Heterotopology and Geography: A Reflection
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Topology is the search for the places in history. It is the possibility to suspend time. Here, starting from Edward Soja and Michel Foucault, it legitimates the returning to the very beginning of the modern age—there, where we can perceive that original and premodern heterotopia concretely ordered by a mirror and a panel. This heterotopia reflects and inverts a space ordered by analogies, a space that is not still fixed by the mortifying tabular logic proper of the modern age. Or else a space whose main working might be similar to the postmodern wrapping. This heterotopia—the specular projection by Filippo Brunelleschi—reflects the subjection in which the space submits whoever looks towards it. The aim is to understand the premodern origins of that mechanism through which postmodern geographers could redraw their maps.

“In the end I do not know—but neither, I think, does Baudrillard. Meanwhile, let us not forget Foucault.” With this sentence, expressing the necessity of doubting and remembering, Edward J. Soja (1995) concludes his article, “Heterotopologies: A Remembrance of Other Space in the Citadel LA.” This doubt reflects on the possibility of formulating a thought that leaves behind the seductions of the postmodern language game to grasp the unmediated surface of phenomena on which the multiple versions of the real and its representations are played out. The reference to a memory refers to an article by Foucault in which he explains the mechanism of heterotopology; this article represents the starting point of Soja’s reflections and also my own. In a similar way to Soja, in this article I also intend to go back to Foucault’s piece and above all to cast a doubt on the postmodern attempt at understanding through a process that involves “becoming eye-less, I less, and aye-less” (Soja, 1995, p. 31).
The concept of heterotopology Soja referred to originates in a minor text by Foucault, *Des spaces autres*, published posthumously in 1986 (Foucault, 1986). In this piece Foucault effected a transposition in space of the more famous heterotopia, which, in the foreword of *Les mots et les choses*, was used to organize Borges’s paradoxical taxonomy of the Chinese Encyclopaedia. Whereas in *Les mots et les choses* the paradox was built around the absence of a table “which allows words and things to coexist side by side,” in *Des spaces autres* he attempted to explain what remained once the table— that was an invisible and reassuring grid that assured a flat description of things in the world—was not there any more. It is precisely this attempt which allows heteropology to become a useful instrument to investigate a postmodern space that is functional to a human geography and which, in turn, takes geography back to space itself. Soja understood heterotopia as a sort of compass that geographers could use to redraw their maps, to rediscover the logic of those forms that remain hidden behind the tabular forms of modernity.

To clarify this, we must start from the very beginning. Soja’s pretext for redefining heterotopology was offered by the celebration of the second centenary of the French Revolution. On this occasion, the Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning of UCLA created a space in which La Place de la Bastille in Paris and the Citadel LA—that is Los Angeles’s center of social space—were re-created, fused together, compared, and conflated. This commemorative space, which conforms to the same principles of heterotopology, also reveals the ideologies, the hidden knots, and the entanglements that are at the basis of the postmodern representation of Paris and Los Angeles.

Before beginning to illustrate the space of the exhibition, Soja provided a useful introduction for understanding its logical structures, an introduction that is reminiscent of Foucault’s text. In this text we read that some places “have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to subject, neutralise or invest the set of relations that they happen to designate mirror or reflect” (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). The specular characteristic, which no space escapes, belongs to both ideal places (utopias) and real ones (heterotopias). Soja (1995) stated that to stress the distinction between utopia and heterotopia, the French historian employs “a lateral glance into the mirror” as the latter has the power to represent an “unreal place in which I see myself where I am (eterotopia)” (p. 14). This subjective reflection contains the possibility for a critical representation of the whole social space, that is to say for heterotopology, which is a different human geography, whose main focus is a space that “draws us out of ourselves, in which we assist in the erosion of our lives, our time and our history, the space that claws and gnaws at us” (p. 15). This is not a reassuring analysis of spatial relations through the customary forms of description, recording, circulation, denomination, classification, and codification, but a disquieting revelation, which implies an immediate realization of conflict and criticism. Further on in this introduction, Soja summarized the five principles of heterotopia. The first principle is that heterotopia belongs to each and all human groups but manifests itself in different forms. In the second principle, heterotopia changes according to time, in line with the synchronicity of the culture in which it operates. In respect to the third principle, heterotopia simultaneously contains and juxtaposes irreducible spaces. Finally, heterotopicity is linked to spans of time (heterocronicity). The synchronicity of time and space or, in other words, the spatialization of history, allows eterotopias to function. These are places in which you enter and exit under surveillance.
Having illustrated and explained his method, Soja began to take into consideration the space of the exhibition. Here two centuries and two cities are unraveled and continuously referred to each other. In this synchronic postmodern space, we go back and forth from the power of the place to the place of power. This collapse of chronological distances is well exemplified by the “Bastaventure” sculpture that mixes features of the Bastille (the historical symbol of the French Revolution) and the Bonaventure Hotel (which represents the disorienting experience of space as interpreted by John Portman). The dynamic and brilliant staging of these irreducible spaces is reassembled to create a luminous screen where everything is placed in doubt, reversed, and criticized. The synchronic projection of the history of Los Angeles and Paris on this screen subtly reminds us of the pervasive and ever-changing forms of political surveillance in the urban space, in a way suggesting that “to think of the city as a prison is only the beginning.” Soja used the problematic geography of Foucault to show that the confusing multiplicity of appearances does not merely signify anarchic dispersion with no order and function but, according to the concept of heterotopia that Soja put forward, it is precisely this form of dispersion that constitutes the social order; in other words, Soja linked the totality of the representations contained in the space in question.

In this regard, he remarked on how Baudrillard used to smile at his typically modernist attempt to invest sense on what appears as a simple phantasmagoric exhibition. Soja admitted that, from the standpoint of Baudrillard, Los Angeles seems a fragmentary space made up of confusing simulacra in which the play of images eliminates any critical position one might adopt. The tension, which informed Soja’s position—as hinted above—was resolved, as I have noted at the beginning, with the necessity to remember and to doubt. Is it in this way that, as Soja said, heterotopology works, and that its essential specular nature belongs to postmodernity? This is the doubt that also permeates this short study; the memory equally refers to a passage by Foucault in which he explained the self-reflexive mechanism that regulated Utopia and Heterotopia.

Topology is the search for the places in history, which begins with the realization that history unravels in an eternally present space. For this reason, it is precisely in space that we are made aware of the multiple, logical forms history is made up of (Vitiello, 1994). The possibility to suspend time, that is, to destroy the linear distance that has ordered the above-mentioned forms, becomes the necessary condition to recognize the functional analogies and the structural connections among different places in history. It is this possibility that has enabled first Foucault and then Soja to discover within the same space the modern and the postmodern mechanism of surveillance. By contrast, such a possibility will become instrumental to refer to the beginning of modernity when the original heterotopia is given the tangible shape of a mirror that reflects a space that is not yet defined through a mortifying tabular logic. During the 16th century, the *emulatio*, the rhetorical figure of the simile, partook of “both the mirror and its reflection” and contributed to the knowledge of the things of the world. In a similar way to the eterotopia staged in UCLA, it suspended, distanced, and untied the links among things, and unveiled their relationship beyond their appearances—here the specular duplication mingles the reflection with its source. Such duplication makes visible—drags to the surface—the web of likenesses (the significance) among things. In this way, similar forms are enveloped by other like forms, which in turn are enveloped and will probably be enveloped in turn again (Foucault, 1986, pp. 33-35). Or, as Jameson (1992, pp. 101-102) put it, the indifferent and fluctuating sum of the signs taken out of a precise context is “wrapped” by an unseen horizon of signification to unveil significations and likenesses that would otherwise be invisible. Such “wrap-
"ping" is what will be in turn wrapped by another and different set of significations. This folding on oneself is the form that, in the era of the narrative of the world and of postmodernity, regulates the deceptive relationship between what is represented and its representations, transforming the whole world in a ceaseless staging of mere signifiers (Cosgrove, 1990). In an unconscious way, then, the most critical and scrupulous postmodern geography seems to keep faith with the prototype of the modern perspectival device that serves to imagine a space that is once more ordered by echoes and analogies (Jameson, 1992, pp. 101-103). If echoes and analogies are reflected in the postmodern description of the space of heterotopia, the dissemination of things in the premodern space is represented through the possibilities of specular emulation. Yet there is something that signals a formal, though not a functional difference, between these two reflections (and these two spaces): that is the problematic “point of surveillance,” the apex of the perspectival pyramid through which the representations of different spaces are translated and drawn into a unifying signification. In a historical period in which the modern “cartographic conception of power” (Cacciari, 1977, p. 62) is negated, such a point of contact scatters these representations, reveals its irreducible difference, and, in last analysis, suspends any stable order of significations. The apparent absence of a precise focus of power is evidence of the changes in the form and nature of this point and of the difficulty of perceiving it. One can only hint at such complexities, which inevitably refer to that topological theory which refuses to endow political power with a precise place. Political power does not appear to be part of a topological discourse. Indeed, it does not merely appear so; it is not part of topological discourse at all (Vitiello, 1994, p. 56). However, it is precisely this point that Soja, and before him Foucault, was searching for. It is heterotopology that can demonstrate its existence, even though, differently from its archetypal form, heterotopology does not endow this point with a concrete and geometrically determined space that is immediately visible.

At this juncture it is necessary to return to the article by Foucault (1986). Foucault began from far away with an analysis of those spaces that function as counterspaces. As with utopias, these places represent, invert, and criticize the totality of social space. These spaces occupy a real place—in other words, it is always “possible to indicate their concrete locations” (p. 24), and at the same time they are estranged and distinct from what they reflect on and converse with. To distinguish these spaces from utopias, Foucault defined them as heterotopias, hence the role of the mirror as the object that is able to translate in a visible experience two concepts of space that are intertwined. This is a kind of space without a place—in the case, for example, in which behind its surface it reveals a virtual space—and it is also a concrete place that turns upside down what it reflects. Hence, Foucault did not use the mirror to suggest difference, as Soja noted; on the contrary, he used the figure of the mirror either to suggest the confusion between the real and its representation or, perhaps, to make perceptible the aphasia that anyone who would try to formulate the observation, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (Foucault, 1973) would perceive or, in line with a more coherent set of thoughts in this context, to follow one of the main rules of topology that stated that the analysis of places can only take place “in the light of ou-topia” (Vitiello, 1994, p. 13). “From the standpoint of the mirror,” wrote Foucault (1986),

I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there, where I am. (p. 24)
Foucault made a clear functional distinction between the gaze and the eye. What returned from the mirror was the gaze. And this movement back corresponded precisely to what, according to Lacan (1979), was the function of the picture. The essential relationship between being and appearance—that is, between that which from the ground of the picture observes and that which is observed and becomes a rough sketch in the picture—is realized through the “springing fountain of reflection,” that is, through the gaze.

In Foucault’s heterotopia, the representation that stains the virtual space “is there watching in order to . . . ‘capture’ the ones who are watching that is to say us” (Lacan, 1979, p. 94). This picture has, as its correlative, the gaze. It does not belong yet to the later modern perspectival representation that is characterized by geometrical vision, excluding the gaze and obliterating reflection. But let us read further:

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 at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (Foucault, 1986, p. 24)

These few lines contain a message that is of central importance. The only thing that exists over there is, as it has been noted above, the gaze. This is, however, defined as a virtual point through which reality has to pass through to be perceived. Hence, we have a mirror and a representation whose possibility to be perceived (i.e., to become a picture) depends on a virtual point (that determines the function of the picture). There are, in conclusion, three essential elements to be noted in the mechanism that “reveals the depth of field, with all those ambiguities and variables which cannot be mastered” (Foucault, 1986, p. 98). However, this mechanism belongs to the origin of projection, which can be traced back to the first perspectival experiment by Brunelleschi. At the beginning of the quattrocento in Florence, Filippo Brunelleschi invented a heterotopia that is similar to the one I have described above in all its aspects but one. Brunelleschi’s experiment consisted in a panel on which the Baptistery of Florence was represented according to perspectival rules. The vanishing point of the perspective here coincided with a hole made on the surface of the panel. Behind the panel, the subject of the perception looked through the hole at the image of the painting reflected in the mirror, which was placed opposite the panel. Immediately the observer notices his absence there, where he should be (in other words, he cannot see his image in the mirror because this is hidden by the panel); at the same time he also perceives the indiscreet presence of something (the stain produced by his eye), which, from the background of the representation, returns and gazes at its reflection, a luminous point which has not yet been transformed in the geometrical vanishing point—in other words, the subject perceives himself first as an eye and then as a point—he looks at himself. In this way the observer, as Foucault (1986) and Lacan (1979) noted, is reconstituted through the gaze—the locus where the relationship between being (the gaze) and appearance (the eye) is made visible. Such specular projection demonstrates the place that controls the whole representation (it makes clear the coincidence between the point of view and the vanishing point); it demonstrates its material nature (the gaze is the hole filled with the eye) and, through an overturning, it also reflects the subjection of the observer to the place he or she is observing.

There is a further characteristic to be noted in this inaugural and originary heterotopia. The upper edge of the panel was identical to the edge of the buildings represented. In this way, Brunelleschi excluded from his representation the sky and the
clouds: He cannot, in fact, depict what perspective cannot represent, that is to say, the “body without surface” of the aerial space. This, however, has still to be represented despite the fact that it cannot be grasped by perspectival geometry. This is the reason why Brunelleschi gave the mirror the task to reflect this space that according to a perspectival logic is irreducible. The mirror manifested itself as an “index of discontinuity, heterogeneity and heterotopy” (Damisch, 1992). The perceiving subject can see, on the same and adjacent specular surface, two spaces that are opposite and overturned.

A final comment I would like to make regards the possibility of the original model to denounce its limits and function as essentially subjective. However, there is a problem. Both Brunelleschi’s and Foucault’s mechanism include a place of the gaze. The first is a concrete hole through which we can perceive the representation. The second is a virtual point through which has to pass what will be a representation. The first is the sign besides which infinity unfolds, both theoretically and visually. The second is a point that comes back as the former but, on the contrary, does not signal the unfolding of anything. By this I mean that the reflection of the eye from the mirror comes back to me as a gaze; the gaze reflects back to me. Could we not then presume that the essence of postmodernity consists of its difference with modernity and in the different structure and nature of its gaze? The one who is writing cannot offer an answer. But following the lesson of Soja (1995, p. 31), she wanted to cast a doubt and in so doing attempt to understand the origin of the mechanism through which postmodern geography can put forward a critical and political act of resistance or, in Lacan’s (1979) words, “the doubt has become the very sign for resistance” (p. 37).

Notes

1. An explanation of this term had already appeared in a previous study by Soja entitled “Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space” (1989).

2. Here Soja referred to the well-known study by Fredrick Jameson on postmodern logic and culture entitled Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1992).

3. Here I refer to libraries, psychiatric hospitals, military quarters, and those strange heterotopologies represented by cemeteries.

4. For the implications of the perspectival regime that I have described above, see Damisch (1992) and the above-cited Lacan (1979).

References


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