

A Heterotopic Reading of Robert Harris's *The Ghost*

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Abstract

The Spatial turn is an intellectual movement which focuses on place, space, and landscape; it marks an academic shift of interest in time to space. Until the first half of the twentieth century civilizations were mainly read and interpreted in terms of the temporal; history was considered as the main determinant of major events. Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia is part of his contribution to the Spatial turn movement. Unlike utopia, heterotopia is a real place which functions as a counter-site to the places where we live. It is the other space of different sorts of deviation. The present study attempts a Foucauldian heterotopic reading of Robert Harris's political novel *The Ghost* (2007). The study is introduced by identifying the concept of heterotopia, and the six principles as contrived by Foucault. Then, it explores the geographical setting of the novel and its history. The kind of deviation which transforms the space into heterotopia is identified, focusing on its impact on the relationship between the protagonist as a political charisma and the demos. The heterotopic principles of liminality, confinement, heterogeneity, and illusory nature are traced in the protagonist's attempt to survive his political crisis. Finally, the study examines the mixed status of the protagonist by relating his current circumstance to Foucault's heterotopic concept of heterochrony. The study concludes by making a prediction about the demos' reaction to an exit from heterotopia without disclaiming deviation.

Keywords: political, heterotopia, space, deviation, Lang, otherness, crisis, demos.

Introduction

Robert Harris (1957--) is a British novelist and journalist. He began his career as a correspondent for the BBC, then a columnist for *The Observer*, *The Sunday Times*, and *The Daily Telegraph*. Before turning to writing fiction, he co-authored and authored several political books such as *A Higher Form of Killing* (1982), *Gotcha! The Government, the Media, and the Falklands Crisis* (1983), and *Good and Faithful Servant* (1990). In 1992, Harris published his debut novel *Fatherland*, a best-seller, followed by fourteen novels, mostly best-sellers, several of them either won literary prizes or short-listed. He uses historical figures and political events in his novels; for instance, *Imperium* (2006) is about the Roman statesman and orator Cicero, *Munich* (2017) is based on the political negotiations between Britain and Germany in 1938, and *Act of Oblivion* (2022) is set in the 1660s and represents the critical period in England's history after the death of Oliver Cromwell. Harris justifies writing political historical fiction by an interest in the political, and a belief in "the universality of political impulses, from Cicero's Rome to 19th-century France to Russia, Germany, wherever – the same quest for power is there" (Preston).

The novel under study is *The Ghost*, short-listed for British Book Awards (2008), it portrays the last few days before the assassination of Adam Lang, a former British minister, because of allegations of war crime. Most of the novel's reviews depict it as a parody of the former prime minister Tony Blair. Thomas Jones (2007) depicts the differences between fact and fiction; incidents in Blair's life, members of his family and cabinet, are contrasted to Lang's. Jonathan Freedland (2007) finds a strong similarity between the protagonist and Blair, but notes that unlike other similar works such as Richard Norton-Taylor's play *Called to Account*, and

Alistair Beaton's television drama *The Trial of Tony Blair*, which explicitly mention Blair's name, *The Ghost* "has the good grace to conceal the accused under a veil of fiction." Lynn Barber (2023) also notes how Harris has invested his relationship with Blair in writing the novel. The present study proposes a reading of the novel informed by Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia.

The Spatial turn is an intellectual movement which focuses on place, space, and landscape, it marks an academic shift of interest in time to space. Until the first half of the twentieth century, civilizations were usually read and interpreted in terms of the temporal; history was considered the major determinant of events. Understanding societies, cultures, and the development of civilizations had been conceived in terms of the passing of time. Each period of human history was seen as having peculiar characteristics which differed from the previous and preceding periods. Starting from the 1960s, theorists "began to investigate with new vigour the idea that space is not an inactive background in human communal behaviour, so far dominated by time in a more or less evolutionistic interpretative frame" (Filippi 1). Space is now conceived as a major factor in shaping societies, cultures, and political phenomena. It is no longer seen as a neutral concrete site; rather, it is conceived as an active contributor to the shaping of identities and civilizations. Diverse views on space have emerged helping toward developing intellectual frameworks and methods of understanding its role in shaping human experience. These views facilitate the opening of interchannels between academic disciplines such as geography, architecture, urban planning, anthropology, sociology, political science, and philosophy.

Michel Foucault is one of the philosophers of the Spatial turn. He does not see space as an objective and fixed territory, rather, it exceeds its material and concrete entity. He believes that they intersect with diverse political, economic, and social experiences in the history of Europe.

Space is also conceptualized in terms of power relationships. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) he relates space to the power and authority of government, institutions, culture, and society. It is conceived as a sign of coercion that separates and controls the unwanted deviants in need of discipline. Thus, hospitals, care homes, prisons and madhouses are seen as spaces established for hosting certain categories of people to separate them from society and practice power over them to set right their deviation.

Heterotopia is yet another space which reflects power relationships. Foucault first mentions this term in his preface to *The Order of Things*, published in 1966, then, in the same year, as part of a series of lectures on literature and the concept of utopia broadcast by the French public radio channel *France Culture*, and in his lecture on space (1967) entitled “Of Other Spaces” at Cercle d'Etudes Architecturales in Paris, in which he spells out his views on heterotopic space. This term is derived from the Greek words ‘hetros,’ another, and ‘topos,’ place. Unlike the term ‘utopia,’ which is derived from the Greek words ‘eu-topos,’ meaning a good place, and ‘ou-topos,’ meaning no-place, or a good place that does not exist, heterotopia means another place. It is noteworthy here that heterotopia is also a medical term; in pathology, it refers to displaced tissues which develop at the wrong place or out of their normal place.

Foucault defines heterotopic space by contrasting it to utopia. In his “Of Other Spaces,” he refers to utopias as “unreal spaces,” which “present society itself in a perfected form” (24). Utopia is originally introduced by Thomas More in the 16th century as an imaginary domain to offer solutions to Europe’s political, economic, and social crises. Alternatively, Foucault introduces his heterotopia as another place, a real one, a counter site, and a place which is “outside of all places” (24). It is a place meant to mirror certain deviations caused by the practice of different types of power. Heterotopia, as Peter Johnson notes, has diverse confusing characteristics, for in relating it to other sites, Foucault uses verbs such as mirror, reflect, represent, and designate. It also speaks about all other sites but at the same time suspends,

neutralizes, inverts, contests and contradicts these sites (78). These contradictory characteristics and functions, as Soumia Bentahar and Nouredine Guerroudj point out, suggest a lack of a clear-cut meaning and a challenge to any form of a coherent pattern (98). A further reason for the complexity of the concept of heterotopia is the diverse and contradictory nature of the places which Foucault chooses to illustrate it, namely, prisons, boarding schools, brothels, care homes and seventeenth century Puritan societies. Furthermore, viewed as a space of otherness, heterotopia is “a place which is and is not, part of a culture and detached from it, bringing together the incompatible, uniting the heterogeneous” (Pfister and Schaff 4), and like Bakhtin’s carnival, it is conceived as a space of resistance and transgression (Werbner, 1997, Johnson, 2006).

Having established the otherness of heterotopic space, Foucault (1986) assigns six principles to it. The first refers to primitive heterotopia, or heterotopia of crisis, and modern heterotopia, or heterotopia of deviation. The second principle “is that a society, as its history un-folds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion” (25). This is a reference to the multiple and contradictory functions of the heterotopia which Foucault attributes to cultural changes that occur within societies with the march of time. The third principle marks the juxtaposition of heterotopic sites which have the capability of combining in “a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (25). The fourth principle is related to “slices in time” in heterotopia, which he terms “heterochronies;” time is fragmented and not chronological. This non-linear time is illustrated by the idea of museums and libraries because these spaces function as archives that both integrate and freeze past, present and future. Foucault, though, adds another dimension to this principle of accumulative time, for he views heterotopias as temporal. Fairs and festivals are some examples of this type which simulate pleasure in us because of the awareness of their precarity. They represent a vacation where we are aware that the time we spend there is

seasonal and limited. The fifth principle is about the process of entering heterotopia, Foucault points out that, unlike a public place, “heterotopia site is not freely accessible ... Either the entry is compulsory in the case of entering ... a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications” (26). Entrance is regulated, and a set of rules is decided which must be followed for admission, despite the site might seem accessible to everyone. The final principle of heterotopia refers to the illusory nature of this space which exposes the nature of other real spaces. Foucault refers to our daily routine which is highly regulated right from getting up early in the morning to “begin[ning] work at the same time: meals were at noon and five o’clock, then ... bedtime...” (27). The examples he gives are contradictory in nature; they are brothels and colonies the sixteenth -century Jesuit colonies in South America. Relating the daily routine to these heterotopic spaces explains how Foucault establishes an interrelationship between them and real places; the latter imposes this fixed routine, whereas the former provides us with either a space of freedom or experimentation of new realities and identities. Though heterotopia represents a clear contrast to other spaces, it is engaged in an interrelationship with them. Heterotopia gains importance by its otherness; its heterogeneity sets off the homogeneity of non-heterotopic spaces and vice versa. The characteristic otherness of heterotopic spaces, as specified by Foucault, sheds light on our diverse cultural, social, and political identities.

Most of the action of *The Ghost* takes place in winter in Martha’s Vineyard, a northeastern American island. The novel is a first-person narrative in which the narrator is a ghostwriter. He is hosted by an American media tycoon to help former British prime minister, Adam Lang, in writing his autobiography. A short time before the arrival of the ghostwriter to the island, the media handles the leaked news of the former prime minister ordering the kidnap of four British citizens, “then hand them over for interrogation by the CIA” (Harris 56). The interrogation is proven to be coercive which leads to the death of one of these men. The novel represents the

reaction of the former premier to this incident during the few days that proceed his assassination by a Briton. The ghostwriter, whose name is never identified, is the narrator. He offers a close-up view of the life and mentality of the former premier and the reasons for his political deviation.

The otherness of the space, where most of the novel's action takes place, is foreshadowed in the location and history of Martha's Vineyard. The island is remote from England, home of the former prime minister. It takes seventeen hours to travel from London to finally reach the house of the American tycoon Rhinehart. The compound where the narrator, Lang, and his team stay is in a secluded place on the island. Martha's Vineyard is a summer resort which hosts more than a hundred thousand visitors, while in winter, only fifteen thousand occupy it. Further, the island's history tells of its being the home of a large deaf community; about a quarter of its population suffered hearing impairment. This physical quality of otherness is represented in the narrator's failure to communicate with the taxi driver who drives him to Rhinehart's residence because of his deafness. The otherness of this space is also signified by its colonial history. In the seventeenth century, the people of Martha's Vineyard were torn apart between tendencies to be loyal to Britain, remain neutral, and join the War of Independence (Munson, 1999; Railton, 1983). These conflicting attitudes indicate a deviation from the rest of the American colonies which fought for independence from the British Crown. Hence, the island's physical space and history indicate both its otherness and liminality.

Foucault (1986) refers to heterotopias "in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (25). What identifies a site as a heterotopic "other" space is the conduct of its dwellers. Lang's deviant political behaviour corresponds to this heterotopic feature. The reason behind his crisis goes back to the 1970s when he first shows up on the political scene. It is at a time when England had been suffering both a political vacuum and chaos. Strikes, uncontrolled security services and forming private armies by retired

generals (Harris 320) are but a few of these crises as former British foreign minister, Richard Rycart, tells the narrator. At this critical time, the CIA recruits Lang and facilitates his election to the House of Commons (322). Lang's rise to power typifies the scheme of the political elite of manipulating power. It illustrates how this minority runs the political scene and rules the majority. The secret allegiance between Lang and Washington exemplifies Vilfredo Pareto's investigative view on the nature of the rulers-demos relationship. He sees that all sorts of governments, democratic and otherwise, deceive their people, and that "King Demos, good soul, thinks he is following his own devices. In reality he is following the lead of his rulers. But that very often turns out to the advantage of his rulers only, for they, from the days of Aristotle down to our own, have made lavish use of the arts of bamboozling King Demos . . ." (50). Pareto believes that rulers have always proven to be manipulative of the demos; they manage to make them believe that they are working for their welfare. However, this unbalanced relationship lasts if the demos are under the illusion of the credibility of their rulers.

On the other hand, Max Weber offers a more analytical view of the relationship between the outstanding rulers, or charismas, and the demos. He sees that this relationship is conditioned by the latter's working for the welfare of their people. He also sees charisma as self-determined and capable of setting "its own limits. Its bearer seizes the task..." (1112). Weber suggests that charisma is privileged with a sense of complete independence which enables them to fulfil the intended tasks. He relates this charismatic 'divine mission' to "bringing well-being to his faithful followers" (1114). Weber interrelates charismatic traits both to independence and political commitment; these are prerequisites for prolonging and strengthening public bonds. Hence, delivering the terms of an unsigned contract between leaders and demos is the ultimate condition that guarantees prolonging their bond. Concerning Lang, at first, his charm and public appeal turn him into charisma. However, these assets do not guarantee enduring public bonds. Lang's breach of the contract between him and his followers leads to "the collapse of

his claim” (Weber 1114) as a political charismatic figure. The demos first believe in him and his ability to fill the political vacuum, but his policies are proven to be devoted to serving American interests; instead of working for the welfare of his country, he prioritizes and opts for the American. Rycart enumerates decisions taken by Lang that prioritize American interests at the expense of the British. These decisions vary from building American military bases in the UK which makes the British “a more obvious target for a first strike” (Harris 323) by enemies, to sacking any minister who opposes serving American interests (324). But the decision which has instantly provoked public anger is that of joining America in its war on Iraq. Thus, once the demos discover Lang’s American allegiances, his spell is broken, and they denounce him. Their response to his charismatic failure is represented in a man holding his nose with one hand and miming flushing a toilet one of Lang’s biographies (Harris 11). This gesture sums up public awareness of the scale of his political failure.

Furthermore, getting to know the former premier proves that he is a mere performer who has created an identity of an illusory nature. This identity corresponds to Foucault’s view on the temporality and illusory nature of the heterotopic space. It is a space which provides a certain degree of performance to attract others. Foucault (1986) refers to heterotopic spaces as “not oriented toward the eternal, they are rather absolutely temporal [chroniques]. Such, for example, are the fairgrounds, these marvelous empty sites on the outskirts of cities that teem once or twice a year with stands, displays heteroclite objects, wrestlers, snakewomen, fortune-tellers, and so forth” (26). The element of ‘let’s pretend’ and perform a part for some time is indicated in this heterotopic principle. In these heterotopic spaces, performers of different sorts play roles that offer fake identities, lasting for a few minutes or more.

The vagueness of Lang’s identity is often indicated by others. When the narrator first meets Lang, he notices his slightly orange- tinted skin and realizes that he is “wearing make-up” (Harris 81). This early incident foreshadows the changing as well as the hidden identity of

Lang. He even acknowledges his propensity to have more than one identity. Lang tells the narrator of his earlier passion for acting, and of being the leading actor in some Shakespearean plays during his Cambridge university days. In reminiscing about this early period, he expresses his fascination with the notion of being someone else for some time, “To go out on to a stage and pretend to be someone else! And to have people applaud you for doing it! What could be better?” (Harris 123). The notion of having a temporal identity, and being rewarded with peoples’ appreciation, then retaining one’s identity is what fascinates Lang. Yet, he expresses his awareness that actors “do not change things . . . Only politicians can do that” (122). This pragmatic view justifies his opting for a political career rather than an artistic one despite his talent for the latter. On the other hand, the narrator realizes that Lang is so immersed in this propensity for illusion that he is no longer capable of distinguishing between real incidents and invented ones. This heterotopic illusory nature has turned him into a “mystery” unravelled by others including his wife (Harris 309). The narrator’s awareness of Lang’s mysterious identity, in addition to his experience of helping celebrities of different careers in writing their autobiographies, have made him assume that “We start with a private fantasy about our lives and perhaps one day ... we turn it into an anecdote . . . Over the years, the anecdote is repeated so regularly it becomes accepted as a fact” (186). Thus, a person might invent an anecdote and tells it about several times until the line between the authentic and the invented is blurred. Lang often tells the story of how he first takes an interest in politics and his initiation into political life. The anecdote of Ruth, his future wife, knocking on his door, on an early rainy morning, to persuade him of voting for the party in the local election, his disinterestedness in politics, and his eventual enrolment into the party, all attest to the blurred lines between authentic and fake memories. The obscurity of Lang’s identity is further intensified by the date which he gives for his enrolment into his political party. When the narrator investigates this date, he discovers that Lang’s actual enrolment happens a year earlier.

This gap year is the period in which he has been recruited by the CIA, which eventually creates his political deviation.

Concerning the heterotopic tropes of crisis and liminality, these are signified in Lang's ambiguous status during his stay on the American island. On the one hand, he is treated both by the American and British authorities as a former premier; he is provided with heavy security protection. On the other hand, the International Criminal Court (ICC) deals with him as a potential war criminal because the case is still under investigation. Meanwhile, Washington insists on protecting Lang. On its part, the British government hints at full cooperation with the ICC in case he is indicted (Harris 170). With regard to the demos, they already consider him a war criminal to be brought to justice. Lang's political deviation is the crisis which turns the island into a prison-like space as it bears similarities with official prisons. Heterotopias and prisons intersect as both, unlike ordinary spaces, are not freely accessible. Prisons are designed and built to separate prisoners from a wider society. This heterotopic characteristic is epitomized by the vast distance of more than three thousand miles that separates Martha's Vineyard Island from Lang's homeland. A ferry must be taken to cross from Boston Logan Airport to the island. The house where Lang and his team stay is heavily guarded by police officers who, though appointed to protect him, bear similarity with official prison guards. Finally, Lang's freedom of travel is extremely limited because, if convicted of war crimes, the ICC is liable to issue an arrest warrant that most countries have signed. Only America, Iraq, and a few other countries have not signed this international treaty (Harris 165). Even his stay in America does not mean a permanent guarantee of safety because "the political climate may change ... one day ... and there'll be a public campaign to hand him over to justice" (Harris 335) as his former foreign minister tells the narrator. This mixed status as a former PM and war criminal represents a limbo-like position. So, metaphorically speaking, Lang, because of his crisis, is shipwrecked and the island represents his haven.

Handling such a political crisis while staying on this remote island affects Lang and his team in several ways. Pete Hay is emphatic in his reference to islands as a “category of the mind...characterized by isolation and remoteness” (27), and P. Gabilondo takes another step towards connoting a negative meaning to islands by viewing them as a sheer symbol of evil (qtd. in Hay 27). Martha’s Vineyard’s geographic isolation affects mental confinement which leads Lang and his team to believe in the sound decision of ordering the kidnap of his fellow citizens. This persuasion is caused by the obstructed channels with the demos. Being away from the homeland does not allow for direct access or a first-hand experience of the anger and rejection of the British people who voted for Lang and put him into power. When they first see the news on TV, a decision is made to unplug all the phones for some time as this action is believed to provide the team with the clarity of mind needed to handle the situation. Being temporarily cut off from the world makes the media the only source of news.

Furthermore, the nature of the Rhinehart compound undergoes a drastic, though temporal, change. Originally the compound is meant to host and entertain the tycoon’s friends. However, the dwelling of Lang and his team changes the place into an “enclosure” which typifies one of Foucault’s views on discipline. In *Discipline and Punish* he states that “Discipline sometimes requires enclosure, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself” (141). Lang and his team, working together to defy the disciplinary international criminal law, have created their enclosure. The Rhinehart's is now a heterogenous space which resists the external space inhabited by the homogeneous global community that seeks justice. Indeed, Lang and his legal team are shown to be exerting their minds either to find a gap in the international criminal law or twist it to escape the dreadful consequences of his political mischievousness. The team creates its concept of justice which pertains to his current juridical and political crisis. Lang’s attorney, Sid Kroll, expresses his abhorrence of what he describes as “the worst kind of moral equivalence” because when terrorists of the Third World “kill three

thousand of us, we kill one of them, and suddenly we're all criminals together" (Harris 162). The lawyer offers Lang a justification for his ordering of the kidnap of the British citizens, his words show how this small heterotopic team creates a peculiar meaning of justice. Despite Kroll's challenging tone against the indictment, the team's position signifies its domination by the international community against which it exerts efforts to have the charges dropped. On the other hand, Lang never expresses regret for his notorious political decision, nor does he reconsider it from the public viewpoint. Neither does he see himself as an exile, an outcast, nor considers going back home to directly confront his fellow Britons. Thus, he breaks the "first rule of politics [of] . . . Never lose touch with your base" (224) as his wife informs the narrator. His handling of the crisis demonstrates a mental confinement that hinders the possibility of achieving reconciliation with the demos. Alternatively, his efforts are mainly devoted to seeking the approval and protection of Washington. Hence, Lang and his team become the "other," evidently confined to their "enclosure" which disconnects them from the homogeneous world because they fail to acknowledge and accept public anger.

Lang's mental confinement is further shown in his incapability of weighing on the scale of his crime against civil liberties which he believes to be "crap" (353). When journalists ask him about his decision of handling British citizens to the CIA, he simply ignores them. Instead, he delivers a brief statement that avoids a direct reference to his allowing the use of torture by the CIA (176). Thus, Lang seems to insist on staying in this heterotopic space, which disconnects him from the larger social body. Such a stance deprives him of an authentic voice that could inform him of the horridness of his political decision. Meanwhile, the media persistently bombards him with questions, yet he and his team view it as an adversary that is never to be trusted.

Regarding Foucault's fourth principle of heterotopia, he correlates the slicing of time to heterotopic emplacement. As mentioned earlier, his concept of heterochrony is exemplified by

accumulative archives which combine different epochs, forms, and tastes, enclosing them as one unit characterized by diversity. Lang's awkward position illustrates this heterotopic principle. His past political office, his premiership, and his allegiances with the Americans determine his present circumstance. It is the past revisiting the present and deciding the future. Now in the eyes of the law and his fellow citizens, Lang is a criminal of war who has violated civil and political rights. Meanwhile, the protection provided by the Americans is perceived by the narrator when he joins him in his journey from New York to Martha's Vineyard. Special Branch and Secret Service accompany Lang on his way to the airport. The traffic is held back by the Harley Davidsons, the pedestrians turn to watch the parade, and the air is filled with the noise of the sirens with the vividness of flashing lights of the motorcade (Harris 340). The 'force' of the moment is felt by the narrator who thinks that "only two categories of human being who are transported with such pomp and drama: world leaders and captured terrorists" (340). This protection is meant to show Lang that his friends in Washington love him as his secretary tells the narrator (341). It also epitomizes his mixed status of a former premier and a war criminal as the narrator's remark suggests. However, the around the clock protection provided by Washington does not prevent his assassination. The assassin is a former major in the British army who has suffered the loss of his son and wife because of Lang's political allegiance with America in its war on Iraq (364). Despite the assassin's personal motive for killing Lang, his action represents the anger of the demos at a charisma whose deviation has failed them.

Conclusion

Reading *The Ghost* through the lens of Foucault's heterotopia shows how places transform from sheer objective neutral sites into subjective spaces. The dwelling of Adam Lang and his team on the island of Martha's Vineyards has transformed it from a quintessential resort into a heterotopic space. The breach of the contract between Lang and his voters; the discrepancy

between the demos' expectations and his mischievous political conduct have created this crisis of deviation. The illusory nature of heterotopia is epitomized by the mysterious identity of Lang who succeeds in enchanting the demos for some time. Once they discover his political deviation, the spell is broken, and they denounce him. The gap between the two parties is never bridged; his marred conviction makes him incapable of weighing the scale of this deviation, he never denounces it, and to the end remains resistant to the global community. This liminal mentality, in addition to the efforts which he and his team exert to avoid the ICC accusation of war crimes, turn the space into a heterogeneous one facing the homogenous global community which demands justice. Finally, the heterochrony of heterotopia, the slicing of time and bringing together different epochs is represented in Lang's ambiguous status. His past political mischievousness revisits his present status of being a former premier. Therefore, the protection he receives from both the American and British governments blurs the distinction between a former head of the UK government and a potential war criminal.

However, the demos insist on maintaining clear boundaries between their normal world which demands justice and Lang's heterotopia of deviation.

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