

## FORMS OF THE BALCONY AS HETEROTOPIAS

Mihai BURLACU<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *In my paper, I argue that some forms or instances of the balcony can be considered heterotopias. Drawing upon Foucault's (1967) "heterotopology", I approach the ways in which balconies entail multi-layered encodings of meaning in places that are both openings and also "conceal curious exclusions" (Foucault, 1967/2008, p. 21). Firstly, I review Foucault's groundwork and several theoretical developments regarding heterotopias. Next, I use Geertz's (1973) "thick description" in order to offer a brief account of three forms of the balcony, which could be placed within Foucault's systematic description of heterotopias.*

**Key words:** *the balcony, heterotopia, heterotopology, thick description.*

### 1. Introduction

The "balcony" is represented in several anthropological texts as a place that entails multiple meanings. It simultaneously connects and differentiates multiple spaces and times. Upon revisiting the concept, I assert the thesis that three instances of the balcony can be considered heterotopias. They encapsulate Michel Foucault's idea of places "that are a sort of counter-emplacements, a sort of effectively realized utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (Foucault, 1967/2008, p. 17). Furthermore, while they are clearly situated outside all the other places, balconies are recognizable. These places are reflections of the "inside" just as much as they are reflections of the "outside".

In my article, in order to develop my argument, I revisit and adapt Foucault's "heterotopology". Envisioned as a systematic description of heterotopias, it can be used to approach the multi-levelled encodings of meaning (Burlacu, 2017, p. 184). As such, balconies are aporetic, in the sense that they represent encodings about and from the society in which they exist through the way in which they integrate and juxtapose contradictory meanings. My research was by no means exhaustive. I focused on the way balconies were approached by respondents that were residents in the old part of Bari, Italy in 2018.

I begin by revisiting Foucault's groundwork and several other theoretical developments on heterotopias, with an emphasis on Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter's theses. According to them, the systematic description developed by Foucault

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<sup>1</sup> *Transilvania* University of Braşov, [mihai.burlacu@unitbv.ro](mailto:mihai.burlacu@unitbv.ro).

can be imagined as including at least three axes, on which heterotopias are placed at the intersection of several “qualifications”: (a) the anthropological axis, (b) the temporal axis and (c) the imaginary axis (Dehaene and De Cauter, 2008b, pp. 27-28, note 30).

Subsequently, I use Geertz’s (1973) “thick description” in order to offer a brief account of three forms of the balcony which I consider to be heterotopias. I have written this article taking into account Geertz’ thesis according to which empirical access to symbol systems is gained “by inspecting events, not by arranging abstracted entities into unified patterns” (Geertz, 1973, p. 17). Thus, I consider the contextual significance of the balconies I approach in this article to be multi-layered.

## 2. The “Heterotopology”: Foucault’s Systematic Description in a Nutshell

In revisiting Foucault’s “heterotopology”, one controversial issue has been the number of heterotopias that can be extracted from the original essay and its various translations. Most interpretations of Foucault’s excursus entail four types of heterotopias, which are more or less highlighted: crisis, deviance, illusion and compensation. However, as Dehaene and De Cauter have pointed out a decade ago, at least two more types of heterotopias can be easily distilled: the heterotopias of festivity and permanence (Dehaene and De Cauter, 2008b, pp. 26-27, note 25). Furthermore, I agree with Dehaene and De Cauter’s claim that Foucault’s “heterotopology” cannot be considered a “full-fledged taxonomy”. Instead, heterotopias should be envisioned as being placed at the intersection of several “qualifications” on at least three axes that are somewhat similar to those from a Cartesian system:

(a) The anthropological axis situates heterotopias on an imaginary reference line between the correlatives normal/ abnormal, common place/ other place, “topos”/ “heterotopos”, and it comprises the somewhat ambiguous historical qualifications of deviance and crisis;

(b) The temporal axis includes the correlative pair permanence/ ephemerality (or transience), assigning heterotopias like museums to the former qualification and carnivals to the latter;

(c) The imaginary axis represents heterotopias as enacted utopias that have a certain function in relation to the rest of the real space: the function of compensation and/or illusion (Dehaene and De Cauter, 2008b, pp. 27-28, note 30).

Since its development, Foucault’s description of heterotopias has been considered ambiguous on quite a few occasions (Boyer, 2008, p. 65). However, the principles postulated by him allow many juxtaposed interpretations of various architectural elements, such as balconies. Therefore, it is relevant to briefly present the six principles from Foucault’s “heterotopology”.

[I] Heterotopias can be found in one form or another in all the cultures from the world. They are a cultural universal or a “constant”. Foucault develops his exposition of the first principle by classifying the various forms of heterotopia into two main types:

(a) “Heterotopias of crisis” are a particular type of places found in what Foucault ostensibly calls “primitive societies”. They are reserved for those considered to be in deep crisis from a medical and/or social standpoint.

(b) In modern and post-modern societies, the individuals whose behaviour is considered to be “deviant” in relation to a meaningful norm, are placed in “heterotopias of deviation”, like prisons and asylums (Foucault 1967/2008, p. 18).

[II] In his second principle, Foucault postulates that a culture may alter the way a heterotopia functions over an extended period of time. In order to typify it, he expounds the heterotopia of the cemetery. This example is relevant, because it includes (a) the evolution of the social and cultural view on illness and death, and also (b) reveals the way in which changes in cultural perspectives have spatial consequences.

[III] The third principle entails a somewhat curious reification: Foucault asserts that “the heterotopia has the power to juxtapose in a single real place several spaces, several emplacements that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 1967/2008, p. 19). Heterotopias associated with this principle are, for example: (i) the cinema; (ii) the theatre stage; (iii) the Persian garden and (iv) the carpet, as a surrogate garden.

[IV] In the fourth principle Foucault expounds the thesis that heterotopias are frequently connected with “slices in time”. These fragments of time, or “heterochronies”, can be both juxtaposed and instantiated in heterotopias. The cemetery is a recurring example, because it is the “heterochrony” generated by the loss of life and is characterized by a quasi-eternity of dissolution and disappearance. Foucault has also typified the “transformation of meaning” in the case of museums and libraries: from (i) an “expression of individual choice” in the seventeenth century to (ii) the modern and postmodern “heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time”, which is a consequence of “the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time, and inaccessible to its ravages” (Foucault 1967/2008, p. 20). Contrariwise, unlike the “heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time”, there are heterotopias linked to time in its most futile or transitory hypostasis; time in the “festive mode”. These “heterotopias of festivity” are ephemeral. However, as Dehaene and De Cauter point out, they also have an intrinsically cyclical aspect (Dehaene & De Cauter, 2008b, p. 26, note 24). In Foucault’s view, this type of heterotopia is exemplified by the fairgrounds on which carnivals take place.

[V] In his fifth principle, Foucault states that heterotopias always have a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them accessible. This system represents one of the aspects that differentiate heterotopias from other places. Illustrative for this principle are barracks and prisons, where the entry is compulsory. Also descriptive for this principle are the guest rooms from the South American farms and the North American pattern of motels’ rooms.

[VI] Foucault asserts in his last principle that heterotopias have a function in relation to all the remaining space. This function can be placed on an axis between two poles:

(a) Heterotopias render spaces of illusion that actually reveal all the rest of the real space as being even more illusory, like the nineteenth century brothels.

(b) Heterotopias can be the generators of meticulously arranged real space, which in turn acts as an antithesis for the rest of the “ill construed” real space (Foucault 1967/2008, p. 21). Illustrative for this extreme are the seventeenth century Puritan settlements from North America and the Jesuit colonies from South America.

After reviewing the aforementioned principles, one may have the propensity to find heterotopias everywhere. However, it is important to stress the fact that not every place is a heterotopia (Dehaene and De Cauter, 2008a, p. 6). Indeed, the concept of “heterotopia” cannot be used if one doesn’t admit the validity of the previous assertion.

### **3. Reconsidering the “Thick Description”**

In the book entitled *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz offers strong arguments for considering anthropology an interpretive endeavour. Accordingly, examining the likelihood that several forms of the balcony may be heterotopias requires reconsidering some of the close connections between theoretical formulations on the one hand, and descriptive interpretation, on the other.

In approaching a “thick description” of three forms of the balcony, it is relevant to highlight a number of fundamental aspects. Firstly, Clifford Geertz emphasizes the thesis that the interpretive approaches intrinsically involve a resistance towards conceptual articulation. Consequently, he stresses the fact that this is how interpretive approaches “to anything [...] escape systematic modes of assessment” (Geertz, 1973, p. 24). From this resistance arises either the threat of self-validation, or, the interpretation may be allegedly validated by the sensitivity of the ethnographer. This can prove to be a particularly insidious problem, which any interpretive approach of balconies may entail. Thus, if one attempts to paraphrase the interpretation, it is invariably considered to be a form of “travesty”, and the researcher is accused of ethnocentrism. Obviously, this raises the question of the scientific character of the research. Actually, this topic is amply discussed by Geertz, whose arguments seem to support the claim that: “There is no reason why the conceptual structure of a cultural interpretation should be any less formulable, and thus less susceptible to explicit canons of appraisal, than that of, say, a biological observation or a physical experiment” (Geertz, 1973, p. 24). His claim should be contextualized from an epistemological standpoint.

Cultural interpretation entails “characteristics” that are actually reasons credited by Geertz with hindering the expression of its conceptual structure. Thus, the theoretical development of cultural interpretation is difficult because it apparently almost lacks the relevant terminology. This is a relevant point that should be taken into consideration, because any attempt of theoretical development based on an interpretation of balconies must remain closely related to that interpretation. Unlike the sciences mentioned in Geertz’s excerpt, anthropologists cannot resort to extensive abstractions.

The advantage of “thick description” in interpreting balconies resides in its main purpose: the multi-layered interpretation of their meaning. It provides the opportunity to juxtapose multiple interpretations of various forms of the balcony. Thus, alongside semiotics, an anthropological interpretation should also entail hermeneutics. Understanding the contextual significance of a balcony should be in many ways congruent to reading and interpreting a text. Therefore, the difficulties in expressing and sharing that understanding can be considered issues of writing.

#### 4. Methods and Results

This article contains a part of the research that was conducted in 2018 in Bari, Italy in two stages: the first stage took place in April and the second one in November. Both stages entailed the use of ethnographic interview as the main research technique. In the first stage I interviewed 12 respondents and in the second stage I interviewed 10, in the old part of Bari. Also, direct observation had an important role in my research. A part of my research was presented at the *15th EASA Biennial Conference: Staying, Moving, Settling*, in the panel *PO31: The Balcony*.

In anthropological terms, balconies have multiple functions. From my respondents' answers, it resulted that the balconies were not considered to be mere alternatives to windows. For example, eight of my respondents emphasized the advantages that balconies have over windows as places where it is possible to breathe, especially during summer. Also, seven of the respondents considered the balconies to be "bridges" from a social standpoint. Indeed, on streets like *Strada Tresca*, the distance between the balconies is comparable to the size of the balconies themselves. Most balconies were enclosed with metal balustrades and were projected at least one meter from the wall of the buildings.

The presence of individuals on their balconies tends to be generally examined from a social, cultural and gendered standpoint. Spatial and temporal elements are also important. An anthropological attempt of interpreting balconies should also include a semiotic approach, in order to access the conceptual world of the studied people and develop ways of dialoguing with them. In fact, when discussing the relation between a theoretical development and the interpretation upon which it is based, Geertz highlights a sort of a "double bind" between the prerequisites necessary to comprehend the context of symbolic action and the requirements of theoretical development. The resulting tension between the sentences from the "thick description" and those from the grounded theory is deemed to be high and unavoidable (Geertz, 1973, pp. 24–25).

The social use of balconies in cities like Bari is obviously relevant because they entail juxtapositions of meaning. Meaning is not constructed and does not entail only visual and auditive dimensions. In Alexander Cowan's terms "the study of urban cultural history, while still privileging the visual, has come to recognise the importance of the other four senses" (Cowan, 2011, p. 721). Indeed, all the respondents stated that, aside from being places of observation, balconies are also places where sounds, smells and even tastes and touches are experienced. Balconies' liminality entails a system of "curious exclusions", while appearing to be "simple openings": they are not inside the houses, nor are they a part of the exterior. This feature can be highlighted if one ponders the multiple ways in which balconies represent points of access (i.e. entrances and/or exits) not only for people, but also for objects and symbols.

The system of description developed by Foucault "seems to establish the parameters for an entirely different system of classification reserved exclusively for 'another topos'" (Sohn, 2008, p. 45). The flexibility and ambiguity of his "heterotopology" entails an adaptability to the tendency of meaning to change over time, in accordance with the transformations from any given culture. Accordingly, I have used Heidi Sohn's concept of

“transformation of meaning” as the common denominator for Foucault’s “heterotopology” (Sohn, 2008, p. 45). In order to bring a degree of simplicity, I used terms from my respondents’ answers to designate three forms of the balcony, in the following paragraphs.

[1] The balcony as a “scene” or “stage”: eight of the interviewees described the balcony as a place used for communicating with their neighbours. News and various points of view were shared verbally. For example, from her balcony, a woman, M. P., was talking with her daughter, S. M. P., and a neighbour, A. S. P., about the detergent she was using and the increase in its price, while she was putting clothes to dry on laundry ropes. M. P. was also showing the effects of the detergent and the new clothes that she had previously bought with money from her daughter. The three women’s discussion drew the attention of a young woman passing in the street below. After drawing the woman’s attention, the three fell suddenly silent. It became apparent that the three women didn’t want the newcomer to know what they were talking about. The newcomer, L. B., reminded M. P. of the debt that the latter was still owing her. M. P. retorted that she will pay her back and that she didn’t understand why L. B. was making such a fuss about it. In turn, L. B. emphasized the fact that she had noticed the new clothes and listed some of the new things that she had seen appearing in the last two weeks on the balcony and inside M. P.’s apartment. The latter brutally interrupted L. B. and asked her how was she able to notice new objects in her apartment? At that point M. P.’s daughter called L. B. a liar. In turn, L. B. responded that she had seen them from her own balcony. The exchange lasted less than ten minutes. It reminded me of an analogy previously made by Farha Ghannam between the balcony and Goffman’s notion of the “stage” (1959). Balconies are “stages”, were people can communicate with their neighbours. On the balcony, more or less willingly, people also expose themselves in public (Ghannam, 2002, p. 56). The behaviour of the three women and the interaction with L.B. actually adds “an extra spatial dimension to conversations on the street” (Cowan, 2011, p. 728). A personal discussion lost its limited or “restricted” character once it could be heard from the street below. While it could be considered a cultural system, the interaction underlines spatial and temporal relationships that can easily be described using Foucault’s third and fourth principles. The balcony can juxtapose several places that are apparently incompatible: the interior of the apartment, the balcony itself as a “stage”, the street below, other balconies and even other apartments. Furthermore, the transience of the “scene” can be placed on the temporal axis identified by Dehaene and De Caeter (2008b, pp. 27–28, note 30).

[2] The balcony as a “threshold”: the liminal character of the balcony was mentioned by seven of the interviewees. However, none of the respondents considered the balcony as a boundary per se. For example, P. B. claimed that his balcony was a point from where he could see the various people that were passing by, down the street, while their view was blocked. He indicated me how he was able to see a large portion of the street below and some of the neighbouring balconies, while standing in an armchair on his balcony. It was giving him an “advantage” in relation to those that were passing below. Evidently, the location of the balcony was important in several ways. It overlooked the street, while limiting the visibility for those walking below. When he

deemed necessary, he could close the door behind him. Thus, he couldn't be heard by his family and other neighbours couldn't see inside his apartment. P. B. chose to go "outside" on the balcony, when he wanted to be by himself, "secluded" from his family. He declared that he cherished these moments because, it helped him reflect and offered him the chance to "step back" and have a broader perspective. From his family point of view, he was home, without being "at home". From his neighbours' standpoint, he was "outside", without truly leaving his apartment: he was in the public sphere, without actually leaving his home. From the perspective of the people passing by below him, in the street, he was spatially close, while being at the same time socially distant: like the archetypal "Simmelian stranger" (Simmel, 1908/1950, pp. 402–408). The balcony as a 'threshold' evokes the descriptions of heterotopias developed by Foucault in his fifth principle and can be also linked with Dehaene and De Cauter's anthropological axis: although balconies may appear like "pure and simple openings", they do in fact "conceal curious exclusions" (Foucault, 1967/2008, p. 21).

[3] The balcony as a "bridge": whereas some of the respondents described their balconies in terms already mentioned in the previous paragraphs, nine of them emphasized that more often than not, balconies tend to be "bridges" between neighbours. Of the nine respondents, five were women. In the old part of Bari, according to the interviewees' responses, the inevitable consequence of the high density of buildings was the fact that people regularly found themselves in close proximity. Accordingly, the distance between the balconies frequently measured less than their actual size. For example, M. F. emphasized that aside from being able to see her neighbours from her balcony, smells and sounds also offered her a plethora of signals of various types: she knew when other neighbours were eating by the smell of the cooked food, she could see the clean clothes on laundry ropes in certain days, she could exchange news or see when someone was coming. During my interview, we were interrupted by the neighbour who lived in the apartment situated alongside M. F.'s balcony: S. M. brought us an Espresso directly over the balcony's railing, because the distance between the two balconies was very short. For both M. F. and S. M., their balconies represented a "bridge" between their apartments: a place that allowed direct interaction and open behaviour. The two women could also noiselessly observe pedestrians and gossip about them, while they were at least partially observed from the street as well. Interestingly, quite a few of M. F. and S. M.'s accounts regarding their activities on their balcony resemble Foucault's assertions associated with his sixth principle. Their descriptions can be also correlated with Dehaene and De Cauter's imaginary axis: the balcony is a space of illusion and also a repository of imagination.

## 5. Conclusions

The account of the three forms of the balcony from Bari indicates the capacity of Geertz's "thick description" to reveal the complexity of the synthesis between: (a) an emplacement, (b) all the individuals present in a time-frame and (c) the juxtaposed interactions from that place. "Thick description" entails a more analytical approach of balconies than Foucault's "heterotopology". However, in my paper I have considered

the former to be complementary for the latter, not mutually exclusive.

The three forms of the balcony presented in this article have a liminal position, between the house and the street *per se*. They entail connections and juxtapositions that can be described and contextualized using Geertz's "thick description" in correlation with Foucault's "heterotopology". The balcony as a "scene" has features that can be described using Foucault's third and fourth principles. The second form (i.e. the balcony as a "threshold") evokes the descriptions from the fifth principle. Finally, the sixth principle of the "heterotopology" entails several interesting assertions that resemble the respondents' descriptions of the balcony seen as a "bridge". These forms of the balcony can be considered heterotopic in nature. However, although I did not find in my exploratory research other forms of the balcony that could be considered heterotopias, this does not mean that they do not exist.

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