Foucault's museum: difference, representation, and genealogy

*Beth Lord**

University of Dundee

Abstract

Foucault's work has been used to promote a negative view of the museum as an Enlightenment institution that embodies state power and strives to order the world according to universal rules and the concept of a total history. This article argues that an analysis of Foucault's work actually leads to a view of the museum that is positive and progressive for dismantling the very notions of historical continuity and coherence that Foucault rejects. This gives the museum a unique status for Foucault, as an institution that has its origins in the Enlightenment values or 'capabilities' that enable us to overcome the relations of power that are based on those Enlightenment values. The museum exemplifies the tension in Foucault's position on the Enlightenment: that we must rely on Enlightenment values of critique, freedom and progress in order to reject the Enlightenment relations of power that have been based on these values. The first part of the paper suggests a Foucaultian definition of the museum as a space of difference and space of representation. The second part argues that on the basis of this definition, the museum has the potential to enact Foucault's genealogy, and to contribute to progress.

Key words: Museum, Foucault, genealogy, enlightenment, representation, difference, history/critique

What are we to make of Michel Foucault's claim that the museum is a heterotopia? When reading Foucault's description of the heterotopia in his 1967 essay 'Different Spaces', we are left with the impression of something negative, uncanny, and disturbing: a heterotopia is a space of difference, a space that is absolutely central to a culture but in which the relations between elements of a culture are suspended, neutralized, or reversed. Unlike utopias, heterotopias are real places 'designed into the very institution of society' in which all the other real emplacements of a culture are 'at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable' (Foucault 1998: 178). Foucault's prime examples of the heterotopia are the cemetery and the ship: the cemetery is a different place compared with ordinary cultural spaces; it is a space of the difference of life and death, duration and eternity; and yet it is a space that is connected to all the other emplacements of the society, since every individual and family has relatives in the cemetery. The ship is 'a piece of floating space, a placeless place'; it functions according to its own rules in the space between ports, between cultures, between stable points (Foucault 1998: 185). Holiday resorts, gardens, fairs, theme parks, cinemas and museums are also heterotopian for Foucault: they are those sites in a culture designated as spaces of difference, spaces in which ordinary relations within the culture are made and allowed to be other.

While Foucault's alignment of the museum with the cemetery is less funereal than the dour claim of Adorno and other twentieth-century philosophers that the museum is a sepulchre for dead objects ('museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association' [Adorno 1981: 175]; the museum is a 'meditative necropolis' and 'the historicity of death' [Merleau-Ponty 1993: 99, 100]),[1] one can read a certain negativity into Foucault's description of the museum here that can be similarly inferred from *Discipline and Punish* and *The Order*

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of Things. A superficial reading of Foucault's work would lead to the conclusion that he takes a dim view of museums. Like hospitals, prisons, and schools, museums are instances of state power as it is embodied in the built environment; like encyclopaedias and libraries, museums are monuments of the eighteenth-century drive to categorize, classify, and order the world into a totality universal in scope and universally intelligible. The museum can be – and has been – characterized as an Enlightenment institution whose power to collect and display objects is a function of capitalism and imperialism, and whose power to form individuals is exercised through the careful and ordered deployment of knowledge within an institutionally controlled and publicly monitored space (see, e.g., Hooper-Greenhill 1989, 1992, 2000; Bennett 1995; Pearce 1992; Crimp 1983; Luke 2002). From this broadly Foucaultian perspective, the museum might be considered an example of the worst sort of Enlightenment tendencies to totalize, categorize and control the world.

But to draw this conclusion from Foucault would be to ignore his refusal to see such institutions as examples either of the values of some pre-existing historical era, or of the conscious, intentional, and moral endeavour of the human subject. The museum, for Foucault, is exemplary neither of 'the Enlightenment' as a historical era, nor of 'enlightenment' as a subjective comportment, good or bad, towards the world of objects and people. If museums of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries participated in the exercise of power through the categorization and controlled deployment of knowledge, it is not because of the 'Enlightenment vision' of museum collectors, curators, or directors, nor because museums reflected a programme of pre-existing universal Enlightenment values. There is a tendency to understand museums in these terms today, and thus to take sides over whether the Enlightenment programme is fundamentally 'good' (and thus to be preserved) or 'bad' (and thus to be overwritten). The current debate around the 2003 'Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums' is evidence of the tendency on both sides to ascribe moral value to museums' Enlightenment heritage.[2] But this tendency arises from understanding both the museum and the Enlightenment in terms of what Foucault calls 'total history' (2002: 7-10). Such thinking interprets 'documents' of the past in terms of the assumed continuity and coherence of a historical era. As Foucault puts it, 'total history' moves from the assumed 'monument' to the 'document' – in this case, from 'the Enlightenment' to the museum as an institution exemplary of it. Foucault wants, instead, to perform an archaeology of institutions that moves from the 'document' to the 'monument', examining particular institutions and their practices and discovering how they fit in to discontinuous historical series. To use Foucault to suggest that the museum is the product of 'bad' Enlightenment thinking is to see the museum as an example of an assumed historical era and its values, and is thus to misconstrue Foucault's archaeology of institutions as a traditional history of objects.

It would be equally simplistic to use Foucault to arrive at an unremittingly positive view of the museum, as an example either of 'good' Enlightenment thinking or of present-day values of cultural pluralism, since such a conclusion would also be based on the assumption that the museum exemplifies the ideas and values of a fixed historical era. Yet the museum *can* be seen to be a positive force – and indeed, it can be seen to be a positive force for dismantling the very notions of historical continuity and coherence that Foucault holds in contempt. This is neither because the museum is defined by its participation in the Enlightenment project of progress, nor because it exercises postmodern scepticism about Enlightenment values. Instead of understanding the museum as an instance of either of these 'monuments' of thought, we must approach it as a contingent 'document' that may be constituent of multiple, discontinuous historical series. When the museum is understood essentially as a heterotopia or space of difference, it becomes clear that the museum can perform Foucault's own historical methodology of genealogy. It is in this sense that the museum can contribute to progress. Progress, understood in Foucault's sense, is not the necessary progress of 'total history', nor a teleological progress towards a goal or ideal; it is, rather, progress as the growth of capabilities to resist and transgress systems that cast power relations and historical events as fixed and necessary (see Hoy 1986: 138-45). It is to this type of progress, associated with Foucault's genealogy and 'general history' (2002: 7-10), that the museum can contribute. In this sense, the museum is seen to be a document of postmodernism as much as it is a document of the Enlightenment.

This conjunction gives the museum a special status with respect to Foucault's work: it is 'postmodern' not in spite of, but *because* of its 'Enlightenment' past. As I will suggest in what follows, the museum functions according to an *ethos* of permanent critique of its own history that Foucault calls 'the thread that may connect us with the Enlightenment' (1984b: 42; cf. Bernstein 1994). The museum can be a 'postmodern' space, in a relation of permament critique to the past, because it partakes of those Enlightenment values that inform critical practice. This points to a problem: the museum is 'progressive'– progressing *out* of Enlightenment values of universal truth and reason – because it can critique those values, and yet it cannot perform this progressive critique without relying on the Enlightenment values at the basis of that notion. The museum thus highlights a well-known and complex tension in Foucault's work between the renunciation of Enlightenment values of truth, reason, and subjectivity, and the recognition that it is impossible to promote justice, freedom, and progress without some reliance on those values (see, e.g., Habermas 1994; Norris 1994; Fraser 1994; Schmidt and Wartenburg, 1994). Is an institution that can critique its own foundations only by making use of the fixed values of those foundations one that must renounce any claim to be 'progressive' in Foucault's sense?

While I do not intend to enter into the debate over Foucault's ethics and politics, I do not think that an institution which, historically, has relied upon fixed values thereby disqualifies itself from resisting such values. In fact, such an institution is best placed to critique and progress out of the fixed structures of the past. I aim to show here that if the museum can be seen to be genealogical and to perform its own critique, it can also be seen to contribute to progress as the growth of capabilities. There is therefore more at stake here for Foucault than there is with most of the institutions to which he applies his analysis. Foucault does not offer a sustained analysis of the museum, but he claims that the museum is a heterotopia, and that natural history collections are spaces of the difference of words and things. In the first part of the paper I will suggest a definition of the museum along these Foucaultian lines as a space of difference and a space of representation. In the second part I will argue that on the basis of this definition the museum can be understood to perform Foucaultian genealogy and to contribute to Foucault's project for progress as the growth of capabilities for resistance and transgression.

1. Defining the museum: a space of representation and a space of difference

To understand how Foucault characterizes the museum, we need to return to the notion of the heterotopia developed in 'Different Spaces'. This notion is alternatively – and better – elucidated in *The Order of Things* (to which we will return), but in 'Different Spaces' it is linked specifically to the museum. The heterotopia is a space of difference, in which ordinary cultural emplacements are brought together and represented, contested, and reversed. Sacred and forbidden spaces, 'crisis' spaces, and spaces for holding deviant individuals are included in this definition. Heterotopias are spatially isolated places that juxtapose incompatible objects and discontinuous times, and have 'the role of creating a space of illusion that denounces all real space, all real emplacements … as being even more illusory' (Foucault 1998: 184). Thus cinemas and meticulously organized gardens are heterotopias; in presenting an illusory version of human life or nature they question and contest the 'real' order of things. The concept of heterotopia has often been used in discussions of place in geography, architectural theory, and studies of the built environment, linked to non-places, spaces of conflict, or alienating spaces (e.g. Soja 1989, Lefebvre 1991). It has also been frequently invoked in museum studies (e.g. Bennett 1995; Rogoff 1994; Kahn 1995; Belting 2001). While these studies generally accept that the museum is a heterotopia, they give almost no sense of how or why it is one. It is a significant concept because it has the potential to shift the definition of the museum away from objects and collections and towards difference.

What is it that makes the museum a heterotopia? Foucault suggests a spatial aspect and a temporal aspect: the museum brings together disparate objects from different times in a single space that attempts to enclose the totality of time – a totality that is protected from time's erosion. The museum thus engages in a double paradox: it contains infinite time in a finite space, and it is both a space of time and a 'timeless' space. What makes it a heterotopia, then, appears to be threefold: its juxtaposition of temporally discontinuous objects, its attempt to present the totality of time, and its isolation, as an entire space, from normal temporal

continuity. The museum is likened to another heterotopia, the holiday village that promises a temporary return to a lost 'natural' way of life: in visiting, 'one abolishes time, but time is also regained, the whole history of humanity goes back to its source as if in a kind of grand immediate knowledge' (Foucault 1998: 183).

As rich as it is in describing the museum's relation to time, Foucault's account limits the museum to being a space that contains and represents the totality of history. But museums have not always been characterized by this endeavour to present all of history, and they need not be characterized in this way. The museum as a 'heterotopia of time that accumulates indefinitely' (Foucault 1998: 182) is not part of the essential definition of a museum, but is historically contingent, as Foucault acknowledges:

> Museums and libraries are heterotopias in which time never ceases to pile up and perch on its own summit, whereas in the seventeenth century, and up to the end of the seventeenth century still, museums and libraries were the expression of an individual choice. By contrast, the idea of accumulating everything, the idea of constituting a sort of general archive, the desire to contain all times, all ages, all forms, all tastes in one place, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside time and protected from its erosion, the project of thus organizing a kind of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in a place that will not move – well, in fact, all this belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are characteristic of Western culture in the nineteenth century. (Foucault 1998: 182)

Characterizing the museum as a space of time limits the museum to the form, aims and activities it took on in the nineteenth century. Extending Foucault's own analysis of the epistemic shifts in *The Order of Things*, it is only in the nineteenth century, when time, history, and evolution become the dominant ideas governing the organization and display of collections, that museums become concerned with exhibiting objects as *historical* and with presenting the totality of time (1970: 263-79). Museums today for the most part no longer aim to 'accumulate everything' or to 'constitute a place of all times that is itself outside time': as Hooper-Greenhill states, 'the great collecting phase of museums is over' (2000: 152). Nor, as Foucault's analysis implies, did collectors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries generally have the aim to present total history (see Bennett 1995: 96). Differences exist between museums of different eras and types, and ideas about the museum's purpose have changed historically. For Foucault, then, the museum's attempt to present the totality of time is historically contingent. Yet if the seventeenth-century cabinet of curiosities and the twenty-first-century science museum are no less heterotopian than the nineteenth-century universal museum, then the heterotopian nature of the museum can in no way depend on the representation of temporal discontinuity or on the presentation of the totality of history.

In what way, then, is the museum *essentially* a heterotopia, through all its historical changes and differences in type? Perhaps it is the spatial aspect, the juxtaposition of temporally discontinuous objects, that makes it heterotopian. But surely it is not enough to say that the museum brings together different objects from different places and eras. Many museums, certainly the great universal museums of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, do this. But museums today often bring together objects by virtue of their geographical or functional similarity: the objects displayed in the Tank Museum in Dorset, for instance, are almost exclusively armoured manoeuvred vehicles from a limited geographical and historical range. Many museums use fabricated objects to illustrate the concepts and principles that are the real content of the display: the Wellcome Wing at the Science Museum, London communicates complex ideas from the biomedical sciences using a large number of interactive, non-object-based exhibits. Many museums today rely less on objects than they do on narrative and the experience of an architectural space (cf. Belting 2001: 80), two examples being the Jewish Museum Berlin and Imperial War Museum North in Salford (both in Daniel Libeskind buildings). To define the museum as a heterotopia because it is a space of different objects is either banal (a supermarket is also a space of different objects) or overly reliant on the notion, associated with the nineteenth-century museum, of a 'timeless' storehouse of temporally

discontinuous objects. Perhaps inevitably such a definition ends up comparing the museum with the cemetery or an abstract 'space of accumulation' (Lefebvre 1991: 263).

The threefold explanation of the museum as heterotopia implied by 'Different Spaces' fails to account for what the museum is and has been. In order to understand how the museum is in its essence a heterotopia, and to show why that designation is crucial for demonstrating the progressive potential of the museum, we need to consider the heterotopia literally as a *space* of *difference*. We need to focus on Foucault's claim that heterotopias represent, contest, and reverse the cultural order to which they are linked. This suggests that the museum does not only represent objects that are different from one another, but that it represents objects *in their difference* from the conceptual orders in which those objects would normally be understood. The museum is a heterotopia not because it contains different objects, nor because it contains or juxtaposes different times, but rather because it presents a more profound kind of difference: the difference between objects and concepts. What every museum displays, in one form or other, is the difference inherent in *interpretation*. Interpretation is the relation between things and the words used to describe them, and this relation always involves a gap. Museums need not contain artefacts and need not contain text; sometimes interpretation is implicit and hidden. But without interpretation, without representing a relation between things and conceptual structures, an institution is not a museum, but a storehouse. The museum is the space in which the difference inherent in its content is experienced. It is the difference between things and words, or between objects and conceptual structures: what Foucault calls the 'space of representation' (1970: 130). As we will see, the space of representation *is* the heterotopia.

Interpretation and representation are intrinsically connected here. Interpretation in the museum is the way that objects are conceptually explicated. Representation, in the very specific context in which Foucault uses it, is the space between things and ways of conceptualizing them. The museum would be impossible without this epistemic space of representation that opens up with the dissolution, in the early modern period, of the idea that things and concepts are necessarily and divinely connected: 'signs were then part of things themselves, whereas in the seventeenth century they become modes of representation' (Foucault 1970: 129). Once conceptual systems are taken to be products of human reason, a space or gap opens up between mind and world, concept and thing, *les mots et les choses*. This gap starts to be evident in the intellectual developments of the mid-seventeenth century – that crucial moment of epistemic rupture that Foucault describes in *The Order of Things*. Whereas this gap did not exist under the pre-modern metaphysical assumption that true concepts and things are perfectly adequate to one another in a universe created by God, once the world is considered to be conceptually constituted by rationality – a conviction that starts with Descartes and reaches its height with Kant – there arise insurmountable doubts about the adequacy of conceptual schemes to objects. The general eighteenth-century philosophical concern over whether and how the mind can adequately represent the world responds to this doubt. In modernity, the gap between words and things cannot be closed, but can only be bridged. Enlightenment philosophy is characterized by the need to provide a theory of representation that will justify the application of concepts to the world, and the simultaneous recognition that such theories will never be fully adequate and such concepts will always be limited in their use.

What is new about the seventeenth century, for Foucault, is that this problem of representation enters into all fields of knowledge and transforms them. 'Natural history finds its locus in the gap that is now opened up between things and words' (Foucault 1970: 129-30). Collections and displays of objects existed before the seventeenth century, but the 'space of representation' makes possible an institution that *interprets* objects; an institution that puts on display the ways that objects are conceptually understood. Museums are among the 'documents' of this historical era concerned with the problem of naming:

> The Classical age [i.e. roughly 1650-1800] gives history a quite different meaning: that of undertaking a meticulous examination of things themselves for the first time, and then of transcribing what it has gathered in smooth, neutralized, and faithful words. […] The documents of this new history are not other words, texts or records, but unencumbered spaces in which things are juxtaposed:

> herbariums, collections, gardens; the locus of this history is a non-temporal rectangle in which, stripped of all commentary, of all enveloping language, creatures present themselves one beside another, their surfaces visible, grouped according to their common features, and thus already virtually analysed, and bearers of nothing but their own individual names. (Foucault 1970: 131)

The fact that early museums displayed their collections wordlessly is, curiously, evidence that interpretation had become their very essence. The objects on display are 'already virtually analysed' by being grouped according to a system of classification or the 'order of nature'. Museums, from their beginnings to the present day, do not only display objects, but display the ways in which objects are related to words, names, and concepts: they display systems of representation. Museums are centrally concerned with that problem of seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophy: how can the things of the world be adequately represented in the conceptual systems of reason? And museums are met by the same problem, that conceptual systems will always fall short of perfect adequacy to the world. By putting 'the order of things' itself on display, museums are spaces for representing the space of representation as such.

It is this 'Enlightenment' idea, that objects must be interpreted according to representational systems that are never absolutely adequate to them, that has remained the foundation of the museum through its historical transformations up to the present day. For museums continue to display conceptual orders, and to leave the adequacy of those orders open to contestation. The museum is a space for the visitor to reflect upon the order of things and the problem of the adequacy of representation. The visitor is invited – though sometimes only implicitly – to consider how conceptual schemes really relate to objects, and whether other conceptual schemes are more or less adequate to represent those objects. The museum has undoubtedly undergone historical changes and takes on different forms; but what differs here is the *way* in which museums present themselves to their publics as spaces of representation. The eighteenth-century museum, in offering virtually no textual interpretation for its objects or the order that brings them together, requires the visitor to reflect upon the order of objects presented and its adequacy to the plenitude of nature. The authoritative, text-heavy displays that arise in nineteenth-century museums as the result of pedagogic, sociological and political changes in the museum idea (see Bennett 1995; Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 2000) do not altogether remove that requirement but simply present it differently. The nineteenth-century museum display is didactic in presenting the order of things as historical and progressive, and leaves little room for contesting curatorial authority. The visitor is still asked to reflect upon the order of objects presented, but is now asked to reflect upon the evidence for the rightness of that order. Despite the limited opportunities for contestation, the nineteenth-century museum is still a space of representation. Malraux's remark that the museum forces us to question the principle that brings together the different expressions of the world that it displays (1956: 15) is, after all, directed at the nineteenth-century museum.

Examples of the nineteenth-century museum type (or what Hooper-Greenhill [2000] calls the 'modernist museum', for it persisted well into the twentieth century) are still prevalent across Europe; the natural history exhibitions at the Royal Museum (part of the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh), are good examples of the didactic mode of display. Examples of the eighteenth-century museum type are less common. While the comparative anatomy gallery at the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle in Paris is close to being an 'original' example,[3] the British Museum's Enlightenment Gallery, which replicates an eighteenth-century exhibition, perhaps gives us the best example of this mode of display. The Enlightenment Gallery displays closely-packed objects on high shelves with little or no textual interpretation; the undeclared order of things is on display, its adequacy to represent nature open to contestation. It asks the visitor to reflect upon the adequacy of the conceptual order to the things, to consider what brings those things together, and to bring other interpretations to bear; it puts representation itself on display (for a longer analysis, see Lord 2005).

Over the last thirty years or so, with increasing recognition of the limitations of the didactic model, and with socially and culturally inclusive learning now a primary aim for museums, many museum displays today explicitly encourage visitors to consider how objects

are related to concepts and categories and whether they might be interpreted otherwise, in other social or cultural orders. Interestingly, there is a current trend for this to be realized in 'Enlightenment' styles of display, with objects presented in high-density display units (sometimes indistinguishable from visible storage), in non-chronological orders, with minimal interpretation. Examples of the use of the 'Enlightenment' model can be found at the Darwin Centre at the Natural History Museum, London (Phase One opened 2002), the Warwickshire historic house/ art gallery Compton Verney (opened 2004), and the Joey and Toby Tanenbaum Gallery of China at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto (opened 2005). By cutting down on authoritative interpretative text and putting objects in unexpected orders, all encourage multiple ways of relating things and concepts. Hooper-Greenhill, in her description of the 'post-museum', shows how museums increasingly allow multiple voices to be heard and encourage plural interpretations (2000: 140-62). But she sees the possibility of multiple and contesting relations of things and concepts as a fundamentally new development in museums, rather than being implicit in what the museum is. I suggest instead that throughout its development, the museum represents systems of applying concepts to objects, and is a space for presenting, reflecting upon and contesting the relation between concepts and things. Museums are fundamentally not about objects but about representation, and anything that operates as a space of representation can be called a museum.

Understanding the museum as space of representation is an extension of understanding it as a heterotopia. The museum is a space of difference not only in the spatial sense of bringing different objects together, but primarily in the sense of the difference inherent in its content. Because the content of the museum is *interpretation*, the ways in which objects are explicated, that difference is the space between objects and conceptual systems for understanding them. As a space of representation, the museum *is* a space of difference. Foucault's museum is not a funereal storehouse of objects from different times, but an experience of the gap between things and the conceptual and cultural orders in which they are interpreted.

2. Genealogy and progress: 'the growth of capabilities'

Defining the museum as a space of representation aligns it with its Enlightenment origins, but does not restrict the museum to being an artefact of this historical era. The museum is indeed an Enlightenment institution and through its history retains its Enlightenment concern with representation. But this is not to say that it is *because* the museum is developed in the Enlightenment that it manifests certain ideas common to that time. Rather, for Foucault, it is because the museum is a space of representation that it is exemplary of 'Enlightenment' thinking, and not the other way around (1970: 131). Because it is an 'Enlightenment' space of representation and a space of difference, the museum is able to perform a critique of its own historical foundations and to fit in to a historical series of postmodernist or poststructuralist thinking. In this section I will suggest that museums can perform Foucault's genealogy, and that they are able to do so not because they 'constitute a sort of general archive' full of objects of analysis, nor because they have signed up to a pluralist or relativist programme in the late twentieth century, but because they are primarily spaces of difference and representation. It is thus on the basis of their 'Enlightenment' origins that museums can perform the critique that is crucial to Foucault's historical methodology.

There is no contradiction in saying that the museum is 'postmodern' because it is an Enlightenment institution. It is characteristic of some postmodernist thinkers to set up the Enlightenment as 'the modern that postmodernism revolts against' and thus to cast its institutions in terms of a negative and reductive view of concepts of reason, universality, and progress (Gordon 2001: 1). But to take this view is to simplify the ways that the major postmodernist and poststructuralist thinkers – including Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, and Deleuze – engage with Enlightenment concepts and institutions. Far from advocating either an acceptance or a rejection of the Enlightenment, Foucault calls on us 'to refuse everything that might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian alternative' between accepting and remaining within the tradition of rationalism on the one hand, and criticizing and trying to escape from Enlightenment principles of rationality on the other (1984b: 43). What we gain from Enlightenment thinking, what we must deploy in our analysis of it, and what is misunderstood

by any 'postmodernist' thinker who urges an outright rejection of Enlightenment values, is the method of *critique*. Critique, to be sharply distinguished from criticism, is a matter of reflecting upon our own conditions of possibility, upon the historically determined limits that are imposed upon us, and upon the possibility of transgressing those limits. Foucault does not set up an opposition or even a dialectic between Enlightenment and postmodernist concepts, for all postmodernist concepts are subject to critique and the unearthing of their own historical lineage. On his view, through performing a 'critical ontology of ourselves', we must recognize that we are beings historically determined by the Enlightenment – and that the ability and imperative to perform critique are based on a philosophical attitude that first arose in the Enlightenment.[4]

Foucault is not suggesting that we affirm this Enlightenment method of critique any more than he is suggesting that we reject it outright. It is a matter of transforming critique from the Kantian model that sought 'formal structures with universal value' to a method that seeks to treat instances of discourse as historical events. Foucaultian critique is

> a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. In this sense, criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method. (Foucault 1984b: 46)

'Genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method': what does Foucault mean by this, and how should we proceed to diagnose our own history? Foucault's genealogical method, based partly on Nietzsche's use of genealogy to argue that moral values are historical and contingent rather than metaphysical and necessary, similarly opposes itself to the search for origins and universal structures of knowledge (Foucault 1984a: 76-100). Rather than interpreting events in terms of an assumed unity or teleology, rather than mapping the evolution of a culture or the destiny of a people, genealogy is a 'descent' into the contingencies and accidents of the past. It is these contingent series and accidental events, rather than continuities of historical eras or unities of thinking, that are the condition of possibility of the present. Genealogy displaces those assumed origins, unities and continuities, not in order to replace them with new unities, but in order to reveal the emergence of discontinuities.

While Foucault wants to reject teleological structures and grand narratives of progress, he does believe genealogy to have a progressive purpose. The investigation into our own conditions of possibility will disrupt the modern notion of the self and enable us to contest those structures of power that are discovered to have constructed it. Genealogy 'will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think' (Foucault 1984b: 46). In helping us to progress out of the governing ideas and structures of the past, genealogy contributes 'to the undefined work of freedom'. The tensions inherent in this position – that 'the truth-values of enlightened thought […] cannot be abandoned without at the same time renouncing any claim to promote or articulate the interests of justice, autonomy, and human emancipation' (Norris 1994: 184) – were famously raised by Habermas in the 1980s (see Habermas 1994), and have been analyzed by Dreyfus and Rabinow (1986), Hoy (1986), Norris (1994), and Fraser (1994), among others. The complexity of Foucault's position arises from the need both to 'transcend' the ideas of freedom and progress and to continue to work under the banner of those ideas. It is possible to treat such ideas as contingent historical events while recognizing their necessity for the act of diagnosing and overcoming the ways they have historically been used to exercise power. What is at stake in the question of Enlightenment values, Foucault says, is this: 'how can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?' (1984b: 48). It is in terms of this 'growth of capabilities' that we must understand progress for Foucault (see Falzon 1998: 52-6; Hoy 1986: 138-45).

So it is that our 'capability' to progress out of historical conditions can be realized only when it has been disconnected from the notion of universal teleological progress. History is 'progressive' precisely in denying the possibility of teleological progress and undoing the power relations it has carried with it:

> History becomes 'effective' to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being. 'Effective' history deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature, and it will not permit itself to be transported by a voiceless obstinacy toward a millennial ending. It will uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity. This is because knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting. (Foucault 1984a: 88)

If the claim that knowledge is not made for understanding sounds like a Kantian worry about the adequacy of the world to our cognitive faculties, Foucault makes it a Nietzschean assertion by saying that it is made for cutting: we must renounce reliance on the ideas of a coherent nature, a stable human self, or a continuous human history. Knowledge of the past is not 'made for' those ideas; it is made both to be 'cut up' and for the act of 'cutting through' assumed continuities. Genealogy, which owes as much of a debt to Kant as it does to Nietzsche (see Han 2002), has the simultaneous aims to identify the contingent historical conditions of the self and to liberate the body from those contingencies.

Genealogy is achieved through *archaeology* as a method. If the aim of genealogy is to descend into the contingencies of the past to reveal discontinuities in history, archaeology works on contingent 'documents' and finds them to be arranged in discontinuous series. The method is characterized in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* as a rejection of 'total history' in favour of 'general history'. 'Total history' seeks to reconstitute 'the overall form of a civilization' or the principle of a society, and articulates history into units or stages, each with its own principle of cohesion (Foucault 2002: 10-11). 'Total history' is committed to the unities and continuities that Foucault wants to reject. By contrast, a 'general history' holds on to series of events without assuming a general law, principle, or centre holding them together. The task of a general history is to determine what form of relation may be described between these different series, what successions, simultaneities, and interplays between them it is possible to draw up. 'A total description draws all phenomena around a single centre – a principle, a meaning, a spirit, a world-view, an overall shape; a general history, on the contrary, would deploy the space of a dispersion' (Foucault 2002: 11).

Now it might be said that one of the aims of the museum is to represent or at least work towards a 'total history'; the nineteenth-century universal museum certainly explicitly had that goal, and it might be said that the British Museum, for instance, is still attempting to complete this infinite task, representing history and culture in neat, internally coherent units that contribute to an overall view of the progression of the world. But if we take seriously the definition of the museum as a space of difference and space of representation, we can see that even those museums that appear to 'draw all phenomena around a single centre' actually deploy 'the space of a dispersion'. All museums, regardless of the historically contingent way they represent history, display the difference inherent to interpretation: the difference between words and things. Even those museums that are organized according to the idea of a universal history must interpret objects in terms of their relation to a conceptual scheme. Even if this scheme is presented as incontestable, and even if this scheme is used as a tool for the oppression or occlusion of other conceptual schemes, the difference between the objects and the scheme remains. Paradoxically, the fact that some museums represent history as 'total history' does not detract from their capacity to perform Foucaultian 'general history'. The opposite is, rather, the case: it is because museums represent objects according to *any* conceptual scheme, including that of universal history, that they can be spaces for the performance of Foucaultian archaeology; the particular conceptual scheme they employ is historically contingent.

We can see how archaeology and genealogy operate in the museum by looking at Foucault's broader definition of the heterotopia in *The Order of Things*, published the year before the 'Different Spaces' paper was given. In this definition, Foucault does not link the heterotopia to any particular space (such as the cemetery or the museum); rather, he defines it more generally as the difference that undermines the order of language. He writes:

> There is a worse kind of disorder than that of the *incongruous*, the linking together of things that are inappropriate; I mean the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without

> law or geometry, of the *heteroclite*; and that word should be taken in its most literal, etymological sense: in such a state, things are 'laid', 'placed', 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all. … *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things ... to 'hold together'. (1970: xviii)

This description of the heterotopia is related to its definition in 'Different Spaces', as a space in which things are 'arranged differently'. Here, however, we see that the heterotopia is closely linked to Foucault's programme of genealogy and archaeology. The heterotopia is described here as the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter in the dimension of the heteroclite: that is, the heterotopia is a realm of *difference* in which contingent fragments of a large number of possible historical series become evident. The effect is that it is impossible to define a 'common locus', law, principle, or centre for things. In the heterotopia, fragments of different series emerge and cannot be arranged according to a governing principle or order. The heterotopia is precisely the space in which archaeology, with its programme to disrupt governing principles and orders, can operate.

The heterotopia, then, is a description of the archaeological *field.* This is what Foucault calls a discursive formation, or simply *discourse* (2002: 41). Discourses are not groups of words that refer to things, but are rather the systems of rules that enable words and things to hold together at all: they are the systems of representation *between* words and things. The point of the analysis of discourses is to reveal those systems of rules, to put systems of representation themselves on display, to determine the contingent ways in which things have been conceptually ordered. Discursive analysis 'loosens the embrace' between words and things, and shows that those relations are contingent and historically determined (Foucault 2002: 54). This is precisely what Foucault tells us heterotopias do in the above passage. Heterotopias are disturbing, Foucault says, because they undermine the syntax that causes words and things to hold together. The heterotopia is a site for discursive analysis because it already does the work of discursive analysis: it undermines the relation between words and things, and maintains the space between them as a space. In other words, heterotopias are spaces of the *difference* of words and things. It is within this realm of the difference of words and things, and through the activity of maintaining that difference, that systems of representation can be revealed as discontinuous, fragmented, and contingent. The work of archaeology to identify those discontinuous series, and the task of genealogy to liberate ourselves from the contingencies of the past, can best be achieved within the space of the heterotopia.

The paragraph above from *The Order of Things* could almost be a description of the museum: a space in which things are placed in different sites, in which fragments of different historical orders 'glitter in the dimension of the heteroclite'. But as I have argued, the museum is not a heterotopia by virtue of housing a collection of objects different from one another. The museum is a heterotopia because it displays the difference inherent to its content: the difference of words and things. Interestingly, one of the earliest defences of the public museum, written by Francis Bacon in 1605, advocates 'a substantial and severe collection of the Heteroclites or Irregulars of nature, well examined and described' (1900: 238). Bacon's plea for a 'competent collection of the works of nature which have a digression and deflexion from the ordinary course of generations, productions, and motions' (1900: 237-8) supports the claim that the museum is a heterotopia: his vision of the museum is of one that displays the *difference* between its objects and the order of nature. All museums reveal this difference inherent to interpretation.

Because the museum is a space of representation, because it puts on display the *problem* of relating words and things, the museum 'undermines language' and performs a kind of discursive analysis. Like discursive analysis, the museum displays systems of representation and reveals the bodies of rules that are used to bind words and things together; it 'loosens the embrace' between words and things and shows the rules binding them to be contingent and

reversible. The 'order of things' is not the unmoveable underlying structure that inheres necessarily in natural and cultural productions, but is rather shown to be one among many discontinuous orders that are historically determined and determining. Museum objects are the 'documents' of those historical series, and can be the documents of multiple series because the space between things and conceptual systems remains open, and open to contestation. In revealing the contingency of the order of things, the museum can be a site for conducting 'general history', archaeology and genealogy in Foucault's sense. The museum might be considered a space of *emergence*, the 'non-place' in which 'the endlessly repeated play of dominations' is staged; relations of domination are inscribed in objects as well as in bodies (Foucault 1984a: 85). The role of the 'genealogical' museum would be to record the history of the emergence of different interpretations – 'violent or surreptitious appropriations' – of systems of rules that are meaningless in themselves (Foucault 1984a: 86).

All museums have the capacity to perform Foucault's genealogy – to present historical events not as 'a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but [as] the reversal of a relationship of forces' (Foucault 1984a: 88). The museum has the capacity to reveal conceptual systems and political orders to be contingent and reversible. It has this capacity because it is a heterotopia and because it has its origins in the Enlightenment. Like Foucault's own notion of genealogy, the museum has certain Enlightenment *capabilities* – including critique, autonomy, and progress – and can use those capabilities to question and overcome the power relations that have historically been based on them. The museum is a site for Foucaultian genealogy, through which we can liberate ourselves from the power structures of the past.

Museums not only can but do perform genealogy, consciously seeking to move away from 'total history' to reveal the contingency of political orders and historical events. They enable the growth of capabilities, and thus contribute to the work of liberation. Museums have enormous importance in cultures struggling for such liberation, and are recognized as tools in helping societies to heal. For example, Constitution Hill in Johannesburg, the site of Johannesburg's constitutional court and a new museum set in a former prison complex, is now a site for understanding and discussing South Africa's history and new democracy. This museum uses a space that had been determined by very specific power relations to understand the historical conditions under which those power relations emerged, and to contest the 'order of things' as constructed by those who historically held power. Constitution Hill encourages the 'growth of capabilities' to progress out of the 'fixed truths' of the past. The 'Early People' gallery at the Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh shows that a simple change of pronoun in label text can make a display whose content might be considered that of 'total history' into a genealogical critique. Instead of describing Scotland's early peoples in the third person, the label text in this gallery uses the pronoun 'we' ('We tilled the soil, and we ate well…') to suggest both the possibility of, and the problems with, posing the continuity of a people between prehistory and the present. This strategy encourages visitors to take a first-person view of their past and to see that past as being a condition for the construction of their sense of self, while critically considering the possibility of any kind of universal and unbroken national continuity. The 'order of things', whether that be the story of Scotland as it has historically been presented to Scots, the concept of a continuous national history, or the traditional representation of prehistoric peoples in museum displays, is shown to be contingent and reversible. And as discussed earlier, the current trend for Enlightenment-style displays, even within 'universal' museums, puts on display the contingency of orders of classification and encourages us to consider different orders, different ways of thinking.

Conclusion

Foucault's museum is defined as a space of difference and a space of representation: a space in which the difference between words and things is put on display and made available for public contestation. The museum is an Enlightenment institution not only because its essence is the problem of representation, but also because the museum partakes of the Enlightenment *ethos* of permanent critique: a reflection upon its own conceptual conditions of possibility. In allowing for the possibility of transgressing those conceptual conditions, the museum is not mired in

Enlightenment critique that searches for 'formal structures with universal value', but moves toward Foucault's version of transformed critique that is 'a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying' (1984b: 45-6). Foucault's definition of the museum as heterotopia is useful, firstly because it overcomes the problems of defining the museum exclusively in terms of objects, collecting practices, or methods of display that are historically contingent; it enables us instead to define it in terms of a philosophical *problem* that is part of the museum's essence. Secondly, the definition of the museum as heterotopia explains how the museum can be progressive without subscribing to politically problematic notions of universality or 'total history'. Indeed, museums are best placed to critique, contest, and transgress those problematic notions, precisely on the basis of their Enlightenment lineage.

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Notes

[1] See also Malraux (1956); Heidegger (1971); Gadamer (2000). Lefebvre's account of museum-like 'spaces of accumulation' that accompany the rise of capitalism and contain the seeds of their own destruction is not far off (1991: 49ff). The philosophical characterization of the museum as a space of death – and particularly as a space that 'kills' the artwork – harks back to Hegel's claim that the life of art has faded away in secular society and is merely preserved rather than revivified in the museum; see Hegel (1975: 10-11). However, this network of ideas appears to have had its starting-point in the 1796 writings of Quatremère de Quincy; see Sherman (1994).

[2] At the time of writing there is debate around the 2003 'Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums' signed by nineteen of the world's major museums affirming their entitlement to maintain their Enlightenment values (The British Museum, 2003). For some recent discussion, see O'Neill (2004).

[3] The comparative anatomy gallery was first displayed in the late eighteenth century, but was moved to its current building in 1898. Its mode of display, which has been left more or less unchanged since then, retains its eighteenth-century character.

[4] For more on Foucault, Enlightenment, and critique, see Han (2002), Falzon (1998), Bernstein (1994), Schmidt and Wartenberg (1994), and Dreyfus and Rabinow (1986).

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* **Beth Lord** is Teaching Fellow in Philosophy at the University of Dundee, where one of her research areas is philosophy and museums. She has a PhD in philosophy, and worked previously as a museum consultant with Lord Cultural Resources Planning & Management.

Address
Dr. Beth Lord,
Department of Philosophy,
University of Dundee,
Dundee DD1 4HN, UK
e-mail: B.Lord@dundee.ac.uk