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# The High Line, “The Balloon,” and Heterotopia

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## Abstract

The High Line, a new park on an old elevated railway on Manhattan, is an otherworldly space that invites an understanding in terms of Foucault’s concept of heterotopia. However, this often-used term requires critical reflection, particularly to extend it beyond the immediately spatial to include the realm of the discursive. To this end, an analysis of the High Line is paired with a reading of a similarly different space in Donald Barthelme’s short story “The Balloon.” Bringing together a real park and a literary space shows how Foucault’s concept requires combining the focus on the spatial in “Of Other Spaces” with the focus on structural order in *The Order of Things*, if it is to be used for understanding not just theoretical or fictional but also actual spaces.

## Keywords

heterotopia, The High Line, “The Balloon,” Barthelme, Foucault

In the summer of 2009, I found myself in Manhattan’s newest public space, the High Line, a park located on top of an old railway track elevated 29 feet above street level. It stretches along the Western side of Manhattan from Gansevoort Street uptown, and will cover roughly 1.5 miles once its final stage is completed. Seeing as the park had only opened about a month before, many people were visiting the park for the first time, like myself. All seemed to enjoy the space very much, judging by their expressions and lively conversations, and people took long strolls through the linear park, exploring all its areas. What the people seemed to appreciate most was not just the novelty of the park, but particularly its difference: Suspended above and across the Manhattan grid, the High Line is unlike conventional parks, offering a view of the Hudson river and the city below. Yet the High Line distinguishes itself not merely in a novel vantage point, but in the fact that the space is discontinuous with the surrounding city. The park seemed enjoyable exactly because it did not fit in with the rest of the urban fabric.

The High Line thereby invites an understanding in terms of Foucault’s concept of heterotopia. However, as many commentators have noted, this concept is by no means clear or unproblematic, requiring close theoretical (re)consideration before use. This is precisely the purpose of this article: to accept the High Line’s invitation to be seen as an other space, and thereby to use the park to critically reflect on Foucault’s concept.

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The theoretical appeal of the concept of heterotopia has always been greater than its clarity. In Foucault's writing the term occurs in two main places—in the preface to *The Order of Things* (1966) and in his essay "Of Other Spaces" (originally a lecture delivered in 1967)—but neither instance is elaborate in the development of the term, and the meaning differs as well.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in its subsequent usage the term has been used in a variety of ways and for a wide range of spaces.<sup>2</sup> Most writers share the basic idea that heterotopias refer to "a relational disruption in time and space" (Johnson, 2006, p. 78) and that they "inject alterity into the sameness, the commonplace, the topicality of everyday society" (Dehaene & De Cauter, 2008b, p. 4). However, many studies use the term without much critical consideration, which has led to an array of (unspecified) interpretations. Consequently, in the prevailing application of the term, as Genocchio (1995) notes, "'Of Other Spaces' is invariably called up (within a simplistic 'for/against' model of conventional politics) to provide the basis for some 'alternative' strategy of spatial interpretation which might be applied to any 'real' place" (p. 39). As a result, most usages of heterotopia share a "persistent association with spaces of resistance and transgression" that is "often asserted with little substantiation" (Johnson, 2006, p. 81). Hence, the lack of elaboration in Foucault and the wide-ranging subsequent mobilization call for further critical reflection on the concept of heterotopia itself.

One of the key difficulties is that Foucault's concept extends beyond the immediately spatial. After all, his first discussion of the term in *The Order of Things* is not in the context of space at all, but is prompted by a story by Borges—a point often disregarded in usages of the concept. Therefore, I will turn to a literary text to investigate the High Line as a heterotopia. In fact, as I sat on a bench in the High Line, I realized I had already encountered a similarly different space before in a fantastic short story called "The Balloon" by Donald Barthelme, a New York-based writer principally known for his short fiction from the 1960s and 1970s. In "The Balloon" (originally published in 1968), a narrator has a gargantuan balloon suspended over Manhattan stretching from 14th street to Central Park. The balloon offers space for strolls and is pleasing to look at, and thereby forms a different space for the people to enjoy, making it a "'prototype' or 'rough draft'" (Barthelme, 1993, p. 58) for an alternative urban spatiality.

Hence, while I sat on that bench, the question presented itself whether the High Line can be seen as the kind of space for which Barthelme's balloon was a rough draft—for even though one is an actual space and the other is fictional, both provide alternatives suspended above Manhattan for the people to enjoy. This simple question allows for exploring the spatial difference that underlies both park and balloon as heterotopias. Exploring the neat fit between the fictional space of Barthelme's story and Foucault's concept shows how such a fit is only possible within the realm of the textual. In contrast, the real space of the High Line cannot be aligned with Foucault's concept to the same degree. In effect, the park lays bare the gap between the theoretical and strict Foucauldian sense of heterotopia—particularly along the lines of "Of Other Spaces" as most common grounding for the concept—and the material reality of spaces for which the concept is to serve as an analytical tool. Yet rather than dismiss the concept as unworkable or the High Line as not being a heterotopia, the argument of this article is that the High Line shows where the concept can be further specified by focusing on how spatial and discursive structures together establish difference.

## The Otherworldly High Line

As mentioned, unlike conventional parks, the High Line is not inserted in, but suspended above the existing urban structure. The space of the park therefore departs from the dominant spatial regime of its visible environment, which is a purposive-rational arrangement of a street grid with defined blocks—basically a rigidly ordered two-dimensional plane for movement and transportation,

with occasional dense concentrations upward in the form of high-rises (with an extensive network for public transport underground and out of view). In contrast, the High Line occupies an elevated plane, a level that is not readily accessible as an open public space in the surrounding city. More important, it follows a course that does not exactly conform to the underlying grid structure, diagonally cutting across it in places. Access to this plane is vertical and only possible at certain points of intersection between the elevated plane and the street grid. The High Line's difference is thus a given to a certain extent, but the design of the park cultivates and underscores that difference, thereby also offering a different perspective on the city.

In this light, two features of the park merit close attention here. First, time is a prominent factor in this space, particularly because it incorporates history as a spatial feature. Originally, the elevated line was used by freight trains for transport from the riverside to warehouses and factories. The line fell into disuse after 1980, after which it spontaneously developed into an area of "wild life" in the city, with a variety of flowers and grass springing up on the abandoned tracks. Ultimately, rather than demolish the line, it was decided it was to be turned into a park, whose design deliberately incorporates the High Line's history. Apart from the basic features tied to the line's background as a railway (the elevation, its narrowness and linearity, and its "route"), the park features sections in which the original tracks have been left in place, with newly planted flowers and grasses between the tracks and sleepers, "re-creating" the original spontaneous growth of plants, which is also echoed in the slits in the walkway of the park through which the same flowers grow. Hence, the park is filled with visible markers that highlight and preserve the history of the space.

One must note here, though, that this preservation is not a matter of leaving original parts in place; instead, it is a signifying strategy that lays bare the processes of change in urban form. Any original components are left in place by design, making them deliberate signs rather than remainders. Moreover, some of the markers of the site's history are newly produced, such as the slits in the walkway or the new sleepers between some of the tracks. The site's history is thus not so much preserved as constructed through markers of the original railway and the nature developing there. As a notably converted urban space, the park produces its history through elements that signify its past, thereby also offering a view of the historicity of urban space, of the dynamics of urban change, decay, and design.

The other prominent feature of the High Line is the reinforcement of the different perspective on the city, particularly in its 10th Avenue Square. At the point where the park diagonally crosses 10th Avenue, there is a sunken area in the park with rows of seats sloping downward like in a theater, though there is no stage. Instead, panes of glass offer a view up the avenue and the traffic below. With the viewer suspended over the middle of the street, the viewpoint is a displacement of the position from which the city is normally seen by pedestrians (i.e., from the sidewalk at ground level). Yet there is nothing of particular interest about this part of 10th Avenue or about its traffic; the dead straight view along the avenue only focuses attention on the rational design of the street grid below. The theater simply shows the street and cars below from a different perspective, transforming the everyday functional use of the urban space into a spectacle itself, literally offering a window on the city.

This reading of the High Line as a markedly different space is in line with the views of the principles of the two main collaborating design offices working on the High Line. According to James Corner, one of the strategies for the park is "to slow things down, to promote a sense of duration and of being in another place, where time seems less pressing," which contributes to the

episodic and varied sequence of public spaces and landscape biotopes set along a simple and consistent line—a line that cuts across some of the most remarkable elevated vistas of

Manhattan and the Hudson River, each view unfolding through an otherworldly synaesthesia of motion. (Friends of the High Line, 2008, p. 30)

Similarly, Ricardo Scofidio emphasizes that “[i]n stark contrast to the speed of Hudson River Park, this parallel linear experience is marked by slowness, distraction, and an otherworldliness that preserves the strange character of the High Line.” In reference to the unconventional ways of entering the park, he points out that “[a]ccess points are durational experiences designed to prolong the transition from the frenetic pace of the city streets to the slow, otherworldly landscape of the High Line” (Friends of the High Line, 2008, p. 31). Both designers underline the temporal aspects of the space, focusing on a sense of duration and slowness in contrast with the hectic city life below. The foregrounding of the site’s history can also be seen in this light, for example. In addition, the designers emphasize the difference of the space, with repeated stress on its *otherworldliness*. All elements of the design—from its incorporation of the site’s background, to the diversity of its plant life, to the perspective it offers on the city—are geared toward providing an experience that achieves a transition from everyday urban life to another world within the city, to another type of space. The crux of the High Line thus seems to be this deliberate difference.

## The Fantastic Balloon

Even though the High Line is a real park and Barthelme’s balloon is fictional, the spaces are akin in how they are distinctly different. “The Balloon” addresses the workings of language and signs—prominent concerns throughout Barthelme’s work<sup>3</sup>—and spatializes these issues. The story describes how a gigantic balloon is suddenly placed against the Manhattan sky, covering 45 blocks north–south and around 10 cross-town blocks. The balloon has no ostensible purpose, defies interpretation, and conveys no message. It is simply a “concrete particular, hanging there” (Barthelme, 1993, p. 54) that bulges and moves about a bit. The people of the city mostly remain calm and enjoy the pleasant colors of the balloon—“muted grays and browns for the most part, contrasted with walnut and soft, forgotten yellows” (Barthelme, 1993, p. 55). Numerous interpretations of the balloon are considered, but none of them sticks. As the narrator points out, it would have been easily understood “had we painted ‘LABORATORY TESTS PROVE’ or ‘18% MORE EFFECTIVE’ on the sides” (Barthelme, 1993, p. 55), but the balloon carries no such commercial message. It also resists psychological/psychoanalytic symbolization and critical opinion produces no more than nonsensical comments such as “inner joy,” “conservative eclecticism that has so far governed modern balloon design,” “abnormal vigor,” and “Quelle catastrophe!” (Barthelme, 1993, pp. 56–57). The balloon can therefore be considered a prototypical “floating signifier”: It is taken as a sign, but it persistently resists to signify. The only adequate response is everyday practical *use* of the balloon, as opposed to interpretation. Children play on top of it, people take strolls there, and they begin to locate themselves in relation to it: “I’ll be at that place where it dips down into Forty-seventh Street almost to the sidewalk” (Barthelme, 1993, p. 57). After 22 days the speaker—for whom it was “a spontaneous autobiographical disclosure” (Barthelme, 1993, p. 58), having to do with the absence of his lover and sexual deprivation—has the balloon removed and stored for further use.

The basis for the representation of the city in this story is the confrontation of the people with a fantastic object that disturbs the regular urban environment. Its sheer magnitude and apparent purposelessness suggest new definitions of the meanings of the city, but the initial exploration of the “meaning” of the balloon quickly subsides, “because we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest, safest phenomena” (Barthelme, 1993, p. 54). As a result, “[t]he apparent purposelessness of the balloon was vexing (as was the fact that it was ‘there’ at all)” (Barthelme, 1993, p. 55). As Maltby (1991)

comments on the balloon, “it exposes the inability of our established meaning-systems to impose meaning that is other than stultifying or superficial, and it seeks to resist and, ultimately, to transcend the habitual modes of perception” (p. 45). The balloon thus raises the issue of the limits of representation through language, or the fact that language in itself is inadequate for coming to terms with the world.

Yet the balloon’s double move of suggestion and refusal of signification, as well as its foregrounding of spatial practice, also amount to a clear social commentary. For the people of the city, the balloon is appealing precisely for its reluctance to signify:

It was suggested that what was admired about the balloon was finally this: that it was not limited, or defined. . . . This ability of the balloon to shift its shape, to change, was very pleasing, especially to people whose lives were rather rigidly patterned, persons to whom change, although desired, was not available. The balloon, for the twenty-two days of its existence, offered the possibility, in its randomness, of mislocation of the self, in contradistinction to the grid of precise, rectangular pathways under our feet. (Barthelme, 1993, p. 57)

The story juxtaposes the rational and rectangular patterning of the city streets, which shapes people’s lives and gives meaning to them, with an anomaly that just hangs there, defying any attempt to include it in the regular order of urban signification. The undefined and amorphous balloon (re)presents simply *non*-meaning: It refreshingly denies signification and thereby definition of the self. It thus offers a critique of the rigidity and regularity of city life as represented by the grid and presents an alternative that allows only everyday practice. The story posits the grid as not just affecting the direct experience of urban space, but as a more pervasive factor that marks the unavailability of change in people’s lives. Furthermore, immediately after the comments on the grid’s repressive nature, the story directly associates this with the dominance of pervasive (technological/economic) discourses of modernity, which the balloon disrupts:

The amount of specialized training currently needed . . . has been occasioned by the steadily growing importance of complex machinery, in virtually all kinds of operations; as this tendency increases, more and more people will turn, in bewildered inadequacy, to solutions for which the balloon may stand as a prototype, or “rough draft.” (Barthelme, 1993, pp. 57-58)

“The Balloon” therefore presents urban space as expressive as well as constitutive of people’s lives—for which the eponymous balloon offers an alternative that disrupts the normal spatial order.

## The Concept of Heterotopia

Both the otherworldly High Line and the amorphous balloon thus disturb the dominant surrounding cityscape of Manhattan. Seeing them as heterotopias, however, first requires a reexamination of the two main discussions of heterotopia in Foucault’s work.<sup>4</sup> In *The Order of Things*, the earlier text, the term is raised in relation to a taxonomy of animals in a Chinese encyclopedia in a story by Borges. The animals are divided into

(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 very long way off look like flies. (Foucault, 2002, p. xvi)

To describe this odd taxonomy Foucault (2002) coins the term *heterotopias*, which he contrasts with utopias, and which

are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy “syntax” in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to “hold together.” (p. xix)

Although Foucault does marginally associate space with heterotopia—by way of the double usage of “table” as a place but also a grid for ordering information (Foucault, 2002, pp. xviii-xix)—the term here does not designate anything directly spatial, but rather a structural (dis)order. The context for heterotopias like in Borges is precisely the “non-place of language” (Foucault, 2002, p. xviii).

In contrast, the essay “Of Other Spaces”—often the “core” text for discussions of heterotopia—uses the term in a directly spatial sense. Here Foucault is interested in sites “that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations designated, mirrored, or reflected by them” (Foucault, 2008, pp. 16-17). These spaces are linked to all other spaces, but at the same time contradict them. In contrast again to utopias—“emplacements with no real place” (Foucault, 2008, p. 17) that offer a perfect or inverse form of the societal space to which they relate—Foucault (2008) uses heterotopia to describe places that are “outside all places, even though they are actually localizable” (p. 17). Although these characteristics are rather abstract, Foucault also gives numerous examples, such as honeymoon trips, museums and libraries, Oriental gardens, theaters and cinemas, cemeteries, fairgrounds, and psychiatric hospitals.

The contrast between the abstract description and the array of examples poses some problems. First, the concept is intended for “other” spaces and counter-sites within which “the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” (Foucault, 2008, p. 17). This basic definition in “Of Other Spaces” seems to offer great potential for the critical analysis of space, particularly in human/urban geography (e.g., through Soja’s work<sup>5</sup>). However, when reconsidering “Of Other Spaces” critically, the concept becomes problematic, since some of its features seem to diverge. For instance, Foucault (2008) underlines on one hand what he calls “heterotopias of deviation,” in which “individuals are placed whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the mean or acquired norm” (p. 18)—of which psychiatric hospitals and prisons are his main examples.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, he also discusses fairgrounds, cinemas, and honeymoon trips as typical heterotopias. It would seem difficult to align these spaces of voluntary leisure with his initial emphasis on deviancy and discipline, at least without further differentiation in the understanding of spatial otherness. Moreover, Foucault’s examples range so widely that heterotopias seem distinct from only the most basic everyday spaces, such as houses, streets, shops, and workplaces. Yet the list can easily be extended to include many ordinary everyday spaces, such as schools, universities, gyms, or shopping malls.<sup>7</sup> The question can thus be raised as to how “other” these counter-sites really are when they are so common and prolific, or as Genocchio (1995) puts it, “what cannot be designated a heterotopia?” (p. 39). As an axiom for their critical appraisal of Foucault’s concept, Dehaene and De Cauter (2008b) claim that “not everything is a heterotopia” (p. 6)—but the very necessity of this axiom already illustrates the possible (and problematic) extent of the concept’s scope in Foucault’s limited description. Closer scrutiny of the diversity of Foucault’s descriptions and examples thus simply makes it impossible to speak of heterotopia as a (single) “type” of space with a recognizable and stable set of features. Or, phrased more positively, the concept inherently leaves room for different kinds of spaces to be differently “other.”

This diversity leads to another difficulty that stems from some of the terms in “Of Other Spaces.” For example, heterotopias are “absolutely other than all the emplacements that they reflect, and of which they speak” (Foucault, 2008, p. 17), but Foucault does not indicate how they are other, or what would actually constitute such difference. Likewise, he unproblematically posits the juxtaposition of “incompatible” sites (p. 19) without considering “spatial compatibility,” let alone how the bringing together of such sites in common heterotopias reflects on their “incompatibility” in the first place. In Genocchio’s (1995) words, Foucault relies on “some invisible but visibly operational difference which . . . provides a clear conception of spatially discontinuous ground” (pp. 38-39), which the text does not address. In effect, if one follows “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault’s discussion entails that heterotopias cannot exist in reality, but only in thought or language—making the heterotopia of “Of Other Spaces” a heterotopia in the sense of *The Order of Things*.

So then how should the concept be used? In my view, one should always see Foucault’s two perspectives—primarily structural in *The Order of Things* and primarily spatial in “Of Other Spaces”—as two sides of the same coin. The point of heterotopia is not that it designates a type of space, focusing purely on spatial arrangements or material/physical elements, but that it approaches spaces as expressive or constitutive of (other) discourses—just as the Chinese encyclopedia in Borges creates a different structural order. It allows for the discussion of the *spatial-as-discursive*, of spatial configurations (be they material/physical or social) that establish a certain order. This view is supported by the discussion of a mirror in “Of Other Spaces,” which presents an image that is a utopia, a place where one is not that gives visibility to oneself. The mirror itself, though, exists in real space and “exerts on the place that I occupy a sort of return effect” (Foucault, 2008, p. 17). It acts as a heterotopia because it simultaneously makes real the place where one is standing, and unreal since it achieves visibility through the virtual place/utopia that the mirror shows. It thus determines one’s position through the projection of the non-place of the mirror image. The key here is that the mirror *works* as a heterotopia. The point is not so much that it refers to a space itself, but that it opens up the spatial-as-discursive, involving a discourse of visibility and subjectivity in this example. The concept is therefore neither a label for any nondominant space, nor a theoretical “yardstick” to measure actual spaces against; rather, it enables the discussion of how parts, aspects, or qualities of spaces fit in and establish conventions, structures, and orders.

This take on heterotopia also points to where to look for the difference that lies at the heart of the concept, namely in spatial elements *insofar as* they establish a different order. For example, a boundary or “system of opening and closing” (Foucault, 2008, p. 21) is not heterotopian per se, but because it can demarcate a different (spatial) order. The point is to examine how the elements and the “set of relations by which a given site can be defined” (Foucault, 2008, p. 16) in a space work, taking on board that difference is always specific and contingent—depending on the (dominant and disruptive) discourses at play in certain spatial arrangements. Accordingly, there is no fixed or exhaustive inventory of heterotopian features, as they always need to be considered along with their (dominant) surrounding spaces/discourses. As a result, any idea of spatial difference as absolute, radical, or complete may hold up in theory or fiction, but cannot be maintained when considering actual spaces; instead, spatial difference should be seen in light of how and what a space is *other to*.

## Park and Balloon: Space, Discourse, Difference

A comparison of “The Balloon” and the High Line as heterotopias illustrates how this reconsideration of the concept can be made to work. First, as a work of literature, the spaces in “The Balloon” are constructed solely through linguistic means. The balloon acts as a mirror for the society over which it is suspended, thereby forming a heterotopian space for Manhattan.



Allowing itself only to be looked at or strolled upon, this milestone in the history of inflation precisely fulfills the role of an alternative space that reflects and inverts the “regular” space of the city. The only thing the balloon ultimately achieves is the positioning and definition of the self in the existing space, vis-à-vis the alternative of the balloon. The story revolves around juxtaposition; the balloon is not a heterotopia in and of itself, but only as a shapeless space, foregrounding physicality and immediate use, in contradistinction to the (dominant) flat space of the grid, as the embodiment of a discourse of rationality and economic logic, and its associated structuring of people’s lives. Neither space nor discourse takes precedence here—both the grid and its (socio)spatial rigidity and the amorphous balloon’s alternative stand in direct and simultaneous relation to each other. What the balloon stands as a prototype or rough draft of, therefore, is exactly heterotopia—as a means of conceiving spatial and structural orders in conjunction.

Likewise, the point of the High Line lies in how it works as a heterotopia specifically in Manhattan. As the designers’ texts indicate, the aim was specifically to construct an otherworldly space that foregrounds its own uniqueness—in its plant life, design, and especially in the experience of time. This stress on particularity—on top of the obvious exceptional position as an elevated plane—stands in clear contrast with the program of repetition and efficiency that inheres in the grid below. The High Line therefore has clear parallels to the balloon as disruptive space suspended over (and suspending the logic of) the grid.

While Foucault’s example of the mirror involves the discourse of visibility, the key discourses involved in the High Line concern temporality. Here the park is close to “Of Other Spaces,” which stresses that heterotopias are also “heterochronisms” which break away from traditional time. As the designers’ comments make clear, the park aims to create a “sense of duration” that differs from the experience of time and the pace of the city below. Partly, this sense of duration is guaranteed by the spatial separation of the park. The elevation, for example, means that one does not quickly pop in and out of the park, also making it unsuited for cutting across the city. Consequently, people enter, move through, and exit this space at a different speed, compared with regular city streets; in effect, it is only worth visiting the High Line when taking your time. By encouraging dwelling and duration, rather than transit and efficiency, the temporality of this space—or one could even say its rhythm—is indeed different from the city below. Furthermore, the emphasis on the High Line’s past establishes another different temporality. The park’s history is not captured in plaques or explanatory texts, but in its present spatial elements that underscore historical processes of urban change. The tracks and sleepers newly left in place, as well as the wild flowers reminiscent of the abandoned railway, do not represent history as some tellable narrative of the past; rather, what they achieve is to make urban history and dynamics of change present in the here and now. In effect, the High Line revolves less around history than around *historicity*; in preserving its history the park is not some relic or anachronism, but indeed a heterochronism that presents not just a past, but again a different temporality.

However, some important contrasts between the park and the balloon most clearly illustrate the need for a reconsideration of the concept. As a work of literature, “The Balloon” can clearly and unproblematically align the fantastic space of the balloon and its alternative of mislocation and formlessness, and the grid and its discourse of rigid patterning, thereby staying remarkably close to both of Foucault’s discussions. As in “Of Other Spaces,” the heterotopia of the balloon neutralizes and inverts the set of relations that it mirrors. In line with *The Order of Things*, the juxtaposition of balloon and grid underscores that language cannot bear a direct and unproblematic relation to reality—a point persistent throughout Bartheleme’s work that goes well with the view that heterotopias “secretly undermine language” (Foucault, 2002, p. xix). In effect, the balloon is a *perfect* heterotopia—but only because this space is constructed precisely in the “non-space of language” (Foucault, 2002, p. xviii), which is indeed where Foucault locates heterotopia

in *The Order of Things*. Compared with actual (heterotopian) spaces, the representation of space in language has certain limitations, of course: The world of the story (both the balloon and the representation of the city) has no other features than those present in the text. Consequently, the balloon is *nothing but* an alternative to the grid, allowing it to be a heterotopia *par excellence*.

Compared with the neat fit between the fictional balloon and Foucault's discussion in both texts, the real space of the High Line is less clear-cut, which is epitomized in something as inconspicuous as an ice cream cart. When I visited the park, there was an unmanned cart with a sign announcing that an ice cream vendor would be setting up there soon. This is nothing out of the ordinary: Places for buying refreshments are perfectly common in parks. Yet this also inserts an element of regularity into this space that otherwise stresses its otherworldliness at every turn. The ice cream cart introduces the commercial, adding a profit-oriented dimension of the economic—a discourse that permeates the surrounding city. In their thorough critical reexamination, De Cauter and Dehaene (2008) posit heterotopia as undercutting the economic:

Heterotopia *suspends* the everyday and makes room for bathing, rituals, games and cultural contests. Heterotopia caters to an anti-economical time: the time of sacrifice, gift, play and squandering. That makes heterotopia “potlatch” space . . . the space that “consumes,” squanders or even destroys the economic logic. (p. 98)

This description, which easily covers parks generally and the High Line in particular, thus emphasizes the departure from the dominant discourse of economic profit.<sup>8</sup> Although this does not mean that economic activity is “anti-heterotopian” per se, it does show how real (as opposed to textual) heterotopias cannot simply step out of the dominant economic system completely.

Moreover, when comparing this cart to the park's 10th Avenue Square, the contrast is emblematic for the difference between the High Line and the balloon. The Square is an instance where dominant space and discourses are represented in the High Line—one of the key “principles” of heterotopia for Foucault, for heterotopias have “the power to juxtapose in a single real place several spaces, several emplacements that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault, 2008, p. 19), with theaters and cinemas as examples where other worlds are represented. In the park, the 10th Avenue Square performs the same function, for its theater setup makes what seems to be an immediate view of 10th Avenue into a *representation* of the street, with the space of the park separated from the spectacle of urban reality below. In contrast, the ice cream cart is an insertion of regular economic activity that does not represent the dominant discourse of enterprise and capitalist economy, but makes this discourse simply *present* as a spatial element in the park. The cart need not therefore be conceived as antiheterotopian, but it does interrupt the heterotopian suspension of the everyday. In other words, the presence of the ice cream cart punctures the “otherworldliness” of the High Line; it just means business as usual.

Last, the park and the balloon differ in how their status as “other” spaces are constituted. Despite its pleasant colors, the balloon is mainly characterized by refusal and negation: It is amorphous, bears no signs, has no purpose, allows no interpretation, and thereby engenders mislocation. It is constructed to consist chiefly of the *absence* of the imposition of a dominant discourse on space and its users; its otherness is constituted negatively, by *not being the same* as the dominant space. In contrast, the High Line is positively laden with elements that mark the otherworldliness that it seeks to foreground. For example, signs all over the railings indicate the nearest exit and what street you are suspended over—simultaneously indicating the separation from the city below and anchoring the park to it. Likewise, highly visible signifying strategies establish the park as a heterochronism. In effect, the signs and design elements emphasize the *constructed* nature of this other world. Therefore, since it is by definition incommensurable with the grid, the balloon is a *radically* other space, whereas the High Line can only suspend the dominant spatiality and discourses of the city and displace them with an alternative configuration.

Overall, then, the comparison between park and balloon shows that one should look for the difference that underlies heterotopia in the combination of spatial configurations and discursive structures. In actual spaces, elements can be incongruous or even contradictory—for example, the 10th Avenue Square and the ice cream cart—indicating that difference, which in theory may be absolute, is more likely to be relative in reality. Simply put, actual spaces are complex, if not messy, and unable to achieve the degree of conceptual rigor that “The Balloon” can. Hence, only little can be gained by saying that a space *is* (or isn’t) a heterotopia; the concept becomes more productive when looking at how a space (structurally and spatially) *works* as a heterotopia. Rather than use the term to simplify and reduce actual spaces, heterotopias should be taken as heterogeneous pluralities with elements that can be diverse and different in nature—and Foucault’s concept serves to analyze which of those engender otherness, and how.

This approach also affects heterotopia’s potential for critique. The balloon’s (negatively) *being other* constitutes its social criticism of the rigidity of the city below; otherness and critique are combined in the same gesture of noncooperation. The park’s otherness is constructed through devices that suspend the dominant spatiality and discourses of the city, and substitutes a heterochronism. Yet it does not completely or radically depart from the metropolis below—with the ice cream cart as an emblem—so although it is markedly different, it is not as markedly critical. The greater complexity of the park illustrates that one cannot use the concept of heterotopia to automatically imply critique and resistance or to evaluate those as positive.<sup>9</sup> And although critique may be part of the “heterotopology” that Foucault proposes, this does not imply that all heterotopias are critical, or that noncritical spaces cannot be heterotopian.<sup>10</sup> Even Foucault, after all, covers a range of spaces with varying critical potential. Consequently, using heterotopia exclusively for critique and resistance veers away from an “academically critical” mobilization of the concept.

In conclusion, this comparative reading aims to show how the concept can be reconsidered and be put to work. Whereas “The Balloon” is a perfect literary instance of heterotopia, also making spatial otherness the vehicle of critique, the elevated space of the High Line cannot perfectly suspend the discourses and spatiality of the city. Simply put, it cannot be separated from certain practicalities such as ice cream vendors—let alone investment, donations, municipal approval and cooperation, and it will also affect the prices of the surrounding real estate. The alternative offered by the park remains tied to the dominant surroundings, showing the limits to the suspension of the everyday that heterotopia can achieve. Yet in spite of the differences between the park and balloon, it would miss the point to attempt to therefore reserve the usage of Foucault’s term for spaces with the (impossible) degree of conceptual rigor that the balloon has. Instead, precisely because it is conceptually perfect, one should see the balloon in the terms in which the story presents it: as a *rough* draft—which shows how to consider spaces and discourses in conjunction and in their specific configuration, so that Foucault’s concept can be used for understanding real spaces such as the High Line.

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### Notes

1. The ambiguity caused by the lack of elaboration in Foucault is compounded, as Johnson (2006) notes, by his inconsistent terminology regarding space (particularly in his usage of *espace*, *lieu*, and *emplacement*),

a difficulty that is not entirely resolved in any of the English translations. The same difficulty is acknowledged in Dehaene and De Cauter (2008a), who provide a new translation that takes these issues on board. This edition of Foucault's text is used here throughout.

2. Some examples of usages of the term include Guarrasi (2001) on landscape and cartography, Hetherington (1997) on modernity, Burdett (2000) on fascist Italy, Lou (2007) on shop signs in Chinatown in Washington, D.C., McCoy Owens (2002) on a Buddhist site in Nepal, and Jacobs (2004) on Internet pornography.
3. As Couturier and Durand (1982) point out, Barthele "gives the impression that reality has lost its power to force words upon him and his characters, that language is at last free from it and constitutes a private world where everything is possible at any moment" (p. 22). Or as Barthele (1997) commented on his own practice and conviction, "what we are looking for is the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken" (p. 15).
4. For example, Ritter and Knaller-Vlay (1998), Sohn (2008), and Boyer (2008) indeed do this, with a more nuanced usage of the term as a result.
5. Cf. Bonazzi (2002) for a discussion of heterotopia in geography, particularly in Soja.
6. Cf. Cenzatti (2008) for an extended discussion of heterotopias of deviation, in the context of post-Fordism, Lefebvre, and public spaces.
7. For example, Kern (2008) on malls, McNamee (2000) on the spaces of childhood, and Low (2008) on gated communities.
8. However, the authors add that "[t]his observation should not lead to the naive conclusion that heterotopia has no economic basis" (De Cauter and Dehaene, 2008, p. 98). Yet they seek the economic in the heterotopia in what they term "club space," "the enjoyment of which is shared within a group or club" (p. 99), which works according to an economic dynamic in the sense that the group associated with the particular club (be it a chess club, fraternity, or gated community) needs to be regulated. Hence, their emphasis on the antieconomic in the common usage (a system of exchange and profit) still stands.
9. In light of her discussion of the medical roots of Foucault's term, Heidi Sohn (2008) reaches a similar conclusion in saying that

treating all spaces and human groups that deviate from the established order as potentially subversive, challenging and resistant formations, and hence reading into them all sorts of positive, utopian transformative powers endowed by their liminality, is to miss an essential point of Foucault's heterotopia: as an ambivalent formulation meant to destabilize discourse and language, as a rather obscure conception endowed with negativity, defying clarity, logic and order. (p. 48)

10. Similarly, in their overview of heterotopia in the context of architecture, Ritter and Knaller-Vlay (1998) positively comment on the impossibility to delimit heterotopia, by noting that in Foucault's wide-ranging list of examples of heterotopias in "Of Other Spaces," "he creates a systematic inconsistency with which he protects the list from being completed. The list of heterotopias suggests an open-ended series that can be continued" (p. 16).

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