as an example, a place for the non-productive, for doing absolutely nothing.

## 4. Lessons for architects

According to Defert, the context for Foucault's most detailed account of heterotopia began with some bewildered amusement. In a letter Foucault wrote to Defert:

> Do you remember the telegram that gave us such a laugh, where an architect said he glimpsed a new conception of urbanism? But it wasn't in the book; it was in a talk on the radio about utopia. They want me to give it again…. (Defert, 1997: 274).

Foucault was invited to speak to the *Cercle d'études architecturales* [Circle of Architectural Studies] and gave his lecture in Paris in March 1967. Foucault was said to be reluctant to publish the lecture at the time, although some excerpts appeared in the Italian journal *l'Architettura* (1968), but shortly before his death he agreed to its publication to coincide with an exhibition held in Berlin in 1984 (Macey, 1993:186). The text, *Des espaces autres*, was published by the French journal *Architecture, Mouvenment, Continuité* (1984) and translated into English by Miskoweic two years later in *Diacritics* as 'Of other spaces' (1986). The text is based on the transcript of the lecture that was made and circulated by the group of architects. The text has since been translated into three further English versions, including by Hurley's (1998) under the distinct title, 'Different Spaces' and recently a version by Dehaene and De Cautier (2008), retaining the title 'Of other spaces'. Unless referring to the original French, I use the Hurley translation and moreover will go on to argue for an overall interpretation that emphasises the relational 'difference' from, or transformation of, the ordinary rather than retaining the connotations of a radical alterity or spaces that are fundamentally 'other' (see also translation notes in Dehaene and De Cautier, 2008: 22-23).

As suggested by the divergent titles, the lecture presents some specific challenges for the translator. In France '*espace*' has a wider application than 'space', referring to many areas designated for specific purposes or activities. Augé (1995: 83) describes the particular 'plasticity' of the term's usage in France. As is often remarked, there are also complex and subtle differences in English and French between space [*espace*] and place [*lieu*]. Augé provides a succinct distinction. He argues that 'space' is more abstract than 'place'. The former term can refer to an area, a distance and, significantly in relation to Foucault's concept

of heterotopia, a temporal period (the space of two days).  The latter more tangible term is relational, concerned with identity and linked to an event or a history, whether mythical or real (81-84).  For Agnew, space is traditionally seen as a general and objective notion, related to some form of location, whereas place refers to the particular, related to the 'occupation' of a location (2005: 142). However, Foucault strongly favours the word '*emplacement*', a term which has a sense of both space and place, and which is repeated over twenty times in the introductory paragraphs.

As De Cautier and Dehaene point out, he seems to use the term *emplacement* deliberately to give it a 'technical' sense, avoiding more common words like *place*, *lieu* and *endroit*, (2008: 24). The term involves site, but also a relational sense involving location and support.   In French, *emplacement* usually refers to the marking out of a position within an archaeological site and commonly refers to, for example, a designated pitch for camping within an overall camping site. Unfortunately, the significance of this term is completely lost in the first translation by Miskowiec that appeared in *Diacritics*. It is converted to 'site' and confusingly the English 'emplacement' is used to translate *'la localisation'*. This leads to such misleading translations as: 'today the site (*l'emplacement*) has been substituted for extension which itself had replaced emplacement (*la localisation*)'. In the more recent translations by Hurley and De Cautier and Deaene, this difficulty is overcome by usually retaining the word 'emplacement' in English. Importantly, as we shall see, Foucault goes on to define heterotopia both through and in the context of this term which he suggests typifies the spatial questions of our present era.

## 5. An exploration of the lecture

 The lecture starts with some sweeping observations, asserting that whereas the nineteenth century seemed to be preoccupied with history and time, the present is more concerned with structure and space.  In an interview in 1980, Foucault recalls that his remarks seemed to hit an ideological mine-field. At the end of his lecture:

> ... someone spoke up – a Sartrean psychologist-  who firebombed me, saying that space is reactionary and capitalist, but history and becoming are revolutionary. This absurd discourse was not unusual at the time (2002: 361).

Foucault appears to have figures such as Hegel and Darwin in mind in his brief remarks about the 'great obsession' with time in the nineteenth century. With reference to the contemporary focus on space, he speaks of 'an era of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the scattered' (1998: 175). Casey suggests such a conception juxtaposes Leibniz with Heidegger, with the former as the most dominant voice (1998: 299). For Leibniz, space is the order of concomitant or simultaneous things, emphasising features such as interval, position, emplacement and distance (see also Casey, 1998: 167-170 and Genocchio, 1995: 37). But Foucault also refers to structuralism as a broad mode of analysis that strongly advocates space rather than time. The question of the structuralist aspect of his account will be returned to later in this essay, but it is worth noting here that his brief description of structuralism, identifying a 'set of relations that makes then appear juxtaposed, opposed, implied by one another', echoes throughout his account of space generally and heterotopia specifically. A key feature of his approach seems to concern the establishment of '*l'ensemble des relations'* within and between spaces.

After his opening remarks, Foucault takes a glance at what he calls the 'history of space', seeming to apply a distinction developed in Koyré's *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (1957)**.** Simply put, prior to Galileo, space tended to be what Koyré describes as 'attributive' or 'substantial' (275) referring, for example, in the medieval period  to a hierarchy, a binary set of places as the sacred and profane, or the celestial and the terrestrial. For Foucault, it is a space of 'localisation'. From the seventeenth century, these sets of enclosed places are replaced or dissolved by Cartesian extension, the infinitely open. Foucault develops this highly simplified and somewhat distorted history (see Casey, 1998: 298) by suggesting that in the present, this conception of space is in turn being replaced by one of 'emplacement'. The question today is about finite space, for example, demography and whether we have enough space for humanity, but it is also about the relations between different sites and our place within them. In sum, extension replaced localisation and now we are in an era of 'emplacement'.  For Foucault, space is now 'defined by the relations of proximity between points or elements' (1998:  176). Unlike time, space may not yet be fully 'desacralised'; it may contain persistent if unacknowledged sacralised oppositions as private/public, family/social, work/leisure and cultural/useful.

Foucault then pays tribute to the work of Bachelard in exploring the spatial metaphors of imagination, or the poetics of intimate space 'laden with qualities' and haunted by fantasies'

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(177). But in contrast to these internal reveries, Foucault turns to his central interest: the space of the outside [*du dehors*]. He wishes, as it were, to turn Bachelard inside out. Tellingly, this space in which we live is a set of relations cut through with time. It is the space through which we are 'drawn outside ourselves' and 'the erosion of our life' takes place. He suggests that this space is equally rich and heterogeneous. The space that 'eats and scrapes away at us' includes everyday emplacements such as houses, specific rooms, trains, streets, cafés, beaches and so on, but Foucault distinguishes some that have :

> …the curious property of being connected to all other emplacements, but in such a way that they suspend, neutralise, or reverse the set of relations that are designated, reflected or represented [*reflechis*] by them…. (Foucault, 1998: 178)

Returning to the terms used in both the preface to *The Order of Things* and the radio broadcast, Foucault describes two major types of emplacement that involve these extraordinary properties: utopias and heterotopias. The latter are 'probably in every culture, in every civilisation'. Like utopias these sites relate to other sites by both representing and at the same time inverting them; unlike utopias, however, they are localised and real. In some ways they are like utopias that are practised or enacted. Foucault also spends some time discussing what he describes as the 'intermediate example of the 'mirror'. The thoroughly disruptive experience of the mirror produces a 'placeless place'. The link with heterotopia concerns the ability to be both different and the same, both unreal and real:

> 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... (179)

Foucault seemed to be fascinated by the effects of mirrors. In a lecture on Manet given a few years later in Tunis, he gives an absorbing account of the painting *Un bar aux Folies-Bergère* (2009b). The famous picture represents a woman with a huge mirror behind her, reflecting her back and the occupants of the bar. Foucault explains how a traditional composition is transformed by Manet into a puzzling series of spatial incompatibilities or distortions. He describes the painting as a 'place at once empty and occupied' (77). Most strikingly for Foucault, the place of the viewer is undermined as 'Manet plays with the picture's property of being not in the least a normative space whereby the representation fixes us ....... to a unique point from which to look' (78). Overall in the lecture on Manet, he argues that the painter

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produced disturbing 'object-paintings' that anticipated not only impressionism but also more significantly non-representative art, focusing entirely on the play of 'material properties'.

Turning to heterotopia directly, the bunch of verbs that Foucault uses to describe these different spaces is dazzling and somewhat confusing. They 'mirror', 'reflect', 'represent', 'designate', 'speak about' all other sites but at the same time 'suspend', 'neutralise', 'invert', 'contest' and 'contradict' those sites. He goes on to support his argument by providing, rather didactically, a list of principles and, rather teasingly perhaps, a diverse range of examples:

| Principles | Examples mentioned by Foucault |
|---|---|
| 1. arise in all cultures but in diverse forms | pre-modern 'crisis' places (eg for adolescents, menstruating women, old people), *voyage des noces* (honeymoon trip), nineteenth century boarding and military schools<br><br>places of 'deviation' (eg rest homes, psychiatric hospitals, prisons, old people's homes) |
| 2. mutate and have specific operations at different points in history | cemeteries |
| 3. juxtapose in a single space several incompatible spatial elements | cinemas, theatres, gardens, Persian carpets |
| 4. encapsulate temporal discontinuity or accumulation | cemeteries, fairs, 'primitive' vacation villages, museums, libraries |
| 5. presuppose an ambivalent system of rituals related to opening/closing and | barracks, prisons, Muslim baths, Scandinavian saunas, motel rooms used for |

| | |
|---|---|
| entry/ exit | illicit sex. |
| 6. function in relation to the remaining space, for example,  as illusion or compensation | brothels, Puritan communities, Jesuit colonies |

Each heterotopia involves all the principles to some extent, forming a diverse group of resemblances, but it is suggested that some are more 'fully functioning' or 'highly heterotopic' (1998: 182). Echoing his earlier radio broadcast, he describes 'crisis' heterotopia that are associated with so called 'primitive' cultures: locations set aside for people at particular stages of their lives, marking a rites of passage involving, as outlined in van Gennep's seminal ethnographical study first published in French in 1908, 'separation, transition or incorporation' (1960: 166). Foucault then refers to modern versions of these earlier forms of heterotopia that are now focussed on 'deviation'. These examples are, of course, the institutions that are involved before and after the lecture in some of Foucault's major studies concerning the asylum (2006), the hospital (1973) and the prison (1977). He was later to describe all of this work as analysing in multiple ways 'dividing practices' that objectify, for example: the mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the 'good boys' (2001a). But it is also interesting to note that some six years before his lecture to the architects, in his *History of Madness*, he described the plans 'for ideal houses of correction' in terms that are strikingly heterotopian, involving 'ideal fortresses' which were 'entirely closed in on themselves' and displaying 'independent microcosms' as an 'inverted mirror of society' (2006: 428).

As Foucault continues his lecture, reference to children's games disappears, but other illustrations tend to follow and expand those found in the radio broadcast. The examples are extremely diverse, but they all refer in some way or another to a relational disruption in time and space. They are, to use Defert's phrase, 'spatio-temporal units' (1997:275).  Apart from the spaces for rites of passage that mark out time in a prison, asylum, or old people's home, other explicitly temporal examples include holidays that split conventional work-time or festivals that spring into life at certain points of the year. These latter spaces are classified rather awkwardly as specific 'heterochronias' that embrace  'temporal discontinuities'

[*decoupages du temps*] and are found in fairs, those utterly transitory or fleeting constructions: 'marvellous empty emplacements on the outskirts of cities that fill up once or twice a year with booths, stalls, unusual objects, wrestlers, snake ladies, fortune tellers' (Foucault, 1998: 182). In contrast to these breaks or gaps in time, other spaces such as museums endeavour to accumulate and protect all time in one space. Whilst another set of spaces integrates both types of heterochronias as with holidays that attempt to replicate the life of a primitive culture for all time in one short intense period. But for Foucault, it is the cemetery that provides the most powerful example of this temporal disruption, as here we are faced with the absolute rupture of familiar time and, as Ariès suggests, a space that formulates a break in time that becomes strangely permanent:

> The city of the dead is the obverse of the society of the living, or rather than the obverse, it is its image, its intemporal image. For the dead have gone through the moment of change, and their monuments are the visible sign of the permanence of their city' (Ariés, 1976: 74)

The cemetery is also used exclusively to illustrate how heterotopias change their function at different stages in history and reflect wider attitudes in society. In many respects, Foucault is rehearsing work by Ariès here, as he had earlier with Koyré (see Macey, 1993:186). The medieval cemetery was traditionally in the centre of the city, with a close and untroubled promiscuity between the living and the dead. With enlightened concerns about hygiene, coupled with a growing disbelief in immortality, cemeteries at the end of the eighteenth century were gradually placed outside the city where those who could afford it found an individual place of rest or 'dark dwelling' in perpetuity.

In other heterotopias, the displacement of time is matched by the disruption of space. Emplacements for rites of passage or initiations take place out of sight or 'elsewhere'. Other heterotopias provide an utter contrast with the rest of space creating, for instance, a meticulously arranged enclosure that exposes the jumbled mess that we tend to live in. Prisons, hospitals and monasteries would fit here but Foucault refers to other utopian communities such as Jesuit colonies in South America where all aspects of life were regulated in minute detail.    In contrast, some emplacements involve an enclosure of several spaces that clash or produce strange juxtapositions.  He mentions the cinema and theatre and also what he considers may be the oldest form of heterotopia, the garden, especially those

symbolic designs found in antiquity with their startling ability to represent both the smallest part of the world and its totality.

A further disruptive feature of these spaces may concern accessibility, as entry is never straightforward. A person may be compelled and constrained within the space as with prisons or asylums, or certain rituals have to be undertaken in order to gain entry, to mark a 'separation from a previous world' as van Gennep describes (1960: 21). Foucault refers to the purification ceremonies associated with traditional Muslim baths. For Foucault, the traditional French brothel, or the 'house of illusion', is also a clear illustration of this aspect, revealing openings and enclosures, hidden pleasures with a range of rituals of purification and exclusion. However, if the cemetery offers the sharpest example of the disruption of time, perhaps Foucault's earlier reference to the mirror illustrates the disruption of space most explicitly. Although the mirror is for Foucault like a utopia, a 'placeless place', it is also an actual site that completely disrupts our spatial position. The space occupied is at the same time completely real and unreal, forming an utter dislocation of place (Foucault, 1998: 179).

Foucault ends his lecture with the concentrated heterotopian features of a ship. Here we have a space that seems to incorporate all the essential disruptive ingredients of heterotopia both within itself and in relation to other spaces. It is a richly ambivalent vessel with unsettling features that are described in exactly the same way as the dislocating effect of the mirror: 'a placeless place'. Above all it is an *emplacement* that is enclosed and yet open to the outside, a 'boundless expanse of the ocean' (1998: 185). For Foucault, the heterotopian site *par excellence* provides a passage to and through other heterotopias: brothels, colonies, gardens and so on. Foucault seems to be suggesting a relational aspect of these spaces; they form relationships both within the site and between sites. The ship not only visits different spaces, it reflects and incorporates them. It is also worth noting that there are some striking similarities between this description of the heterotopia '*par excellence*' and his earlier description of the 'ship of fools' in the opening pages of his *History of Madness*. The ship of fools, which contains the 'passenger *par excellence*', is part of the literary landscape of the Renaissance, but it is also a description of boats that did exist, conveying madmen from harbour to harbour. Foucault examines the possible reasons for this strange means of dispersing the insane and concludes that it is not simply for security or social utility. He identifies ritual as well as its practical aspects of removing them from cities. The madmen's voyage is deeply ambiguous, both 'rigorous division and absolute Passage', both 'real and

imaginary'. The space is a prison and an entrance, a play of interior and exterior: 'a prisoner in the midst of the ultimate freedom, on the most open road of all, chained solidly to the infinite crossroads' (2006: 11).

The ship of fools provides a rich and intense metaphor, mapping out the relational, liminal position of madness at a particular point in history, a space where madness has a certain freedom, a pervasive and ambiguous reach. The play of spatial ambiguities ('confined' and 'delivered', 'prisoner' and 'most open', 'bound fast' and at an 'infinite crossroads') captures madness within a space where modern boundaries and binary thinking are held in ambivalent but productive suspension. But it also represents an unsettling site where we are drawn away from, or out of, customary landmarks. The passenger is positioned on 'the inside of the outside, or vice versa'. In the conclusion to his lecture to the architects, the ship provides a rich inventive space: a provocation that forms a 'reservoir of imagination' (1998: 185).

The concept of heterotopia has generated a cottage industry of interpretations and applications – see my essay [Interpretations](#) (2016)

# 6. References

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