

# POWER, SPACE, AND KNOWLEDGE: THEOLOGICAL-AESTHETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MICHEL FOUCAULT'S CONTRIBUTION TO POST- COLONIAL THEORY<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Although the somewhat enigmatic French philosopher Michel Foucault can be described as one of the most influential and debated French philosophers of the last four decades, and although the corpus of literature on his contributions is still growing, it can also be said that the literature that endeavours to interpret him through theological lenses, is still sporadic.<sup>3</sup> He himself seldom commented on actual religious phenomena.<sup>4</sup> However, several dimensions of Foucault's oeuvre hold potential for theological re-appropriation, for instance his understandings of power, aesthetics (space), and epistemology.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I briefly investigate Foucault's innovative notions of power, space, and knowledge, before offering some theological-aesthetical perspectives on Foucault's contribution to post-colonial theory.*

**Keywords:** Aesthetics; Power; Space; Knowledge; Post-colonial Theory

## Power and Knowledge

Foucault has become known, inter alia, for his so-called *archaeological and genealogical projects*.<sup>6</sup> While the former hinges on the identification of the characteristics of what 'truth' could be, and why it should be regarded as 'knowledge' (e.g. that it is 'reasonable', or 'good', or 'beautiful' – the so-called *archaeology* of knowledge), the latter asks what the deeper origins of

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. James Bernauer, "Foreword: Cry of the spirit." In Foucault, M; Carette, J (ed.), *Religion and Culture*. London: Routledge, 1999:xiff. Foucault can be described as being enigmatic not only because his thought developed and was transformed during different phases of his life, but also in view of the fact that several of his works have not yet been published, or are at least not very well known. It is therefore not easy to distil the 'essence' of Foucault. It is obviously also not possible to do justice to the richness of Foucault's thought within the limitations of an article like this.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Rolf Schieder, "Michel Foucault: Religion als Transgressionsdiskurs", in: *Kompendium Religionstheorie*. (Hg) V Drehsen, W Gräb, B Weyel. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2005:223.

<sup>5</sup> Johan Beukes, "Teenswoordige geskiedenis: Michel Foucault in gesprek met die teologie." *HTS* 60(3) 2004:883-884.

<sup>6</sup> Developed inter alia in Michel Foucault, *Order of things: An archeology of human science*, translated by AM Sheridan Smith. New York: Vintage Books: 1970.

these discourses are, in other words *how* these discourses are formed, and in particular *why* these discourses assume historical variations (the *genealogy* of knowledge).<sup>7</sup>

Foucault's achievement was that he fashioned a series of inquiries that makes it possible to question the *activity of thought itself as an ethical practice*.<sup>8</sup> Foucault's ethic historicizes Kant's classic questions on knowledge, obligation, and hope. Foucault does not ask – as Kant does – “What can I know?” but rather “How were my questions produced? How was the path of my knowing determined?” Not “What ought I to know?” or “What may I hope for?” but “How have the parameters of my aspirations been defined?”<sup>9</sup>

Foucault systemically questions the nature, claims and discourses of all dominant epistemologies in terms of their traditions, spaces, authorities, and powers, proposing that the latter are inevitably influenced and formed by the dominant regimes of knowledge operating within the particular phases of history. In the same way, theology and culture cannot be separated. Issues such as exegesis, revelation, self-understanding, and God-images are all moulded by culture and context (also called ‘space’ by Foucault; see discussion below).<sup>10</sup>

To put it briefly: Foucault excels in the *art of unmasking* the powers and power-structures lurking behind knowledge and knowledge-structures.<sup>11</sup> His ‘epistemology’ challenges epistemology. According to Foucault ‘knowledge’ is not a collection of true statements of fact, but an attribution of properties, the latter being largely determined by power relations and in fact reflecting these relations.<sup>12</sup> Knowledge is always linked to historical processes, and these historical processes simultaneously draw the borders and offer the possibilities for knowledge. History offers space for the formation, but also destruction of knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

The genius of Foucault lies in the fact that more than any other philosopher in recent times, he ventured into an analysis and description of ‘power’, following three innovative lines of thought. Firstly, Foucault was of the opinion that power is not occasional, but on-going and ubiquitous – contra the belief of the orthodox domination theory, or so-called

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *Language, counter-memory, practice*, translated by DF Bouchard & S Simon. Oxford: Blackwell, 1977:145-146.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Bernauer, “Foreword: Cry of the spirit”, xi ff.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment” in *The Foucault Reader*, (ed.) Paul Rabinow. New York: Random House, Pantheon Books, 1984:32-50.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. JW Rogerson, “The potential of the negative: Approaching the Old Testament through the work of Adorno”, in *Rethinking contexts, rereading texts*, (ed.) RMD Carrol. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000:37.

<sup>11</sup> For a further discussion of the phenomenon of masking, cf. Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2012:167ff.

<sup>12</sup> It is important to keep in mind that Foucault argues against the so-called ‘sovereignty theory’. Power can indeed be a vague and complex concept, making it virtually impossible to find two thinkers who agree about its nature. Power can be described from political, social, military, ideological, cultural, theological and numerous other perspectives. It can be described as conceptual, behavioural, and relational control. Although power can be understood as occasional and discretionary, scholars such as Foucault have drawn attention to the ubiquitous nature of power – the fact that power is omnipresent and its operation inevitable. Power as such need not be evil or destructive. As a matter of fact, it can simply be described as a ‘communication of efficacy,’ or perhaps as *adiaphoron* (neutral reality). Power can be used for good (e.g., the doctor’s ‘power to heal’) or evil. Power itself is neutral and formal, almost indifferent – operating in political, social, and biopolitical spheres. However, it seldom remains indifferent. It becomes good and necessary, but also bad, excessive, or abusive, through the objects by which it is applied. Cf. Kyle A Pasewark, *A Theology of Power: Being Beyond Domination*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993:1-5.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Rolf Schieder, “Michel Foucault: Religion als Transgressionsdiskurs”, 219.

'sovereignty theory' of power.<sup>14</sup> Power is therefore, according to Foucault, not applied or acted out from time to time as the need arises, but it is always there, albeit in different forms. Secondly, power is not the possession of an elite, powerful few. It permeates all dimensions of society and life, and forms an all-invasive network of historical relationships from which no subject can escape – subjects are both the agents and products of power. Therefore, in a sense we are never sure who we are.<sup>15</sup> Thirdly, power is intrinsically linked to knowledge.<sup>16</sup> The latter is of specific importance for this article.

Foucault was of the opinion that reason and knowledge seldom, if ever, have a (critical) understanding of their own involvement with power. As a matter of fact, all of the above-mentioned arguments of the 'sovereignty theory', namely that power is occasional, limited to a few, and not linked to knowledge, can serve as *masks* to hide the real effect of power. This is true particularly of knowledge: "In such impressive disguise, knowledge's power is nearly absolute. If one resists knowledge, one is accused of resisting not power but truth."<sup>17</sup>

Foucault strives to reveal this disguise, to disclose the fact that knowledge is an instrument of power, par excellence. Power creates knowledge, and the conviction that a certain form of knowledge is 'truth' is an exercise in, but also a condition of increasing power. Knowledge and power complement, generate, and sustain each other; they co-exist and flourish in an undeniable, reciprocal relationship – sometimes blatantly, but mostly subtly, hidden behind its mask. Foucault states: "Power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms. Would power be accepted if it were entirely cynical? For it, secrecy is not in the nature of an abuse; it is indispensable to its operation."<sup>18</sup> Foucault even postulated that

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<sup>14</sup> It would be an interesting exercise to compare this theory, and Foucault's criticism of it, with African notions of power. Actually, one cannot speak of African culture or spirituality in the singular. Africa is a vast continent, incorporating a wide variety of cultures and ethnic groups. The term 'Africa' does not denote one homogeneous group. The South African isiXhosa word for power, also linked to God, is *Amandla*, which literally means 'power' or 'energy' or 'life force.' These concepts are difficult to describe. In Africa this power or *force vitale* is linked directly to the Divinity that rules over humanity and determines our fate. Cf. Gabriel M Setiloane, *African Theology: An Introduction*. Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1989:34. Of course, there is also no common understanding of 'Divinity' in Africa – there are numerous nuances on the continent in this regard. For a good overview, cf. Edwin William Smith, *African Ideas of God* (London: Edinburgh House, 1966). Generally speaking, one could say that the Divine Force penetrates all of reality as a cosmogenic presence, but is not necessarily understood in terms of personhood. It is rather the all-penetrating force that enables individuals and communities to receive and experience life. This ever-active, penetrating force initiates existential experiences of *force vitale*, to the point where humans in turn strive to exercise power over any force that is perceived to endanger society or the individual's well-being. The (divine) Power empowers. Many Africans thus seek power-charged objects because the quest for power is a driving force in African religion. *Ubunye* (the unity of all reality) is kept intact through *Amandla* (power), which in turn operates within *Ubuntu* (community). African spirituality is concerned with the maintenance of equilibrium and therefore with guarding against the loss of power. Cf. Abraham Kriel, *Roots of African Thought: Sources of Power – A Pilot Study*. Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1989:198; Smith, *African Ideas of God*, 283.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. J Caputo, "On not knowing who we are: Madness, hermeneutics and the night of truth in Foucault", in Bernauer, J & Carette, J (eds.), *Michel Foucault and theology: the politics of religious experience*. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004:119-120.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures", translated by Kate Soper, in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, (ed.) Colin Gordon. New York: Random House, Pantheon Books, 1980:92-108.

<sup>17</sup> Kyle A Pasewark, *A theology of Power. Being Beyond Domination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993:9.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *The will to knowledge. The history of sexuality, Volume I*. London: Penguin Books, 1978:86.

meaning itself is a mask, meaningless in itself, and only acquiring meaning through its effects in the spaces of power.<sup>19</sup>

The classic question here would obviously be: if the production of truth is the result of a historical process, i.e. if truth is determined by power relations within historical settings, how can Foucault – or anyone else, for that matter – claim any measure of truth for his own propositions? Can his ‘epistemology’ indeed challenge epistemology without falling into the trap of epistemology, i.e. of power itself? Can he avoid wearing the mask himself?<sup>20</sup>

Naturally Foucault is aware of these questions, and consequently his approach to his own viewpoints and those of others is by and large a playful one.<sup>21</sup> In this approach roles and knowledge-structures do not become ontologised, and the seriousness with which followers of particular worldviews motivate and act out their beliefs, is playfully suspended or at least relativized.<sup>22</sup> This playful approach is designed to reveal the in-commensurate character of theories of the past, and in effect to act as a demolisher of the untenable truth claims of any form of sovereign thought.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, the playfulness is actually also serious business, and could even be called prophetic and disturbing.<sup>24</sup>

It is within this line of thought that Foucault often speaks of the *freedom (or play) of the aesthetic subject*. It is through aesthetic freedom, or as he sometimes calls it, the *care of the self*, that each person forms his or her own subjectivity apart from the ‘normalising’ and ‘normative’ paradigms of society. This involves an aesthetic discipline that continues throughout the entire life of the subject.<sup>25</sup> In fact, Foucault envisages that everybody can or should become a work of art: “Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?”<sup>26</sup> It is within this aesthetic creation of the subject that meaning can be formed, and critique is expressed and embodied. This self as the work of art stands directly opposed to power.<sup>27</sup>

It is also interesting to note that Foucault emphasised the fact that this aesthetic subject can and must resist dominant power structures, and why “local knowledges’ – or, if you

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Pasewark, *A Theology of Power*, 47.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, it has been noted that Foucault’s thought was strongly influenced by Christian ethos, but in particular also Greek ethics. Cf. Rolf Schieder, “Michel Foucault: Religion als Transgressionsdiskurs”, 223.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Foucault, “Two Lectures”, 85-90.

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed discussion about the relation between epistemology and play, cf. Rubem A Alves, *Tomorrow’s Child: Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture*. London: SCM Press Ltd, 1972:89 ff.

<sup>23</sup> This playful approach is illustrated aesthetically in Michel Foucault’s delightful book, *This is not a Pipe*, translated by James Harkness. Berkeley: University of California P, 1973. In this book Foucault critiques certain orthodox notions of representation in art via an engagement of some artworks by the Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte, in particular the work *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* (1926) – also the title of Foucault’s book. The main argument of the book is that a depiction of a pipe is not actually a pipe, i.e. that there is a distinction between resemblance and similitude in visual representation. If we state that image resembles reality, we assume the ontological superiority of reality. However, with similitude the so-called ‘objective referent’ falls away, and image and reality then are “more or less like one another without any of them being able to claim the privileged status of model for the rest” (10).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Pasewark, *A Theology of Power*, 30; also JJ Schulz, “Augustine, Foucault and the politics of imperfection”, in Bernauer, J & Carette, J (eds.), *Michel Foucault and theology: the politics of religious experience*. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004:70-71.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Foucault, *The Care of the Self: Volume Three of the History of Sexuality*, translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Random House, Pantheon Books, 1986:58.

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics”, in *The Foucault Reader*, (ed.) Paul Rabinow. New York: Random House, Pantheon Books, 1984:240-272.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Pasewark, *A Theology of Power*, 50.

wish, *indigenous knowledge systems* – can and must be seen as allies in this process. The genealogical project entertains “the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchize and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects.”<sup>28</sup> According to Foucault, local knowledges stand a better chance of resisting totalizing and normalizing power, if only for the fact that they tend to be more transparent in their association with, and more self-conscious in, their use of power, and more open to being unmasked by the promptings of the aesthetic of freedom.<sup>29</sup> Although Foucault does not develop this line of thought in detail, one could surmise that the reason for this would be, inter alia, that local knowledge is generated from below up, i.e. as an answer and response to basic needs, sometimes even as survival strategies; while other, non-local forms of knowledge, for example knowledge brought with colonisation, often, if not always, comes with a different agenda, an agenda that would be hidden in order to ensure the success and legitimacy of the act of colonisation – as a sort of knowledge moving down from above.

A good example would be the stipulation of the Second Charter of the Netherlands government of 1622, which required that the powerful Dutch East India Company (DEIC) should not only pursue economic agendas, but also promote and protect ‘public religion’ – namely the Reformed orthodoxy of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC).<sup>30</sup> When Jan van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape on 6 April 1652, he immediately conformed to this stipulation and expressed the need for the ‘Reformed Christian religion’ to be promoted in the settlement. Van Riebeeck in fact officially opened the first meeting of the Council of Policy (appointed by the Company’s directors, the ‘Heeren’ – Lords XVII, to act on its behalf in the Colony) with a prayer that echoed the DEIC’s stipulation, namely that the ‘true Reformed Christian Doctrine’ be spread among “these wild insolent people.”<sup>31</sup>

## Power and Space

It is interesting to note that Foucault constantly made use of *spatial categories* when he addressed the notion of power (and consequently knowledge). Power, space, and knowledge seem to go together.<sup>32</sup> He states: “... through them [spatial categories, JC] I did

<sup>28</sup> Foucault, “Two Lectures”, 83.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Pasewark, *A Theology of Power*, 44.

<sup>30</sup> This stipulation can be seen as a consequence of the Eighty Years’ War between Holland and Catholic Spain – a war which ended only shortly before the Dutch came to the Cape.

<sup>31</sup> All quotations as in Charles Villa-Vicencio and Peter Grassow, “First religious Encounters” in *Christianity and the colonisation of South Africa 1487-1883: Documentary History Volume 1*. Johannesburg: Unisa Press, 2009:4-5. The church, and perhaps especially the church, also suffers from a tendency to fall prey to ideologies of power, which have been described as *kyriarchy* – “the multiple and complex systemic grading of dominations, subordinations, and power arrangements.” Flora A Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2000:27. The church, reckoning with the power of God, often tends to mistake itself (its structures, officials, theology) as the final form of knowledge, if not God as such. It often positions itself in a dominating and controlling position within the networks and gradations of those who have power and those deemed to be without power.

<sup>32</sup> While spatiality was predominantly seen as a chartable reality up till the seventies, the works of people such as Foucault, and also Lefebvre and Soja, have paved the way to understand the historical and socio-dynamical characteristics of space, i.e. the fact that society simultaneously produces, and is a product of space. Cf. for example EA Soja, *Thirdspace: journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); H Lefebvre, *The production of space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); also H Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place. A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

come to what I had basically been looking for: the relations that are possible between power and knowledge... one is able to capture the process by which knowledge functions as a form of power and disseminates the effects of power.”<sup>33</sup>

These spatial categories are not meant only in a metaphorical sense, but can denote real, physical places – the prison, the classroom, the hospital, etc. are normally constructed architecturally in such a manner that power, in whatever form, is experienced as being omnipresent. In this regard Foucault has become known as the exponent of what he calls *heterotopia* (‘of other spaces’).<sup>34</sup> In his famous lecture, *Of Other Spaces*, Foucault tracks the historical development of Western space perception, from what he calls *espace de localisation* in the Middle Ages, through the *étendue* (extending) from the time of Galileo to the modern notion of ‘*emplacement*’. According to Foucault “*emplacement* means that the relations between locations in space are the constitutive principle of space perception” (<http://culturalstudiesnow.blogspot.com/2011/05/michel-foucault-of-other-spaces.html>).

Foucault furthermore argues that space, unlike time, still has to complete its process of secularization, and that issues such as *sanctity* still play an important part in the manner in which we divide space. For instance, we still divide the inner from the outer, the internal from the external, and assign different meanings to different types of spaces depending on their mutual relations within the networks of geographical settings (<http://culturalstudiesnow.blogspot.com/2011/05/michel-foucault-of-other-spaces.html>).

Foucault coins the concept, *heterotopia*, to indicate those places which bear an unconventional relationship to other places by neutralizing, suspending, or reversing the relationships through which we can normally point at them, reflect on them, or conceive them. These ‘heterotopias’ should be distinguished from ‘utopias’, the latter being places that do not really exist, and have no basis in reality.

Foucault describes heterotopia as follows:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.<sup>35</sup>

A heterotopia is thus a real place, but simultaneously a place which stands outside of known space. Foucault quotes several interesting examples in this regard: a zoo is for instance an example of a heterotopia because it brings together into a single space animals (and people!) that are not usually together – a place where the lion and the lamb lie

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Indeed, space is “always becoming, in process, and unavoidably caught up in power relations.” P Hubbard, R Kitchin, and G Valentine, (eds.), 2004. *Key thinkers on space and place*. London: Sage Publications, 2004:4, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, “Questions on Geography”, Colin Gordon, (ed.) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. New York: Pantheon, 1980:68.

<sup>34</sup> The text, entitled *Des Espace Autres (Of Other Spaces)* was published by the French journal *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* in October 1984. It was the basis of a lecture given by Michel Foucault to a group of architects in March 1967. Although not reviewed for publication by the author and thus not part of the official corpus of his work, the manuscript was released into the public domain for an exhibition in Berlin shortly before Michel Foucault's death. It was translated from the French by Jay Miskowic ([http://www.opa-a2a.org/dissensus/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/foucault\\_michel\\_des\\_spaces\\_autres.pdf](http://www.opa-a2a.org/dissensus/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/foucault_michel_des_spaces_autres.pdf)).

<sup>35</sup> Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, 5.

together, so to speak. A heterotopia is a 'strange' space within a 'normal' space – a strange space that can be benevolent (such as a library, or a museum), but also threatening to the 'normal' space (such as for instance a concentration camp). A striking example of heterotopia, according to Foucault, is a mirror, because it uniquely and simultaneously represents utopia and heterotopia. On the one hand a mirror is a place without place, and on the other it is a real place. And, looking in the mirror we find ourselves missing in the place that we are!<sup>36</sup>

Foucault lists six interesting characteristics of heterotopia, which can only be mentioned briefly here. Firstly, although heterotopias are a part of every culture, they are manifested in a variety of forms in different places and times.<sup>37</sup> There are no stereotypes when it comes to heterotopias. Secondly, a heterotopia's function can indeed change, depending on the time and setting: the cemetery which was once in the centre of town can for example find itself on the outskirts as the town's dynamics change. A third characteristic of heterotopias is the fact that they are able to neutralize, suspend, or reverse different places – they are indeed counter-spaces. A fourth principle of heterotopias concerns the link between a heterotopia and time: A heterotopia separates us from our usual time (in this sense they are also *heterochronic*). They offer spaces within which we can reflect on time (for instance in libraries which represent 'accumulated' time); in which we can celebrate time (our achievements), or express our longings for a better time (our hope, for instance in festivals which are transient); or in which we can criticise time (lamenting aspects of our history), etc. A fifth trait of heterotopias is the remarkable fact that they always maintain a system which simultaneously isolates and connects them from and to their surroundings – a porous mechanism of opening and closing. And finally, heterotopias function in a unique network of relationships to other places. A heterotopia namely creates an imaginary order and reason which serve to stress their inexistence elsewhere.<sup>38</sup>

It is clear that the notion of space plays a primary role in the thought of Foucault. In the opening paragraph of his now famous lecture on heterotopias, he even speaks of the *epoch of space* that we have entered:

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<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, 5-6.

<sup>37</sup> It is indeed important to bear in mind that space is a culturally determined phenomenon, as every culture continuously forms its own concepts of space – resulting in a variety of interpretations of the notion: "Physical space is continuously redefined by human presence and individual interpretation of the ideology of place." VH Matthews, "Physical Space, Imagined Space, and 'Lived Space' in Ancient Israel." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 2003:33(1),12. 'Space' can mean different things for different cultures, powers and individuals. The very same space can for instance be interpreted differently, even radically opposing, from the viewpoint of a farmer, a land developer, an ecologist, a colonialist, a colonised person, a homeless person or community. The quality or potential of a specific space is determined *inter alia* by the attitude, perspective, and expectation of those who view this space. Space is also constituted by the way in which we *approach* space.

<sup>38</sup> Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, 6 ff.

The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis, and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world. The 19th century found its essential mythological resources in the second principle of thermal dynamics. The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment.<sup>39</sup>

Of importance for this article is the link between power, space, and knowledge. In a work entitled *Force of Flight*, originally published in 1973 to accompany a series of paintings by Paul Rebeyrolle (1926-2005),<sup>40</sup> Foucault offers some abbreviated, but highly interesting comments on space as power:

In the world of prisons, as in the world of dogs ('lying down' and 'standing upright'), the vertical is not one of the dimensions of space, it is the dimension of power. It dominates, it rises up, it threatens and flattens; like an enormous pyramid of buildings, those above and those below. Orders are barked out from up high and down low, orders that you are forbidden to sleep by day, to be up at night, orders to stand up straight in front of the guards, to stand at attention in front of the governor. You are crumpled by blows in the dungeon, or strapped to the restraining bed for having not wanted to go to sleep in front of the warders; and, finally, the vertical dimension of power results in hanging oneself with a clear conscience, the only means of escaping the full length of one's enclosure, the only way of dying upright.<sup>41</sup>

### Theological-aesthetical Perspectives start here

Foucault reminds us that theology (or religion in the broader sense) can either contribute towards the creating of a space conducive to reciprocal enrichment, or a space of stagnation. If religion becomes the carrier of certain unassailable 'truths', it simply perpetuates power; it becomes the handmaiden of these powers – as illustrated in the case of the DEIC's Second Charter, ordering colonialists not only to serve economic motives, but also to spread and perpetuate the 'true Reformed Christian Doctrine'.

But religion can also operate in a benevolent and reciprocal manner, as definitive and formative space-creators and space-setters within the spaces of culture. Religion can serve the discourse of crossing borders in a reciprocal manner – not with the subject acting as the Master of Discourse, but as one subservient to these discourses. Religion can keep the relationship between knowledge and power open, critical, and fluid; it can aid us in preventing words from becoming dogmas, set in stone; it can warn us when simulations (simulacra) are being fixed into some perceived Original.<sup>42</sup>

If religion, and theology in particular, does not want to end up as a mere encyclopaedia of the past or an elitist model of orthodoxy, it must be prepared to be perpetually disturbed and unmasked, especially in terms of its linkages to power. It must be brave enough to

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<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Rebeyrolle's work is little known outside France, but is reminiscent of that of Francis Bacon in terms of style, although with a pronounced emphasis on texture and the incorporation of objects in a blend between collage and painting ([http://www.ashgate.com/pdf/SamplePages/Space\\_Knowledge\\_and\\_Power\\_Intro.pdf](http://www.ashgate.com/pdf/SamplePages/Space_Knowledge_and_Power_Intro.pdf)).

<sup>41</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Force of Flight", translated by Gerald Moore, in Jeremy W Crampton, Stuart Elden (eds.), *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*. London: Ashgate, 2007:169-172.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Rolf Schieder, "Michel Foucault: Religion als Transgressionsdiskurs", 220-221.



search for the often hidden regimes of power that underlie the discourses of theology; it must be transparent enough to be taken out of its dogmatic corset and confronted with its own, often dark subconscious agendas.<sup>43</sup> It must face up to the real possibility that 'theology' or 'religion' may in fact constitute a phenomenon of power under the pretence that it is busy with a 'higher good', with the 'transcendental', while in fact it is an imminent construction that perpetually reconfigures its power into infallible and unassailable propositions.

Foucault challenges religion – the Protestant version in particular – to rethink the notion of *freedom*. His thoughts on the *freedom (or play) of the aesthetic subject* is of particular importance in this regard. It is quite ironic that Luther, for instance, understood the Reformation as the rediscovery of the fundamental experience of freedom.<sup>44</sup> Calvin, who had an unmistakable impact on the spirituality of the Dutch colonialists who came to the Cape, placed the emphasis not only on freedom *from* (law, ecclesial powers, etc.), but also on freedom *for* a life of obedience.<sup>45</sup> It is ironic indeed that this freedom was taken up in the space of colonial power, as illustrated painfully in the history of South Africa.

It has been noted that Foucault did not really connect his work to the political powers of his day, and that he was in fact, without 'political bite'. His silence on for instance colonialism has been described as 'astounding', given the potential of his thoughts in this regard.<sup>46</sup> To bring Foucault to bear on colonial matters, or to use his writings as a type of post-colonial lens, may therefore be viewed as audacious, not least by him.

Nonetheless, in this article I postulate that colonization represents a unique form of heterotopia. *Colonization is the constitution of a 'strange' space within a 'normal' (i.e. indigenous) space; it is the movement of a counter-space into another space.* This occupation of space by space can either be benevolent, or, as seems to be the case in most instances, threatening and destructive to 'normal', indigenous space.

In what follows, I endeavor to bring some of Foucault's abovementioned characteristics of heterotopia in conjunction with an iconic, aesthetical expression of colonialism in South Africa, thus in fact using Foucault's thoughts as a type of 'post-colonial' lens. The way in which Foucault himself offered aesthetical interpretations of the series of paintings by Paul Rebeyrolle, revealing the 'spaces of power' in these paintings, acts as a proto-type in this endeavour.

The iconic expression of colonialism I am referring to is a painting by Sydney Taylor (1870-1952), a British artist who lived in South Africa for a number of years, and produced several artworks depicting South African scenes. This painting portrays the landing of Jan van Riebeeck at the Cape in 1652, and thus condenses in an aesthetical manner the first official act of colonisation.<sup>47</sup> It is, in my opinion, a remarkable depiction of a *space of*

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Beukes, "Teenswoordige geskiedenis", 888.

<sup>44</sup> Albrecht Grözinger, *Homiletik. Lehrbuch Praktische Theologie Band II*, Hrsg Albrecht Grözinger, Christoph Morgenthaler und Friedrich Schweitzer. München: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2008:55.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Pieter Coertzen, *Die Hugenote van Suid-Afrika 1688-1988*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg, 1988:143-152.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Stephen Legg, "Beyond the European province: Foucault and post colonialism", in Jeremy W Crampton, Stuart Elden (eds.), *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*. London: Ashgate, 2007:137-156.

<sup>47</sup> Historians have pointed out that the intent was originally not to colonize the Cape, but only to create a halfway refreshment station for ships of the DEIC en route to the East. In effect, however, this first landing of the Dutch resulted in colonization. It is also a known fact that the Dutch were not the first Europeans to set foot on South African soil – the first were the Portuguese in the person of Bartholomew Dias, whose ship

colonial power (and consequently colonial 'knowledge') being constituted within an indigenous space.



The figure of Jan van Riebeeck is the dominant one in the painting. As a matter of fact, *bodies* play an important role in the composition of the painting. It is interesting to note that Foucault also gave the body an explicit place within a theory of power. The 'descent' into genealogy involves a descent into the body.<sup>48</sup> Domination in fact "establishes marks of its power and engraves memories on things and even bodies."<sup>49</sup> Sovereign power was indelibly inscribed in the body – whether it took on the form of torture of those who were overpowered, or as a power based on the ubiquity of the bodies of those who did the overpowering (for instance the King or other forms of bodily power).<sup>50</sup>

The body of Jan van Riebeeck forms the centre of the space of power in Taylor's painting. His bodily attitude and stance, his *body language* says it all: I am a person of power, and I represent power. He looks down at the indigenous people, but his gaze also

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floundered on the South African coastline in 1488. The Portuguese did not evaluate this part of the world as a promising harbour for seafaring traders. Jan van Riebeeck arrived on 6 April 1652 with three ships, the *Drommedaris*, *Reijger*, and *De Goede Hoop*. With him were 82 men and 8 women.

<sup>48</sup> Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", translated by Donald F Bouchard and Sherry Simon in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, (ed.) Donald F Bouchard. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977:154.

<sup>49</sup> Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", 147.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Pasewark, *A Theology of Power*, 24.

roams further, already colonizing the spaces beyond the indigenous people.<sup>51</sup> His clothes make the man; his walking stick resembles the scepter of one sitting on a throne; his hat hints at a crown. His body, his spatial presence, etched out against the backdrop of the Cape of Good Hope's mountains and oceans, makes an unmistakable statement: this space is now being occupied.

It is clear: in the picture Van Riebeeck comes from another world, another (superior) space. Behind him, the flag of this other, superior world can be seen – the blue, orange and white emblem of the Netherlands and the powerful Dutch East India Company (DEIC). Behind him on the left the bodies of other colonialists fill up the space – clearly subservient to him, and of a lower order, but also carriers of goods that signify (superior), colonial knowledge.

On the right the bodies of the indigenous people are depicted, in complete contrast to the dominant body of Van Riebeeck and the colonial bodies that come in his wake. While Van Riebeeck's body stands there in its entire powerful splendour, and the bodies of the other colonialists are colourful, active, and industrious, the indigenous people are almost colourless, with body languages that speak of submission and fear. The squatting figure in front of Van Riebeeck correlates exactly with Foucault's description of the vertical dimensions of space, dimensions of 'lying down' and 'standing upright'.

The indigenous body standing closest to Van Riebeeck slants away from him, underlining the power and superiority of the dominant body, and possibly also the submissive body's fear. The sticks that the indigenous people hold in their hands are puny and powerless in comparison to the sceptre yielded by Van Riebeeck. They have no flag, no identity; they are already absorbed into the space of the colonialists. As a matter of fact, they crouch in the space between Van Riebeeck (and the flag behind him), and the officer standing behind them on the far right of the picture, also holding a flag. They are swallowed up in the power of the space created by the flags surrounding them, flanked by the colonialists who encircle them. We are reminded of Foucault's reference to the modern notion of *emplacement* – which means that "the relations between locations in space are the constitutive principle of space perception." In this painting, clearly, the relations between locations constitute a space perception of power versus subordination.

Besides the bodies, we also see three ships in the picture – the main vessel in the background, the smaller one mooring, and one already on land. They represent visually the process of colonization. Ships were, in many cases, the vehicle through which the 'strange' space of the colony was brought to the 'normal' space of the colonized. The main ship in the background, beautifully crafted (and with yet another Dutch flag flying!) looms up as a symbol of power from another space.<sup>52</sup>

It is a remarkable fact that Foucault himself called ships the *heterotopia par excellence*. In the final paragraph of his famous lecture on heterotopia, he states as follows:

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<sup>51</sup> Apartheid, which came much later (1948), could indeed also be called an occupation of space. In fact, "Apartheid was a politics of space more than anything. If you look at the 1913 and 1936 Land Acts they are all about space, and much of the apartheid legislation was about denying people the right to move. It's all about space, restricting space." Darrel Koloane and Ivor Powell, "In Conversation" in: DELISS, Clementine (Hrsg) *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1995:263. It is therefore understandable that the debate about the re-possession of land and the re-naming of spaces is of such importance in post-apartheid South Africa, and will continue to be so for some time to come.

<sup>52</sup> This is one of three with which Van Riebeeck and his following arrived at the Cape of Good Hope.

Brothels and colonies are two extreme types of heterotopia, and if we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has been not only for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development... but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.<sup>53</sup>

In the painting by Taylor, the ship represents the movement of a powerful space to a less powerful space; its looming presence anticipates the clash of these spaces; in fact it already celebrates the ultimate outcome of this clash – the conquest of the powerless by the powerful. But, and this is the irony, the clash and victory are still shrouded, as the mask of knowledge is worn: the technology (ships), the culinary expertise (goods, food, etc.), the organised precision (soldiers), being harmless in themselves, *become tools of power within the frame of this space of power*. The various expressions of knowledge depicted in the painting in fact hide the ultimate agenda of the bearers of power.

I reiterate: it is my contention that colonization represents a unique form of that which Foucault called heterotopias. Events of colonization – the shifting of spaces in and between continents – can be seen in almost every culture and in almost every period of history, albeit in a variety of forms in these different places and times, and with diverse agendas, functions, and outcomes. True to Foucault's understanding of heterotopias, events of colonization are intrinsically the opposing of one space to another – they indeed signify the clash of counter-spaces.

As is the case with heterotopias, the act of colonization also maintains a system which simultaneously isolates and connects the spaces involved (in this case the colonialists and the colonized) from and to their surroundings – a porous mechanism of opening and closing. It is not an overstatement to say that the movement (of power and knowledge) of one space to another in terms of colonization agendas was a one-way movement. The portals of these spaces were opened up to allow movement of power and knowledge from the powerful to the (perceived as) less powerful, and vice versa, other portals were opened up to allow movement of the “most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens” – to use the words of Foucault – from the (perceived as) less powerful to the powerful. The ‘local knowledges’ were not deemed appropriate or useful enough to be exported through the portals, or, as a matter of fact, to be kept intact within the space of the occupied.

At the mechanism of these portals, opening up and closing those according to the dictates and agendas of the powerful, but closely concealed behind the mask of ‘knowledge’ and ‘economic development’ – to use Foucault's words again – yes, at the helm of the ship, stand the powerful. In short, colonization, like heterotopia, creates an imaginary order and reason which serve to stress their inexistence elsewhere, i.e. to conceal the origins (the genealogy!) of their ‘real existence’. It serves the power-play of masking.

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<sup>53</sup> Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, 13. It would also be interesting to draw some parallels between what Foucault says about the “Ship of Fools” as a space to which ‘madmen’ were condemned, their ‘madness’ however, being determined by social constructions or a specific episteme. Cf. *Madness and Civilization: A history of Insanity in an Age of Reason*. London: Vintage, 1988:11 ff.

### **Finding Space for Time**

In closing: taking the above discussed painting of Taylor as a condensed, aesthetical record of the colonization of South Africa into account, it could be said that this painting offers us a space in which we can reflect on time. In this sense, the aesthetic space opened up by this work of art acts as a *type of heterotopia itself* – as all art does. It separates us from our usual time (in this sense art could also be described as *heterochronic*). For different viewers this heterotopia may be interpreted as either benevolent (as the celebration of an achievement), or as destructive (as a reason for lament because of its ultimate outcomes).

It all depends on which space we find ourselves in.