

INSTAGRAM: A SPACE OF ALTERNATE ORDERING?

Williams, Laura

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ABSTRACT

As worldly space increasingly coincides with online spaces, it is important to consider the radical potential of these new spaces that are both separate from the space of the physical world, but also deeply related to it. This article uses radical French thinker Michel Foucault's theory of Heterotopia, and Kevin Hetherington's later adaptation, to investigate the radical potential of the social-media platform, Instagram. First outlining how Instagram is inherently heterotopic and extrapolating what this means, the article progresses to introduce real-life examples in which Instagram's heterotopic spatiality has had both detrimental and beneficial effects on the space of our physical world. Taking examples from the #blacklivesmatter movement and gender-rights campaigns, such as #metoo, #timesup, and #wontbeerased, as well as the disastrous Fyre Festival in 2017, this article draws reader attention to Instagram's potential as a heterotopic space that can change the way humans exist in the spaces they physically inhabit. It asks how by identifying Instagram as a space of alternate ordering engulfed with radical potential, users should then approach it as a site of resistance and transgression, and thus, begets wider questions about the radical potential of online spaces as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, sociological spatial theories investigate the way that physical locations and local proximities alter the way in which human beings interact, arguing that the space in which human beings exist plays an important role in enforcing power structures and systems of dominance. However, the increasing popularity of the internet (in particular social media, and specifically Instagram) has profoundly challenged the concept of space as a local, physical proximity by opening up a new, different space; one that is still very much part of human reality, whilst not being a physical space of human existence. In response to this, this article explores the online space of Instagram alongside Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopic spaces (and theorist Kevin Hetherington's later adaptation) in order to expose it as a space of 'alternate ordering' (Hetherington, 1997: viiii). The article investigates the radical potential of the online social media platform, Instagram, as a heterotopic space, one that alters the way that humans behave and interact in traditional, lived-in space. Additionally, it demonstrates how this space can be used to reintroduce new systems of dominance and power that enforce capitalism, as well as other detrimental systems of ordering, like the patriarchy. The article begins by first: exploring, and explaining Foucault's theory of heterotopias, as well as Hetherington's adaptation that applies Foucault's work to spaces of eighteenth-century modernity; it then applies Foucault's six defining principles for heterotopic spaces to the Instagram platform, in order to outline how Instagram as a space is inherently heterotopic. Finally, it investigates online-borne social media movements to demonstrate how Instagram's heterotopic qualities make it both a potentially radical space, and also a space that can perpetuate detrimental, existing power structures.

HETEROTOPIA AND SITES OF ALTERNATE ORDERING: FOUCAULT AND HETHERINGTON

The spatial theory of heterotopia was conceptualised by the radical French thinker and philosopher Michel Foucault in 1984. Foucault's theory simply outlines heterotopias as 'a space that is other' (Foucault, 1986: 27), or different, from normal

spaces. Heterotopic spaces are, in Foucault's description, 'real [physical] places' that both 'represent, contest, and invert' all other real spaces in society, 'yet are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about' (Foucault, 1986: 24). Thus, heterotopias are a real space, different from the traditional, physical space that surround them, that reflect, or have relation to all other sites in a society. Therefore, the 'otherness' of these spaces comes from the contrast between their similarity to the real world and their difference from normal, everyday spaces. Having conceptualised the theory of heterotopia in his revolutionary essay, 'Of Other Spaces', Foucault ceased to write on the concept, halting the progression of his own line of thinking; however, his ideas have since been developed and adapted by a number of other thinkers and philosophers who discuss the radical and empowering potential of space and place.

One of these thinkers is sociologist and cultural geographer, Kevin Hetherington, who takes Foucault's theory of the 'other space' and applies it to important spaces in the modern-era of nineteenth-century Europe. He adopts Foucault's original term to define heterotopias as 'spaces of alternate ordering' (Hetherington, 1997: viiii), arguing that heterotopic spaces are where new modes of social ordering (the way in which the various components of society are structured to uphold the status quo) were found; and it is from these new spaces that the radical social and economic changes that characterise the modern era began. For Hetherington, 'modernity [and the radical changes that characterise it] is defined by the spatial play between freedom and control' (Hetherington, 1997: 18), and 'is found most clearly in spaces of alternate ordering, heterotopia' (Hetherington, 1997: 4). In line with Hetherington's assessment that nineteenth century heterotopias 'played a significant role in the emergence of modern society' (Hetherington, 1997: 17), I argue that we are once again in a developing period of alternate ordering, brought about by the introduction of online spaces provided by the internet. In the past fifteen years, Western society has once again opened up a new world of 'uncertain zones that challenge our sense of security and perceptions of space as something ordered and fixed' (Hetherington, 1997:

14). These are the spaces we have created online. Tom Boellstorff argues that the 'foundational feature of virtual worlds is that they are places, [...] constructed beyond the terms of online global networks in terms of space, landscape and localities' (Boellstorff, 2011: 217). Therefore, the online spaces that we create, are, like Foucault's heterotopia, a real space, in which humans live and interact. In these spaces, we are drawn 'out of ourselves [...] the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occur' (Foucault, 1986: 23). Online spaces, or cyberspaces, are, like heterotopia, 'absolutely real', whilst also being 'outside of all places' (Foucault, 1986: 24); thus, as spaces of alternate ordering, they have the potential for revolutionising the exercise of power, freedom, and control.

By approaching the virtual online platform, Instagram, as a space, its users become a population of people. As a virtual space, Instagram has one of the largest populations on earth. At present, one-billion people per month engage with this social-media platform (Clarke, 2019), with these figures continuing to rise. Instagram, like all other cyberspaces is both 'absolutely real', whilst also being 'outside' traditional human space. It, therefore, much like Hetherington's 'badlands of modernity', becomes a site of alternate ordering; a site in which capitalism, politics and socialism interconnect to create new orders, new means of control, and new power structures, whilst also perpetuating the social ordering of a capitalist society.

TICKING THE BOXES: TO WHAT EXTENT IS INSTAGRAM A HETEROTOPIA?

It is not enough to simply state that Instagram is heterotopic; we must also evaluate the ways in which Instagram conforms to and resists the foundational principles of heterotopias. Foucault's original essay is structured around the six principles that he argues must be met for a heterotopic space to be achieved. Foucault's first principle states that 'there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias' (Foucault, 1986: 23). This is the only principle that Instagram as a platform fails to meet in totality since there are still cultures and societies who have not yet engaged with the internet, and thus, have not entered into the real, but different spaces of social media held within the internet's spatiality. With the exception of this small discrepancy, Instagram as a platform is inescapably heterotopic. Cyberspace in general is largely heterotopic, as a space that requires an entering and exit system (principle five), as well as being increasingly relevant to the surrounding space in which humans physically interact (principle six). However, when we investigate Instagram through Foucault's six principles, its complex engagement with its own spatiality becomes apparent as it aligns itself with, and in some instances further develops Foucault's original six principles, to outline itself as an 'other' space of 'alternate ordering', a contemporary heterotopia.

With regards to the second principle - 'that a society, as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion' (Foucault 1986: 23) - Instagram adheres, as the current culmination of the development and progression of online social-media platforms. Instagram - the most relevant and fastest growing social media platform of 2019 - is the culmination of the development of social-media from its humble beginnings in the early 2000's; the era of MSN and Myspace, as a space to talk to friends. Instagram marks the current online social space as both a space where real-world friends interact, but also a space in which online friends - friends who you only ever meet in online spaces and who it would be impossible to meet otherwise - interact. As a result,

Instagram as a social media platform has also become a playground for capitalism, through the wide reach of sponsored ads, and the culture and business of social Influencers. To demonstrate his second principle, Foucault discusses the 'other city' (Foucault, 1986: 24) of the cemetery, explaining how the cemetery's role changed between the sacrilegious eighteenth century and Foucault's more contemporary 1980. Unlike Foucault's 'other city', the city of the dead, Instagram as the 'other city' is a spatial appendage for those who use it. Instagram is the largest city in the world, with over one-billion monthly visitors and 500-million daily inhabitants (Clarke, 2019), it is a space where otherwise impossible interactions can occur, and therefore, can be seen as a very real, unreal space. Furthermore, when aligning Foucault's comparison between the cemetery with the heterotopia of Instagram, photographic theorist Susan Sontag's argument, that 'to photograph someone is a sublimated murder' (Sontag, 1973: 10), is useful to consider. Sontag's statement argues that photography of a human subject is a socially acceptable equivalent to murder, and therefore, Instagram as a photo-sharing platform becomes more closely aligned with Foucault's 'other city' of the cemetery. Whilst Foucault's 'other city' of the cemetery is a place to celebrate the 'cult of the dead', Instagram, as a contemporary modern city can be seen as a site that celebrates millions of sublimated murders. Instagram, when investigated alongside photographic theories, therefore becomes the 'other city' for our contemporary society.

Similarly, it is Instagram's primary function as a photograph sharing platform that closely aligns it as a space with Foucault's third principle. As both a photo and video sharing network accessed through a two-dimensional screen, Instagram meets the third principle of Foucault's theory by juxtaposing 'in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' (Foucault, 1986: 24). Furthermore, when scrolling through an Instagram feed, the user journeys through different spaces and sees through a variety of gazes, 'a whole series of places that are foreign to one another' (Foucault, 1986: 25). Moreover, the location search feature, which shows only images from one specific place, allows the reader to encounter one singular space through a variety of different gazes and views. Therefore, Instagram as a contemporary heterotopia expands upon Foucault's original ideas by not only juxtaposing 'in a single place several spaces [...] that are in themselves incompatible' (Foucault, 1986: 24), but also contrasting in one single space, several incompatible gazes.

Foucault's fourth principle posits that in heterotopic spaces 'men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time' (Foucault, 1986: 26), which Foucault defines as a 'heterochrony'. Instagram users regularly complain of the way in which the app absorbs their time. Indeed, the verb to 'scroll' - to work through an Instagram feed - is now synonymous with wasting time. When scrolling, the user works through images of equal distance at a largely similar pace; this positions the 'scroller' within a new time-frame, causing them to break with traditional time as they are sucked into this new, absorbing method of time-telling. Additionally, psychological studies have now proven that the excessive use of Instagram also warps user perception of time in the real-world, even when not

actively engaging with the online space itself¹. Furthermore, Instagram accumulates fragmented segments of personal information and images to create a digital log of a person's past, which is permanently available in the present. This links to Foucault's example of the museum in his original essay demonstrating that heterotopias 'indefinitely accumulate time' (Foucault, 1986: 26). The Instagram 'story' feature further exposes Instagram as a heterochrony, as images and video footage from the past twenty-four hours sit alongside, and juxtapose images from the past shown on an account's profile grid. Once again, Instagram becomes a contemporary heterotopia that both aligns with Foucault's principles, but also expands upon his original examples.

The final principle that heterotopias relate to all the remaining, normal spaces (Foucault 1986) is the principle employed by Hetherington to argue that modernity's sites of 'alternate ordering', or heterotopia, ultimately altered the remaining space of modern society. Foucault discusses the sanctification of space, and how we allocate different spaces for oppositional roles. These are, Foucault argues, 'oppositions that we regard as simple givens: for example, between private space and public space, between family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure and the space of work' (Foucault, 1986: 23). Foucault argues that we need to deconstruct these oppositions in order to stop hierarchising spaces, and thus, challenge the hierarchisation of society. These ideas were the focus for Rymarzuk and Derksen's (2014) article that outlines Facebook as heterotopic². However, whilst their article picks up on the way that social media forces a merge between spaces that have traditionally stood in opposition to each other, they fail to observe how these spaces achieve precisely what Foucault's essay argues for: the desanctification of space. Instagram, and social media as a whole, is therefore heterotopic by adhering to Foucault's principles, but also heterotopic in Hetherington's analysis of Foucault's theory, by offering up a 'site of alternate ordering' (Hetherington, 1997: viiii). It is a space that radically alters the way we interact in traditional space, and therefore alters the way people behave and act in the real, physical space that it exists both within and outwith. It therefore undeniably, has 'a function in relation to all spaces that remain' (Foucault, 1986: 26).

INSTAGRAM THE HETEROTOPIA: REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES AND WHAT THEY MEAN

Hetherington (1997) argues that the Palais Royale in Paris was both a site from which the French revolution sprung, but also a site in which capitalism was able to develop and play-out, due to its heterotopic qualities as a space of alternate ordering. It was, therefore, a site of revolution, yet also a space in which traditional power structures, control, and surveillance methods, continue to exist. Emma Bonanno argues the same of Instagram; using Judith Butler's argument for gender

performativity alongside Foucault's theory of the inverse panopticon – a surveillance theory that suggests society is constantly surveying itself – Bonanno contests that Instagram and social media in general, gives the user the impression of 'false agency' (Bonanno, 2014: 4). She therefore suggests that Instagram appears to be a place where one can make free choices and act independently, when in fact, it is a place where we survey each other, and, in so doing celebrate normative gender and other social manners and mannerisms: men should be physically strong and dominant, women should be conventionally attractive and domestic, and most importantly, that financial wealth – and everything that symbolises this – is paramount for happiness.

Bonanno's argument, which combines theories of gender with theories of surveillance and power to argue that platforms like Instagram are just new spaces in which traditional power structures are perpetuated, is of relevance when we consider the way in which Instagram as a space has altered the way gender is approached in the remaining space of our lived reality. Renowned hashtags #metoo, #timesup, and the pro-trans, and non-binary gender rights hashtag #wontbeeraised, that started as a response to the Trump administration's decision to erase the gender fluidity laws introduced during the Obama era of American politics, have all been used to create online spaces. In essence, these hashtags create a space - like a meeting house in the nineteenth century - in which members of a community, or those with the same ideological views can meet and share in their ideological similarity, despite a physical meeting being impossible. For example, in October 2018, the #wontbeeraised hashtag physically united several-hundred New Yorkers together to protest against the Trump administration's new laws, whilst thousands of others demonstrated their support by posting selfies on Instagram using #wontbeeraised to unite themselves as part of the movement³. This movement utilised Instagram's heterotopic qualities to create a potentially radical moment in the real world, whilst uniting those who couldn't be physically present to join through the creation of a space in the alternate ordering of Instagram.

Similarly, the hashtag #metoo, which addresses sexual harassment and assault, has branched out of its Hollywood origins as a response to the Harvey Weinstein scandal, with the hashtag going viral in 2017. Through the creation of an online space, women felt safe to confess experiences that they felt unable to disclose in traditional public spaces. This advocacy hashtag provided a space that united women with similar experiences online, and was the most popular on Instagram in 2018, with over 1.5 million uses (Ians, 2018). The creation of a community of women in this online 'other space' was then used to bring women together in worldwide public marches in 2017, demonstrating yet another example of online unity through the 'real' but 'outside' space of Instagram. This movement later developed into the celebrity-led development of #timesup,

¹ For study particulars, see: Turel, O., Brevers, D., and Bechara, A., (2018) Time distortion when users at-risk for social media addiction engage in non-social media tasks. *Journal Of Psychiatric Research*, 97: 84-88. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0022395617308750>

² For article, see Rymarzuk, R., and Derksen, M., (2014) Different spaces: Exploring Facebook as heterotopia. *First Monday*, 19(6). Available at: <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/5006/4091>

³ For further reference, see: Gayle, D., 22. 10. 2018. #wontbeeraised: Reports of US trans policy shift sparks protest. *The Guardian Online*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/22/wontbeeraised-reports-us-trans-policy-shift-spark-protests>

which once again, united women to speak out about gender inequality in the workplace. As a result of these two hashtags ‘every company and organisation is going to have to change’ (Feldt, 2018). The creation of an online space through these two hashtags has started to create changes in the physical world; companies are beginning to investigate their parity in gender pay-gaps, objectification of women in the workplace, and discrimination in hiring processes, and thus, the alternate ordering of the online space of Instagram has started to alter the ordering of the real, physical world.

Similarly, the three women who began the #blacklivesmatter movement in 2013 literally describe the movement as a ‘space for people to tell their stories, a space for people to collaborate together’ (ELLE 2019). These women identify all ‘social media platforms’ as a catalytic space for the start of the movement and integral for its progression. However, they also note the importance of the work that happens in these online spaces having an effect in the real world. The online #blacklivesmatter supporters need to physicalise their presence at rallies and protests to make the movement created in the online space of social-media, a movement that affects the real-space of the physical world as well. The #blacklivesmatter movement creates an online space of alternate ordering, in which black voices are heard and listened to. This demonstrates how the ideologies discussed in the online space of social media, move into, and become relevant within the ‘space that remains’. In turn, this should initiate a fairer, alternate ordering in the real world, physically altering the experience of black people, or people of colour in America (and worldwide) today. The women who started this movement - Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi - discuss in an interview the way that the movement has grown out of their control, how it is no longer tied to them. This demonstrates that the heterotopic alternate ordering of online spaces means that messages and movements can spread exponentially. The #blacklivesmatter movement, like traditional movements, now has prominent celebrity figureheads who often use the hashtag to address others within the movement, whilst also using their dominant online presence to spread the message that those who engage with the hashtag wish to send to the rest of the world. Beyoncé – perhaps the #blacklivesmatter movement’s most prominent celebrity figurehead – has used the hashtag on Instagram to address her seventy-seven million followers, following a violent attack on the Dallas police force in the name of #blacklivesmatter to declare her disgust at the attacks, separating violent appropriations of the #blacklivesmatter movement from the wider online community of followers. Instagram, as a space of alternate ordering, can also therefore be used as a platform to monitor how these movements effect the space that remains, reprimanding its appropriation and misuse. This means, that whilst the movement can grow exponentially, the core ideology behind it should remain the same.

Whilst Instagram can be used to create a space for marginal voices, it is, like Hetherington’s example of the Palais Royal, ‘a strange combination of the socially central with the socially marginal’ (Hetherington, 1997: 6). Its ability to ‘order the social

in very different ways’ (Hetherington, 1997: 8) can both be used to create a site of counter-hegemonic transgression, but can also open up a space of alternate ordering where something non-existent in the real world can be made to seem real, and utopic in the heterotopia of Instagram. Fyre Festival – ‘the coolest party that you’d ever seen advertised’ (Gabrielle Bluestone quoted from *Fyre* (2019)) – used Instagram as a ‘compensatory heterotopia’ that deceptively rendered a space ‘as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled’ (Foucault, 1983: 27) to promote an idyllic festival that was non-existent. The Fyre Festival organisers paid six-figure sums to the celebrities of Instagram - who hold positions of power that would be reserved for Heads of States in traditional, physical space - in ‘the best coordinated social influencer campaign ever’ to sell ‘a pipe dream to your average looser’ (Billy MacFarland quoted from *Fyre* (2019)). Through the alternate ordering of Instagram’s space, the festival organisers promoted, and sold out an exclusive festival in under twenty-four hours by creating a hype within Instagram’s spatiality around an event that in the traditional space of the physical world, was non-existent. As a site of alternate ordering, Instagram, therefore can be exploitative, just like Hetherington’s Badlands. Whilst it has radical potential, it can also be exploited as a space of potential corruption, a space where the dominant class of Instagram – influencers and celebrities – will sell a lie to their followers for financial gain, or an increased position of dominance.

CONCLUSION

The conception of Instagram as a platform has resulted in a new space, an ‘uncertain zone that challenges our sense of security and perceptions of space as something ordered and fixed’ (Hetherington, 1997: 14). It is itself a ‘heterotopia’. Whilst this is true of all social-media platforms, Instagram’s origins as a photo-sharing platform – a compensatory heterotopia, in which the online persona is a compensation for the imperfect persona that exists in the real world - exemplifies its heterotopic qualities, as a site of ‘alternate ordering’. Contemporary society has once again opened an ‘other’ space, like the heterotopic spaces of the modern period, which holds the radical potential to alter the surrounding ‘real space’ that remains. It can create a space to expand the voice of those on the margins, but it also as a space perpetuates the existing detrimental power-structures and surveillance methods that exist in the space of the real world. Users therefore must appreciate the potential of their engagement with Instagram’s alternately ordered spatiality. Upon entry, they engage with a space that has the power to alter the real space that remains, yet, just like traditional space, they enter a space where they can easily manipulated and ordered by the online extension of traditional systems of ordering. By understanding Instagram’s potential as a heterotopia, and how similar spaces in the past have been used for monumental radical changes, users are encouraged to engage with this new space of ‘alternate ordering’ as a tool to bring about radical change in all the space that remains (the real, physical world).

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