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THE PLAY OF THE POSSIBLE AND THE REAL IN AESTHETIC HETEROTOPIA

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Abstract:

This paper is focused on clarifying the concept and the phenomenon of aesthetic heterotopia. The paper takes as its starting point the cultural phenomenon of heterotopia itself and then reveals its aesthetical component in order to find the "topos" of aesthetic heterotopia in contemporary culture.

Thus, the main task of the paper will be exploring the boundaries and the relations between possibility and reality in aesthetic heterotopia through W. T. Anderson's central figure of the postmodern ironist as the only type of worldview with future. In this context, some important issues of contemporary philosophical aesthetics will be discussed, such as: what is the mechanism of creating new aesthetic heterotopias, and what is it based on? Why can the field of classical aesthetics not cover such a cultural phenomenon? Why can non-classical aesthetics also be called process aesthetics, and what do aesthetic heterotopias and the field of process philosophy have in common?

And last but not least: what moral attitudes do plenty of aesthetic heterotopias encourage?

Key words: heterotopia, aesthetic heterotopia, possibility and reality, process aesthetics, constructivism.

"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.'" (Johnson 2012:11, Foucault 2006:11)

Contemporary postmodern culture is in a state of a flux in the sense that it is constituted by the periphery, by the relations between everything, by becoming and loss, beginnings and endings, by the life hidden in the spaces between situations and the relations of people, words, and things.

1. Marcuse's double-function of utopia: Utopia as a constructivist tool

In this context, the current paper will begin with an ending—*The End of Utopia*. This is the title of a lecture delivered by Herbert Marcuse at the Free University of West Berlin in July 1967 on the topics of his book *Eros and Civilization*:

"Today any form of the concrete world, of human life, any transformation of the technical and natural environment is a possibility, and the locus of this possibility is historical. *Today we have the capacity to turn the world into hell, and we are well on the way to doing so. We also have the capacity to turn it into the opposite of hell.* This would mean the *end of utopia*, that is, the refutation of those ideas and theories that use the concept of utopia to denounce certain socio-historical possibilities. It can also be understood as the 'end of history' in the very precise sense that the new possibilities for a human society and its environment can no longer be thought of as continuations of the old, nor even as existing in the same historical continuum with them" (Marcuse 2005; all emphases added).

It is important here that Marcuse distinguishes between two different types of utopia. The first one reveals itself "when a project for social change con-

tradicts real laws of nature," when its intentions are aimed "beyond history" and biology (Marcuse 2005). The second one—which is also a central subject of Marcuse's book—is based on the fact that "*all the material and intellectual forces which could be put to work for the realization of a free society are at hand* [emphasis added]. That they are not used for that purpose is to be attributed to the total mobilization of existing society against its own potential for liberation. But this situation in no way makes the idea of radical transformation itself a utopia" in the first sense (Marcuse 2005).

The very possibility of employing all these mentioned forces in the task social liberation lies, according to Marcuse, in the aesthetic-erotic dimension.

"Here the notion 'aesthetic' is taken in its original sense, namely as *the form of sensitivity of the senses and as the form of the concrete world of human life.* Taken in this way, the notion projects the *convergence of technology and art* and the *convergence of work and play*. It is no accident that the work of Fourier is becoming topical … speaking of a possible society in which work becomes play, a society in which even socially necessary labor can be organized in harmony with the liberated, genuine needs of men" (Marcuse 2005; all emphases added).

Marcuse (2005) emphasizes that "the so-called utopian possibilities are not at all utopian but rather the determinate socio-historical negation of what exists," and they have real potential to restart the socio-political system in a new, non-restrictive way. Marcuse's idea of *the aesthetic dimension as disruptive of the existing social and cultural order* is very important for the further conceptualization of the cultural phenomenon of aesthetic heterotopias.

2. Heterotopia as a cultural phenomenon

The concept of heterotopia itself comes from Michel Foucault, appearing for the first time in his book *The Order of Things* (1970) in a reflection upon Jorge Luis Borges' *Book of Imaginary Beings* (2005). Aware that all the impossible classifications and juxtapositions of different imaginary animals could exist only in the space of language, Foucault compares that space with the function of utopias, and gives Borges' invention the name of "heterotopia"—a different, alternative, or other place. (It is worth noting that heterotopia is also a medical term referring to a particular tissue that develops at an unusual location, i.e., a dislocation—see Johnson 2012: 1.) In Foucault's study of *The Order of Things*, heterotopias are disquieting and undermine language, "they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences" (Foucault 1970: xviii). In short, *this loosening of words and things is what raises questions for Foucault about the establishment of culture and the basic codes that govern perception, language, and practice* (see Johnson 2012: 2). Therefore, there is a place for heterotopias in every place and every time that something appears as a question or gap in the thinkable universe.

Another important text of Foucault on heterotopias is *Of Other Spaces*—a lecture delivered in Paris in March 1967, and first published in 1984. When a real existing site—or a *social system*, because sites in the human world as a rule represent social and cultural compositions—gets exhausted of its potential for creating new possibilities, alternative spaces appear to compensate for its imperfection or lack in order to "mend" it in one way or another. Foucault is the first to realize the double function of heterotopias as both representing and at the same time inverting real spaces, but unlike utopias that aim to invert the real world/system as a totality, heterotopias are local parts of the real world. This is why they can also be called "utopias in practice," because they usually cover the margins of social and cultural space (both literally and figuratively), allowing them to be excellent experimental fields for imposing new orderings and possibilities. A good example of such alternative space given by Foucault is the space reflected in a mirror: it may seem locked and restricted behind the mirror's surface, but at the same time—as if it is just waiting for a new Alice to step through the looking glass—it could be full of surprises.

Nowadays, as the researcher of cultural heterotopias Peter Johnson notes, the focus is not on textual sites, but *rather cultural and social sites*. In a 1970 radio talk in *France Culture* on utopia and literature, Foucault pays attention to the way that *children's inventive play produces a different space that at the same time mirrors what is around them*; just in the same manner, *heterotopias reflect and contest simultaneously* (Johnson 2012: 2) what is around. These "counter-spaces" that can be found in every culture and civilization cover a significant part of Foucault's further studies,[1] as he observes that

[1] Foucault's "heterotopology" explores the cultural spaces of sanctuaries, rites of passage, cemeteries, brothels, prisons, asylums, holiday villages, fairs, museums, libraries, hospitals, rest homes, old people's homes, military schools, honeymoon trips, cinemas, theatres, gardens, Persian carpets, and so on, as well as their different func-

modern heterotopias function as deviations rather than as active stages in life. For example, Hetherington calls heterotopias the "badlands of modernity," marked as totally "Other" spaces (Hetherington 1997: viii), while Foucault had only emphasized their difference, not radical Otherness. Jorge Zuzulich notes that a heterotopia is actually "a utopia having a place … governed by different rules" and giving "different experience" (Zuzulich 2014).

The French world "espace" indeed has a wider meaning than "space," referring to many areas designated for specific purposes or activities. Augé (1995) argues that "space" is more abstract than "place," because it includes not only an *area or a distance, but also a temporal period—any form of location, whether it is real or not*. (Besides, "emplacement" is preferred by Foucault since it combines the meanings of "space" and "place"). Since contemporary culture is preoccupied with space and horizontal structure in opposition to the dominant 19th century cultural concepts of time, explicit hierarchy, and progressive history, and since the center of the culture of late modernity could be considered to be almost any given peripheral aspect, *the rethinking of the cultural world as a constellation of heterotopias, social roles, and "language games," and as the convergence of the internal and the external, virtual and material, possible and real, is more than necessary.*

As far as holidays, honeymoon trips, festivals, and fairs are considered to be alternative, different cultural phenomena that interrupt conventional daily life and provide it with both beginnings and endings, they have to be classified as "heterochronias" that embrace "temporal discontinuities" (Foucault 1984). (E.g., museums collect all time into one space, and the space of the cemetery presents an absolute rupture of familiar time. In literature, the American writer Phillip K. Dick has written heterochronias into his novels.)

Bachelard uses a broader meaning of space that includes the special metaphors of the imagination: the space of the inside. On the contrary, Foucault

> "wishes … to turn Bachelard inside out … *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.* … 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 distinguished 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)" (Johnson 2012; all emphases added)
>
> —namely, utopias and heterotopias.

Thus, the *cultural phenomenon of heterotopia, but also of heterochronia, marks a rupture, a break, inversion, discontinuity, suspension, or sublimation of its environment, either spatial or temporal.* Peter Johnson gives a useful definition of the relationship between utopia and heterotopia (Johnson 2012a): if utopian models are holistic, imaginary, normative, prescriptive, and present/future-orientated, then heterotopias reflect the results of utopian models and are analyzed in terms that are fragmentary, concrete, value-free, descriptive, and present/past-orientated. *It is symptomatic of contemporary culture that in the last fifty years—the time of the so called "postmodern shift"—the concept of "heterotopia" has begun to be used more often than the concept of "utopia."* The collapse of the totality gives rise to the particular, moral values are replaced by aesthetic ones, the disproved moral charge of words liberates the words-as-metaphors, principles have been transformed through an openness to the new, the will to knowledge leads to infinite experimentation; there is no more Progress, there is no more Truth—there is either a variety of truths or no such thing as truth; there is no Being, but only Becoming; the destruction of normativity, authority, centralization, and governance from the outside allows for decentralization, marginality, and the actualization of people's internal directions. And finally, since there is no ultimate Utopia, people have begun living in a variety of heterotopias. Peter Zima discusses this exact trend in his book *Moderne—Postmoderne* when he says that "heterotopia is an aesthetic diversity: a radical plurality amongst a society which acknowledges not one but countless beauties, a society composed by numerous aesthetic communities competing with each other" (Zima 1997: 207-208).

3. Aesthetic heterotopia in contemporary philosophy and aesthetics

While Zima examines the cultural phenomenon of heterotopia strictly in an aesthetic context,

tions and resemblances, and the rules of entering and leaving them.

Jacques Rancière has explicitly conceptualized aesthetic heterotopia in a paper with the same title. According to Rancière, it is "a specific form of relation between sense and sense" (Rancière 2010: 15), i.e. between sensible data and making sense of them. More exactly, aesthetic heterotopia has the potential to produce "the distribution of the sensory" (Rancière 2010), that is, "to open a new possibility so that bodies can construct a different experience which can be sensed, at the point when that 'other space' bursts into the real world" (Zuzulich 2014). T*he overlap of aesthetic heterotopia and process philosophy here is:* the "topos" of aesthetic heterotopia in contemporary culture is *the will* for utopia, for creating different rules in real cultural and social spaces. Two excellent examples are presented by Michel Serres' *Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (2009) and Richard Shusterman's aesthetics in action or *somaesthetics* (Shusterman 2012), in which he defends the idea that reality is constituted solely by the body, with no stereotypes, prejudices, or names; in such a reality every single sensation reveals a new sensible heterotopia to us.

The very possibility of thinking about (aesthetic) heterotopias lies in non-classical philosophy and aesthetics, especially in the philosophy and aesthetics of the particular, which is a marginal concept in classical philosophical-aesthetic thought (appearing in Goethe, Hegel, and Lukach). If the beautiful as a total harmony of the internal and the external and of value and expression is the central concept in classical aesthetics, then the central subjects of non-classical and also negative aesthetics are the places and moments of the occurrence and loss of the beautiful, the points of dissonance of the internal and the external, of value and expression. Still, all these crisis moments (shifts, boundary situations, etc.) are what make the streams of possibility enter the real world. The development of culture (whether progress or regress) always happens due to the merger of people's imaginations—the world of possibilities—with the existing state of affairs. What is distinctive of heterotopias is their relation with the particular; in Kant's scheme of the free play of imagination and understanding, the given particular subsumes the universal and in turn establishes a totality, whether or not it is a subjective one. Just in the same manner, (aesthetic) heterotopia as an other, different, particular space is what reflects and subsumes the usual surrounding cultural and social space and sets its own rules, whether or not they are subjective ones.

4. The 'topos' of aesthetic heterotopias in contemporary culture: between constructivism and its moral bearings

In his essay *Four Different Ways to Be Absolutely Right*, the American philosopher and writer W. T. Anderson maps postmodern Western society and mind onto four distinguishable worldviews which form distinct cultures within society, each with its own language of public discourse and its own epistemology (Anderson 1995). Anderson argues that only the postmodern-ironist worldview[2]—which sees truth as socially constructed—is future-oriented, because it does not rely on the values and truths of either the modern or premodern age. More exactly, the essay distinguishes three types of postmodern ironists: constructivists, players, and nihilists, as all of them "share a readiness to see reality as a social construction" (Anderson 1995: 112). *Constructivists* resemble Abraham Maslow's "self-actualizing" subjects—outwardly conventional, but curious to expand the limits of the so-called common truth and world. *Postmodern players* compose a much larger group; they are the people

> "who manage to surf along fairly satisfactorily on the currents of cultural change without taking much interest in abstract ideas or any self-conscious 'postmodernism' … their irony is more an attitude or sensibility than an intellectual position. They browse among cultural forms, play mix-and-match with all the pieces of our various heritage. They invent new religious rituals, combine folk music with hard rock, dabble in nostalgia for the 1950s or 1960s. They explore virtual reality, regard clothing as costume, and feel right at home in theme parks." (Anderson 1995: 112)

In general, for the postmodern ironist there is no "true self," as this concept makes no sense apart from its context, whether it is a social role (constructivists) or a more dynamic "lifestyle" (players); moreover, social roles are created by people, and sometimes need to be re-created or discarded. It is

[2] The other three types are: *the scientific-rational* worldview, in which truth is "found" through methodical, disciplined inquiry; *the social-traditional* worldview, in which truth is found in the heritage of Western civilization (these first two both draw their values from the modern age); *the neo-romantic* worldview, in which truth is found either through attaining harmony with nature or through spiritual exploration of the inner self, a worldview which draws its values from the premodern age.

good to remind ourselves that irony is one of the bounding aesthetic categories, presenting a gap between internal and external: internal value exceeds any external expression of it, while at the same time the internal opposes the external—it is just the same potentiality hidden in heterotopias.

Anderson notes that each of us living in postmodern society is more or less multilingual and must have some access to each of the four worldviews; still, for him "the inner voice of the postmodern ironist is becoming a part of everybody's psychological makeup … . If we learn to hear that voice in a constructive (and constructivist) way, it becomes a guide to living in today's multi-world view" (Anderson 1995: 116). What must be emphasized here is Anderson's central figure of the postmodern ironist, who is *the living heterotopian of today* in his manner of mixing and matching the rules and the specific characters of different spaces and ages. Moreover, in the perspective of heterotopias or alternative spaces and modes, Anderson's idea of the postmodern ironist as a constructivist and a player is just the reverse of Baudrillard's conception of simulacra—as far as the former demonstrates the constructivist way of using and playing with reflections and echoes of the preceding culture in order to develop ourselves, while the latter emphasizes our exhaustion in the well of reflection, literally—the "other" side of infinite cultural regress.

What has created this gap between the postmodern ironist's social roles and lifestyles on the one hand, and the regime of simulacra on the other? Most likely, it has been created through the way in which individuals use the surrounding time and space.

Ernst Bloch's critical theory of utopia *sees utopia as a process rather than a destination* (see Howells 2014). As the British researcher Richard Howells notes in his article "Aesthetics of Utopia," Bloch argues that we need to go beyond creation theory to *a critical theory of creativity*. "Utopia is not something that we can delegate either to nature or to the supernatural because, as Bloch declares in *The Spirit of Utopia*, *'Life has been put into our hands'* [emphasis added]" (Howells 2014). This primary rule agrees with Marcuse's observation that we are exploiting and playing with our possible worlds every single day.

Emile Michel Cioran explains the will utopia firstly by the process of secularization (people living only to find their place in the Christian paradise beyond actually *have had* their utopia; see Cioran 1987), and secondly by the nostalgia caused by the loss of Christian existence itself. If nostalgia in its metaphysical sense is based on the very impossibility of it coinciding with any moment of time, and if this metaphysical nostalgia finds its solace in the most distant past, where its loss can be dissolved, then the other type of nostalgia that has emerged after the secularization is future-oriented, totally distorted by the initial paradise. This orientation of modern utopias towards the future makes heterochronias of them as well, since their pawn is "a *totally other* time inside time" (Cioran 1987).

There is another important detail of modern utopias; as Cioran observes,

> "their characters are automatons, fictions or symbols: none is real, none exceeds its puppet status, an idea lost in a universe without reference points. Even the children become unrecognizable … they are so pure that they are utterly unaware of the temptation to steal, to 'pick an apple off a tree'…" (Cioran 2015).

In this context, heterotopias take another step after the end of utopia, since they are real alternative spaces and modes of real individuals who have already stolen an apple from Eden; contemporary aesthetic heterotopias put the utopian fragments of an order into action and steal forbidden parts from the unthinkable (Ranciere, Beckette) in an attempt to expand our thinkable selves. Cioran asks: is it easier to construct a utopia than an apocalypse? The persistent multiplication of aesthetic heterotopias nowadays shows that we are at least trying to make it easier.

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