

# Presentation Notes — Art History 455

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Foucault

Foucault was a poststructuralist.

- Structuralism identifies a difference between a signifier and that which is signified—for example, the word “chair” and the actual object that you are sitting on. Taken together these make up a sign. Further, structuralism acknowledges that the relationship between these two is arbitrary; there is no fundamental property of the object that determines why it should be called chair or chaise or silla. Finally, because these are arbitrary, we understand them through relationship to one another. Structuralist particularly like to point out how meaning depends on difference: chair is chair, not char or cheer.
- Poststructuralism issues an addendum: signs can signify other signs. That is, the [“chair”|chair] system can also be used to communicate the idea of . An unlimited number of these significations may be chained together. (Derrida’s pun was to say that this meaning depended not on difference but on deference: each link in the chain passes its meaning on for the next link to rework.) What these significations are can vary from person to person, or context to context; perhaps for you “chair” evokes WWE drama more strongly than bureaucracy. So, when we talk about what things mean, we need to be aware that they may have multiple meanings depending on who the audience is and what point in the chain of meanings they are thinking about.

Foucault was particularly concerned with the mechanics of power.

(This probably had to do with him being a gay man, acutely aware of state and social pressures.) He examined how power is, and how we, having seen the way that systems of power function, change our behaviours and ideas to fit within those structures.

Foucault’s preferred method was to look to history for examples of other ways in which state and social power could be configured, and then to analyze the merits of the different approaches. Often he points out ways in which older attitudes could be seen as preferable. For example, historical justice systems were nasty and violent, but the violence was public, making it possible for the public to respond with rebellion when they found it unjust. Our current system is also dependant on violence, but that violence is hidden from view.

- This led to an anarchic left-wing outlook, even though his parents had been wealthy and his dad a doctor—symbolic of the systems he critiqued.

Heterotopias,  
in brief

Foucault sketches an idea of a space which exists outside the dominant social or political context. His description is broad, and is in various ways by different authors. Here, however, is my understanding of what he lays out in *The Order of Things*:

A heterotopia is a space that is not part of the “real world” even though it is a real place. Heterotopias can be spaces created to rebel against the dominant order of things (for example, convents or monestaries), or spaces created to maintain the dominant order (like prisons). They are either attempts to create ideal spaces, or places to which anything that is tarnishing the ‘real’ space can be removed.

They all share six basic attributes. Heterotopias...

1. exist in one form or another in every culture.
2. have specific functions, which can change over time.
3. are “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces” (eg, a museum with exhibits about many places and times).
4. belong to specific epochs (museums are a modern idea) or life events (boarding school & coming of age; disneyland & vacation).
5. have controlled access: either mandatory, or requiring permission and the performance of specific rites.
6. either reveal the constructed nature of other spaces (by being quite obviously constructed themselves) or offer an orderly space that is in contrast to disorderly everyday spaces.

Discussion

Which aspects of this need clarification?  
Are there any aspects that we disagree with? (How might it be changed or improved?)  
Is this a useful methodology? (Why?)

Owens on  
Swayambhu

*The comments of two Kathmandu valley residents from the summer of 1999 succinctly delineate the tension between preserving cultural practices and pre-serving their past results:*

*“This beautiful valley is lost. Twenty years of urban planning have failed. The only thing that would save it would be to tear down everything built over the last twenty years. Though it is a terrible thing to say, and though it would be a terrible thing if it were to happen, the only other thing that would save the valley would be an earthquake.”*

*“It used to be that you could put a god wherever you wanted. Nowadays they even tell you what kind of brick to use.”*

— Owens, 281

→ The Problem of Place

What are the distinctions between Foucault's description of "heterotopia" and Owens' use of "multilocal"? (See p. 273 of Owens.)

Does Swayambhu fit Foucault's idea of heterotopia? What modifications to the idea, if any, are required to make it fit?

Who is responsible for governance of a heterotopia? Who should be responsible for Swayambhu?

If Swayambhu, as a heterotopia, is a place outside of the dominant political or social system, what happens when political concerns (restoration campaigns, building codes, etc.) are applied to it?

→ Newness

How is the significance of Swayambhu changing? Which changes are positive and which are negative?

How have limitations on access changed?

What is the impact of the introduction and juxtaposition of new building types, building styles, and building sponsors?

→ Museum Effects

Foucault claims that "[t]he museum and the library are heterotopias that are proper to western culture of the nineteenth century." What are the consequences of importing the museum into a different space and time, as Owens describes? Should spaces like Swayambhu be understood as museums?