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Interpretation of Space and Understanding of Self: Reading Foucault and Ricoeur in One Frame

Interpretación del espacio y comprensión del yo: una lectura de Foucault y Ricoeur en un mismo marco

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Abstract

This paper explores how the interpretation of space opens possibilities for self-understanding in the later works of Michel Foucault and Paul Ricoeur. First, the thinkers' projects in post-structuralist hermeneutics of the subject/self are situated in the aftermath of the "overthrow of the Cogito" by the "masters of suspicion." Next, an analysis of space as a text-analogue is passed through to understand the self's exteriorisation of meaning in built space. Here, Foucault's history of the Western concept of space is unpacked through Stephan Günzel's exposition, and Foucault and Ricoeur are discussed as thinkers on space. Finally, "refiguration of space" is identified as the phase in which possibilities for the revealing and transforming of the self are opened. The paper shows that "spatiality of the self" offers another point of intersection to further imaginary conversations between Foucault and Ricoeur in the context of their shared concern for the self.

Keywords: Michel Foucault; Paul Ricoeur; hermeneutics of the subject/self; hermeneutics of suspicion; masters of suspicion; interpretation; meaning; self-understanding; spatial turn; spatiality; built space; architecture; refiguration of space.

Resumen

Este artículo explora cómo la interpretación del espacio abre posibilidades para la autocomprensión en las obras posteriores de Michel Foucault y Paul Ricoeur. En primer lugar, se sitúan los proyectos de ambos pensadores en la hermenéutica postestructuralista del sujeto/yo, tras el "derrocamiento del *cogito*" por los "maestros de la sospecha". A continuación, se analiza el espacio como análogo textual para comprender la exteriorización del significado del yo en el espacio construido. En este marco, la historia de Foucault sobre el concepto occidental de "espacio" se discute a partir de la exposición de Stephan Günzel, y Foucault y Ricoeur son analizados como pensadores del espacio. Por último, se identifica la "refiguración del espacio" como la fase en la que se abren posibilidades para la revelación y la transformación del yo. El artículo muestra que la "espacialidad del yo" ofrece otro punto de intersección para continuar las conversaciones imaginarias entre Foucault y Ricoeur en el contexto de su preocupación compartida por el yo.

Palabras clave: Michel Foucault; Paul Ricoeur; hermenéutica del sujeto/yo; hermenéutica de la sospecha; maestros de la sospecha; interpretación; significado; autocomprensión; giro sobre el espacio; espacialidad; espacio construido; arquitectura; refiguración del espacio.

1. Introduction¹

Despite being contemporaries within the camp of continental philosophy and having had several common concerns, the late twentieth-century French thinkers Michel Foucault and Paul Ricoeur had few interactions with each other during their lifetimes—"except at very localised points of intersection," as Ricoeur observed (Ricoeur, 1998, p. 79; see also Goetz, 2004; Castonguay, 2010, p. 83, n. 1). Recent studies have attempted to construct imaginary conversations and philosophical dialogues between the two thinkers regarding their shared concern for the self (Davidson & Michel, 2010, p. 8), specifically the constitution of the self by the self, the role of understanding and interpretation in the constitution of the subject, the conception of freedom as practices of the self, and the status of ethics (see Barthélémy, 2010; Castonguay, 2010). The search for self-understanding, imbued with an ethical concern for one's relations with oneself and others in institutions, has been identified as one of the common guiding threads that run through their works (Goetz, 2004), situating them within "a philosophical lineage that can be traced back to the Socratic injunction to 'know oneself,'" framed by the "care of the self" (Michel, 2015, p. 103; see Davidson, 2016, p. 159).

This paper attempts to show that "spatiality of the self" offers yet another point of intersection to further the imaginary conversations between Foucault and Ricoeur in the context of their shared concern for the self. First, the concern that Foucault and Ricoeur share for the self in their later works is identified as projects in post-structuralist hermeneutics of the subject/self, situated in the aftermath of the "overthrow of the Cogito" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 5) by those whom Ricoeur designated as the

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“masters of suspicion”: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 33). Next, an analysis of space as a text-analogue is passed through to explore how the interpretation of space and self-understanding hang together, and to understand the self’s exteriorisation of meaning in built space. Here, Foucault’s history of the concept of space in the West is unpacked in light of Stephan Günzel’s exposition, and Foucault and Ricoeur are discussed as thinkers on space. Finally, “refiguration of space” is identified as the phase in which possibilities for the revealing and transforming of the self are opened.

2. A shared concern for the self: projects in post-structuralist hermeneutics

Foucault’s and Ricoeur’s concern for the self became more pronounced in their later works, which can be considered projects in post-structuralist hermeneutics of the subject/self. The highly eclectic concept of “post-structuralism” is difficult to define due to the ambiguities and disagreements surrounding it. Following Gary Gutting (1998a & 1998b), this paper uses the concept in the sense of philosophical reflections on or reactions to structuralism rather than as a simple rejection or extension of it. The implicit theoretical basis of structuralism was “a kind of Cartesianism without the subject”: it treated “distinctively human domains as formal structures in which meanings were constituted not by conscious subjects but by relations among the elements of a formal system” (Gutting, 1998b). Post-structuralist critiques of structuralism retain its elimination of the foundational role of the subject but deny the internal coherence of formal systems based on two major theses: (1) no system is autonomous in the way structuralism requires, and (2) dichotomies underlying structuralism do not hold up under scrutiny (Gutting, 1998a & 1998b). The retention of the term “post-structuralism” instead of “postmodernism,” which the current academic literature more typically invokes, seems more apt here to delineate Foucault’s and Ricoeur’s responses to the idea that “the subject [is] not the master of meaning” (Taylor, 2015, p. xii) and to suggest their engagement with tradition, rather than a “radical rupture” with it that the latter term implies (Taylor, 2015, p. xv). Meanwhile, Keane and Lawn (2016) observe that contemporary Western hermeneutics is “almost exclusively bound up with the activity of interpretation” (Keane & Lawn, 2016, p. 1),

compared to its more polysemic past. It involves the interplay of three interconnected yet distinct aspects:

- (1) [...] the concrete process of understanding as the task of explicating and assessing our interpretation of texts; (2) [...] the historical centrality of establishing a rule for the proper use of interpretation [...] ; and (3) [...] the philosophical theory and method with which we can fix or ascertain the nature, character, conditions, and limits of every possible act of understanding [...]
- (Keane & Lawn, 2016, p. 1).

Foucault is widely recognised as a post-structuralist, though not as often as a hermeneutician. Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983, p. 124) argue that Foucault employs an “interpretive analytic of our current situation” but not a hermeneutic method. However, Foucault is readily included as a “major figure” in a few key references on hermeneutics (for instance, see Foucault, 1990; Keane & Lawn, 2016), especially for his contributions to and expansion of the hermeneutics of suspicion by way of analysing “cultural meaning as a site in which competing fields of power configure and confront one another” (Davey, 2008, pp. 695-696). On the other hand, Ricoeur is widely recognised as a seminal figure in contemporary hermeneutics, though not as often as a post-structuralist. However, many recent studies, notably that by Johann Michel (2015), characterise Ricoeur as a post-structuralist, especially for his critique of the foundational subject, his attempt to surpass structuralism, and rereading Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as hermeneuticians of suspicion (Michel, 2015, p. xxiv).²

Despite and due to their difficulties of “fully belonging” to both theoretical branches, this paper presupposes the later works of Foucault and Ricoeur as contributing “up to a point” to a “specific type” of post-structuralist hermeneutics in their distinct ways, in a manner similar to that proposed by Michel (2015, p. xxvi). Ricoeur (1998, p. 79) had observed that he and Foucault were on paths where they encountered each other infrequently. Even so, as Hans Joas (2019) notes, Michel (2015 & 2019) shows how the two thinkers “learned from each other and modified their respective philosophies accordingly” (Joas, 2019, p.

² See Michel (2015) for a list of studies that classify Ricoeur as a post-structuralist as well as those that discuss the difficulties with such a classification.

xiv), furthering the possibilities of reading them in one frame. As Joas summarises Michel's argument (and responds to Dreyfus and Rabinow):

Ricoeur integrated more and more aspects of a Nietzschean hermeneutics of suspicion into his approach—a process that had already begun with his interest in Freud and Marx or Karl Mannheim. Foucault, who had been labelled—by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow—to be “interpretive but not hermeneutic,” developed in his later work a study of the genealogy of self-examination that can be called a “hermeneutics of the self.” [...] Both provide, as Johann Michel writes, an anthropological foundation for the “forms of auto-interpretation when a human agent is confronted with the problematicity regarding himself, when the meaning of his existence no longer makes sense” (Joas, 2019, p. xiv).

3. The quest for meaning: towards a hermeneutics of the subject/self

The self for which Foucault and Ricoeur share a concern in their later works emerges in the aftermath of the critique of the philosophies of the subject by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—whom both thinkers jointly treated for their contributions to the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” and whom Ricoeur famously designated as “masters of suspicion” (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 33; Foucault, 1990).³ The Cogito posited by Descartes in his search for a certain and indubitable foundation of all knowledge and meaning was a subject that answered to the question of what I am rather than who I am. The “exaltation of the Cogito” came at the price of its being reduced to a thinking thing bereft of understanding or agency (Ricoeur, 1992, pp. 5-11). When the masters of suspicion took up the problem of the Cartesian doubt in the nineteenth century, it was “to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as ‘false’ consciousness.”

³ The primary references in this paper for the joint treatment of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are the published English translations of Foucault's “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx” (Foucault, 1990), presented and originally published in 1964, and Ricoeur's “Interpretation as Exercise of Suspicion” (Ricoeur, 1970), delivered in 1961-1962 and originally published in 1965.

They exercised suspicion—which until then had been directed only towards language and things—to consider consciousness itself as being something other than what it appears to itself (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 33; 1989, p. 148; Foucault, 1990, p. 60). They entered the problem of false consciousness to “make their ‘conscious’ methods of deciphering coincide with the ‘unconscious’ work of ciphering which they attributed to the will to power, to social being, to the unconscious psychism.” Nevertheless, all methods were united in their common intention: to reduce the illusions and lies of consciousness (Ricoeur, 1970, pp. 32-34).

When the interpreters began interpreting themselves per the techniques of interpretation, the heritage of the philosophies of the subject, “those from Descartes to Kant, then from Kant to Fichte, and finally to the Husserl of the *Cartesian Meditations*” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 5), underwent a tremendous shift, inflicting “inexhaustible narcissistic wounds” on Western culture (Foucault, 1990, p. 61). It became uncertain if meaning and the consciousness of meaning coincided in consciousness at all. The new hermeneutics of suspicion posed interpretation as an exercise of suspicion against interpretation as a recollection of meaning and the reminiscence of being (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 35). It was no longer sufficient to seek meaning through recollection and verbalisation of the immediate consciousness of meaning. Rather, meaning necessitated mediation—an art of interpretation, a deciphering of its expressions (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 33; 1989, p. 149).

Ricoeur asserts that the contribution of the masters of suspicion to the heritage of the philosophies of the subject was not simply an exercise in scepticism, as is commonly misunderstood and dismissed. Their mastery lies in not only suspecting and demystifying consciousness but also extending it rather than detracting it (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 35). Indeed, the role of suspicion, as Taylor (2015) notes, the role of suspicion was to “open an alternative space for human vitality to flourish” (Taylor, 2015, p. xiv). As Foucault argues, the overthrow of the Cartesian subject “does not create a deficiency; it does not constitute a lacuna that must be filled. It is nothing more, and nothing less, than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think” (Foucault, 1970, p. 373). In the absence of the imposition of the Cartesian subject and the emptiness of reflexive self-certitude (Davidson, 2016, p. 160), many contemporary thinkers have superseded the philosophies of the subject. By being attentive to and assimilating the often-overlooked positive possibilities of the masters’ critiques (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 32), they have

reconceptualised the subject/self within newly unfolding interpretive spaces. And yet, to those who still do not consider the Cogito to have been overthrown, Foucault responds with a silent, philosophical laugh:

To all those who still wish to talk about man, about his reign or his liberation, to all those who still ask themselves questions about what man is in his essence, to all those who wish to take him as their starting-point in their attempts to reach the truth, to all those who, on the other hand, refer all knowledge back to the truths of man himself, to all those who refuse to formalise without anthropologising, who refuse to mythologise without demystifying, who refuse to think without immediately thinking that it is man who is thinking, to all these warped and twisted forms of reflection we can answer only with a philosophical laugh—which means, to a certain extent, a silent one (Foucault, 1970, p. 373).

For Foucault, the new relation between meaning and the consciousness of meaning that the hermeneutics of suspicion brought forth implied that the interpretation of consciousness became an essentially incomplete task. There is nothing to interpret, only interpretations of interpretations. Therefore, interpretation cannot but always correct itself. To impose one interpretation over others is to give up on the infinity of interpretations and to force the death of interpretation (Foucault, 1990, pp. 63-66). The rejection of *a priori* theories of the subject is what Foucault celebrates when he declares man to have disappeared and died (Foucault, 1970, p. 373), a statement often misunderstood and criticised as having given up on conceptualisations of the subject/self altogether (Allen, 2008, p. 60). On the contrary, he asserts that the new hermeneutic question turns to the “Who?”—the subject that poses the interpretation (Foucault, 1990, p. 66), a form, not a substance, which is “not primarily or always identical to itself” (Foucault, 1997, p. 290). The active constitution of the subject by itself in various forms through the practices of the self became the object of analysis in Foucault’s later investigations into the ethics of the care and concern of the self and others as a practice of freedom (Foucault, 1997, pp. 281-290).

For Ricoeur, to enforce a final interpretation or a last word on the conflict of interpretations, or the plurivocity of texts and actions, is to do violence (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 177). He, too, declares the Cogito to have

been shattered and his question of selfhood to have parted ways with the philosophies of the subject (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 4). He then turned his attention toward a hermeneutics of the self considered as a “triple dialectic of reflection and analysis, of selfhood and sameness, and of self and other” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 21), which he placed “at an equal distance from the apology of the cogito and from its overthrow” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 3). Ricoeurian hermeneutics is a “philosophy of detours”: “The recourse to analysis [...] is the price to pay for a hermeneutics characterised by the indirect manner of positing the self” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 17). Ricoeur’s claim here, as Taylor explains, is that “meaning is understood not on the basis of intuition but in meaning’s externalisation in objects” (Taylor, 2015, p. xii). The self implied reflexively in the long route of analysis is rich, complex, and multidimensional, one that answers to the question “Who?”: “Who is speaking? Who is acting? Who is recounting about himself or herself? Who is the moral subject of imputation?” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 16). The intimate degree to which the other is constitutive of selfhood (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 3) is such that “the autonomy of the self will appear then to be tightly bound up with solicitude for one’s neighbour and with justice for each individual” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 18), thus binding his hermeneutics of the self with the practical wisdom of his “little ethics” in the quest for the “ethical intention,” i.e., the “aiming at the good life with and for others, in just institutions” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 172).

4. Meaning’s exteriorisation in built space: an analysis of space

In Ricoeurian hermeneutics—the philosophy of detours—the paradigm for interpretation is provided by the model of the text. Understanding the text, however, is not an end in itself: “It mediates the relation to himself of a subject who, in the short circuit of immediate reflection, does not find the meaning of his own life. [...] The constitution of the self is contemporaneous with the constitution of meaning” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 120). Self-understanding requires passing through “the detour of understanding the cultural signs in which the self documents and forms itself” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 120), which include “those which are fixed by writing, including all the sorts of documents and monuments which entail a fixation similar to writing” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 159). That is, Ricoeur construes built space as a text-analogue: he draws a direct and open analogy between architecture as inscription in stone or any hard material, and narrativity as inscription in language (Ricoeur, 2016, p. 32). He thus opens possibilities for the application and

expansion of hermeneutics to architecture and, more broadly, to space. In what follows, a detour of reflection by way of an analysis of space is passed through to explore how the interpretation of space and self-understanding hang together, and to understand self's exteriorisation of meaning in built space.

Space, for Foucault, is a historical entity subject to time and power. The history of space is a history of powers (Foucault, 1980b, p. 149). In his oft-cited article "Of Other Spaces," he traces a brief and rough history of the concept of space in the West: the contemporary space of "emplacement" has substituted the modern space of "extension," which itself had replaced the medieval space of "localisation" (Foucault, 2008, p. 14). Foucault's account has been criticised as being hasty and simplistic (for instance, see esp. Casey, 1997, p. 298); however, unpacking it in light of a more recent exposition of the conceptual history of space, such as that offered by Stephan Günzel (2009 & 2012), demonstrates its continuing relevance.

Günzel (2009 & 2012) identifies three epochs in the general history of the concept of space: the Aristotelian period, the Newtonian period, and the contemporary period wherein Newton's spatial conception was rethought, especially by Einstein. In each epoch, he notes, "the physical concept of space rested upon geometrical as well as cosmological concepts of spatiality, which furthermore was set in a cultural context by which certain understandings of space were encouraged and others ignored or suppressed" (Günzel, 2009, p. 1173).

During the Aristotelian period, the concept of space as *topos* or "place" was dominant. As Günzel (2009) notes, Aristotle considered place as "the surrounding border of any material object" (Günzel, 2009, p. 1173), tying spatiality to the locality and substance of an object. Space as place is non-geometrical and has no extension, is invariable and never void. Things can change their places, but place itself does not move. The cosmological background of Aristotelian physics—a finite universe with Earth as the centre and a first mover located at the outermost sphere who caused any physical process in the world—prevailed and persisted into the Middle Ages (Günzel, 2009, pp. 1173-1174). The concept of space that presupposes the cosmology Günzel outlines aligns with what Foucault calls the medieval space of "localisation," wherein space was seen as hierarchic and oppositional:

In the Middle Ages it was a hierarchic ensemble of places: sacred places and profane places, protected places and open spaces without defence, urban places and rural places (so far for the real life of humans). For cosmological theory, there were the super-celestial places as opposed to the celestial, and the celestial place was in turn opposed to the terrestrial place. There were the places where things found themselves placed because they had been violently displaced, and then, on the contrary, the places where things found their emplacement and natural rest. It was this complete hierarchy, this opposition, this intersection of places that constituted what could very roughly be called medieval space: the space of localisation (Foucault, 2008, p. 15).

Later, Aristotle's substantialism was strongly backed by Descartes, with his concept of physical space as *plenum*—"continuous and of a material character" (Günzel, 2009, p. 1175).

During the Newtonian period, a new concept of physical space as volume—"the (geometrical) product of a three-dimensional extension" (Günzel, 2009, p. 1175)—was established. Newtonian absolute space is the homogeneous, indivisible totality in which any object is located. Against the Aristotelian-Cartesian conceptions of space it replaced, absolute space was no longer tied to locality or substance and could be void. In the cosmological framework of Newtonian physics—an infinite universe with no centre—there was no place for a divine first mover, as matter (as mass) itself was considered the cause of movement (Günzel, 2009, pp. 1174-1175). The conception of space Günzel discusses aligns with what Foucault calls the space of "extension," wherein space was seen as "infinite and infinitely open" ever since Galileo, reducing medieval place to a point in the movement of a thing:

This space of localisation opened up with Galileo, for the real scandal of Galileo's work is not so much his discovery, or rediscovery, that the earth revolved around the sun, but his constitution of an infinite and infinitely open space. In such a space the place of the Middle Ages found itself dissolved as it were; the place of a thing was nothing but a point in its movement, just

as the rest of a thing was only its movement indefinitely slowed down. In other words, starting with Galileo, starting with the seventeenth century, extension supplanted localisation (Foucault, 2008, pp. 15-16).

Newton's spatial conception was contested and rethought in several ways. Leibniz refuted his concept of absolute space, conceiving space instead as the relations between *topoi*, the construction of which is even prior to the perception of objects.⁴ On the other hand, Kant considered geometric space as three-dimensional extension to be the very condition of perception and hence prior to and independent of relations, particular situations, and individual perceptions. In the early twentieth century, Einstein rethought Newtonian absolute space—which he called the container model of space—as relative. In his relativistic space-time theory, space is interweaved with time and no longer seen as infinite, as it has expanded since the Big Bang (Günzel, 2009, pp. 1175-1176).

In response to physical and mathematical concepts of space, phenomenologists argued for a description of spatiality from within lived bodily experience, against explanations of spatial structures according to the mechanics of a body's functions. In this "counterproposal," spatial dimensions arose from a "point zero" inherent in the subject (Günzel, 2012, p. 312), thereby incorporating the lived body into discussions on space (Tharakan & George, 2025, p. 147). Foucault considered phenomenological descriptions of space as primarily concerned with "inner space" and "fundamental for reflection in our time" (Foucault, 2008, p. 16). Reflecting on Bachelard's description of space as heterogeneous, he writes:

Bachelard's monumental work, the descriptions of phenomenologists have taught us that we do not live in a homogeneous and empty space, but on the contrary in a space thoroughly loaded with qualities and perhaps also haunted by fantasy. The space of our primary perception, the space of our dreams and that of

⁴ Günzel (2012) notes that Leibniz can be considered the forerunner of "topology"—a "non-materialistic and even non-extensional conception of space as the structure of relations (of spatial objects)" (Günzel, 2012, p. 307). This abstraction in geometry is said to have urged the contemporary understanding of space in sociocultural discourse (Günzel, 2012, p. 307).

our passions hold within themselves qualities that seem intrinsic: it is a light, ethereal, transparent space, or again it is a dark, rough, encumbered space; it is a space from above, a space of summits, or on the contrary a space from below, a space of mud; it is a space that can be flowing like lively water, or it is a space that is fixed, solidified, like stone or like crystal (Foucault, 2008, p. 16).

Phenomenological meditations on spatiality, such as those by Husserl, anticipated and urged a transition from the modern to the contemporary understanding of space (Tharakan & George, 2025, p. 147).

Meanwhile, by the twentieth century, the conception of space in sociocultural discourse had moved away from “a materialistic and deterministic view of (physical) space to an immaterial and possibilistic view of (cultural) space.” Cultural space is less concerned with the origin, essence, or ‘true’ concept of space than with spatial practices and the production of spatiality (Günzel, 2012, p. 307). In the contemporary period, space is understood as emergent rather than existing a priori, and composed of relations rather than structures (Warf, 2009, p. 75; Bachmann-Medick, 2016, p. 216), and is thus able to better account for the dynamicity and heterogeneity of the processes that shape space today.⁵ Contemporary society has the “network” as its organising principle, wherein distance is defined “functionally rather than in terms of physical length” (Warf, 2009, p. 70). The notion of space as relational and heterogeneous in the network era aligns with what Foucault calls the space of “emplacements” in the present epoch of space:

The present epoch would perhaps rather be the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity; we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a great life developing through time than

⁵ A few recent contributions to the relational understanding of space view space as the relations between things and actors that have to be constantly rebuilt by the latter (Peters & Kessl, 2009, pp. 25-26), even at the risk of overemphasising their creative possibilities (Schroer, 2019, p. 9).

that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. [...] We are in an epoch in which space is given to us in the form of relations between emplacements. [...] We do not live in a kind of void, inside which we could place individuals and things. [...] We live inside a set of relations that delineate emplacements that cannot be equated or in any way superimposed (Foucault, 2008, pp. 14-16).

The understanding of space as relational and heterogeneous has been central to the spatial turn in social theory in the late twentieth century. With a strong theoretical critique provided by post-structuralism, this ongoing movement acknowledges and responds to “a longstanding ontological and epistemological bias that privileges time over space in all the human sciences, including spatial disciplines like geography and architecture” (Soja, 2008, p. 11). It therefore calls for a “reinsertion” or “reassertion” of space in the humanities and social sciences (Peters & Kessel, 2009, p. 20; Warf & Arias, 2009, p. 1). In the wake of its “long, slow, and painful undertaking,” it has come to be reasserted that space matters not only because all our thoughts and actions necessarily occur in space, but also because “where events unfold is integral to how they take shape” (Warf & Arias, 2009, pp. 3-10; see Vendra & Furia, 2021, p. 1). Today, space unfolds as “suspended between matter and meaning” (Warf & Arias, 2009, p. 10), a result of “social and political action that has its material correspondence in architecture [and] structures” (Bachmann-Medick, 2016, p. 229). The contemporary conception of spatiality helps us grasp “how space and social relations are made through each other” (Hubbard & Kitchin, 2011, p. 499). The spatial turn has also driven profound shifts in the understanding of identity and subjectivity. The fixed, unified, autonomous, and transcendental identity at the core of the Cogito has mostly made way to account for heterogeneous, shifting, and even contradictory aspects of the nature and constitution of selves “who lie at the changing intersections of different language games” and axes of identity (Warf & Arias, 2009, p. 6). The following two sections explore how Foucault and Ricoeur held space for the spatiality of the self in their distinct ways, for thinking spatially about the self, specifically in relation to built space or architecture, when the self is confronted with the problematization regarding oneself.

5. Foucault and the spatiality of the self

Foucault is widely recognised as a “key thinker on space” (Hubbard & Kitchin, 2011), whose discussions on the significance of space for the human condition are credited for renewing a cultural approach to space (Günzel, 2012, p. 313) and leading to the spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences (Schroer, 2019, pp. 4-5). He recognised the “devaluation of space that has prevailed for generations” (Foucault, 1980a, p. 70), identifying the “discourse of philosophers” as one of the reasons for it (Foucault, 1980b, p. 149):

At the moment when a considered politics of spaces was starting to develop, at the end of the eighteenth century, the new achievements in theoretical and experimental physics dislodged philosophy from its ancient right to speak of the world, the cosmos, finite or infinite space. This double investment of space by political technology and scientific practice reduced philosophy to the field of a problematic of time. [...] Along with this goes a correlative devaluation of space [...] (Foucault, 1980b, pp. 149-150).

He observes that the longstanding neglect of space meant that space was treated as “the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile,” compared to time, which was seen as “richness, fecundity, life, dialectic” (Foucault, 1980a, p. 70). It also meant a delay in the emergence of space as a “historico-political problem” (Foucault, 1980b, p. 149): “Space used to be either dismissed as belonging to ‘nature’ — that is, the given, the basic conditions, ‘physical geography,’ in other words a sort of ‘prehistoric’ stratum; or else it was conceived as the residential site or field of expansion of peoples, of a culture, a language or a State” (Foucault, 1980b, p. 149). Foucault acknowledged the intersection of time and space, emphasising that “a whole history remains to be written of spaces — which would at the same time be the history of powers” (Foucault, 1980b, p. 149). He also observed that “the anxiety of today fundamentally concerns space, no doubt much more than time. Time probably appears only as one of the various possible operations of distribution between the elements that are spread out in space” (Foucault, 2008, p. 15). Although only a few of Foucault’s works discuss space explicitly — the most acclaimed

ones being the interviews “Questions on Geography” (Foucault, 1980a), “The Eye of Power” (Foucault, 1980b), and “Space, Knowledge, Power” (Foucault, 2000), and the article “Of Other Spaces” (Foucault, 2008)—he admitted to his spatial “obsessions” and preoccupations, conceding that “geography must indeed necessarily lie at the heart of [his] concerns” (Foucault, 1980a, p. 77). Indeed, most of his works are imbued with the theme of space, and not only use spatial, strategic metaphors but also study spaces as objects (Foucault, 1980a, p. 70; 2000, p. 362).

In Foucault’s works, space acts as the support, or the condition of possibility, for relating knowledge and power. In comparison to the “inner space” of phenomenologists, it was “outer space,” or sociocultural space, that he was attentive to (Foucault, 2008, p. 16). In his analysis of the genealogy of knowledge and the formation of discourses, he was concerned with the “politics of knowledge,” i.e., the tactics and strategies of power deployed through channels of geopolitics, by which “knowledge functions as a form of power and disseminates the effects of power” (Foucault, 1980a, pp. 69-77). He considered space as fundamental to any form of communal life and any exercise of power, and hence as having an effect on the constitution of personal identity (Foucault, 2000, p. 361). For Foucault, the individual “is not a pre-given entity which is seized on by the exercise of power. The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces” (Foucault, 1980a, pp. 73-74).

Foucault analyses architecture specifically for the “specific effects” it brings about in the field of social relations, rather than merely as an “element in space” (Foucault, 2000, p. 361). He admits that his analyses of architecture have been “vague,” and that, in them, architecture is “only taken as an element of support, to ensure a certain allocation of people in space, a canalisation of their circulation, as well as the coding of their reciprocal relations” (Foucault, 2000, p. 361). In other words, he was interested in architecture’s “interconnection” with social relations, and not “the primacy of this over that” (Foucault, 2000, p. 362). He observed that, if separated from one another, it would become impossible to understand “the effective practice of freedom by people, the practice of social relations, and the spatial distributions in which they find themselves” (Foucault, 2000, p. 356). For Foucault, liberty and resistance are relations realised and exercised in the actual practices of people, not that which can be given or possessed. Therefore, there is

nothing inherent or fundamental in the order of spaces as such—their structure, function, or the intention of the architect—that can either thwart or guarantee liberty to its inhabitants. Even in the most terrifying of systems, such as concentration camps, “aside from torture and execution which preclude any resistance [...] there always remain the possibilities of resistance, disobedience, and oppositional groupings” (Foucault, 2000, p. 354). Similarly, institutions and laws intended to guarantee liberty cannot automatically assure it merely by their establishment, and even retain the possibility of being turned around. Still, the exercise of freedom is not “completely indifferent to spatial distribution” (Foucault, 2000, p. 356)—his position is not that “one may as well leave people in slums, thinking that they can simply exercise their rights there” (Foucault, 2000, p. 355). Architecture can and does produce “positive effects when the liberating intentions of the architect coincide with the real practice of people in the exercise of their freedom” (Foucault, 2000, p. 355). For Foucault, an architect is not one among the people “through whom power passed or who are important in the fields of power relations” (Foucault, 2000, p. 356). However, the architect and her projects need to be taken into account so as to understand “a certain number of the techniques of power that are invested in architecture” (Foucault, 2000, pp. 354–357).

6. Ricoeur and the spatiality of the self

Ricoeur’s discussions on space are severely limited compared to those on time, so much so that recent scholarship observes that “his work could be (and in fact has been) considered a perfect example of the temporal bias” in philosophy and the humanities (Vendra & Furia, 2021, p. 2). Almost every aspect of Ricoeur’s philosophical thought, especially that concerning the self, “revolves around time rather than space” (Furia, 2022, p. 193), “even in contexts where spatial language might be more appropriate than temporal” (Gschwandtner, 2017, pp. 169-170). Ricoeur directly, though briefly, analyses space in the context of “the meaning and the task of human being” in only a handful of works—including the section “Inhabited Space” in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) and the article “Architecture and Narrativity” (2016). Consequently, Ricoeur was rarely addressed as a thinker on space. However, recent scholarship also demonstrates that “the concept of space is profoundly intertwined with the recurring topics of his thought” (Vendra & Furia, 2021, pp. 2-3) and that “he offers decisive suggestions for how to conceive of

a hermeneutic account of human space” (Umbelino, 2017, p. 234), opening possibilities to envision a spatial turn for the philosopher of the temporal self.⁶ Ricoeur’s insights on space as a “polysemic concept” (Vendra & Furia, 2021, p. 1), though not explicitly developed by himself, are being recognised as having crucial implications for furthering our understanding of the spatiality of built space and space-language and self-environment relationships (Vendra & Furia, 2021, pp. 1-4; Furia, 2022). The growing interest in a “Ricoeurian project of a hermeneutics of space” (Umbelino, 2015, p. 199) is fragmentary so far, promising room for elaborations on the multiple dimensions along which he pursues the problem of space (Vendra & Furia, 2021, p. 3).

Ricoeur traces the discourse of space as a “dialectic of lived space, geometrical space, and inhabited space” (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 153). Lived space includes the living body surrounded by “places” of life (Ricoeur, 2016, p. 32). The corporeal space is “immediately linked with the surrounding space of the environment” in privately shared memory, from which “we pass by degrees to collective memory and its commemorations linked to places consecrated by tradition” (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 149)—its named, public spaces that invite ritualised gatherings (Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 149-151). The phenomenology of places is such that “beings of flesh and blood occupy, leave, lose, [and] rediscover” them (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 153):

My place is there where my body is. But placing and displacing oneself are primordial activities that make place something to be sought out. And it would be frightening not ever to find it. We ourselves would be devastated. The feeling of uneasiness—*Unheimlichkeit*—joined to the feeling of not being in one’s place, of not feeling at home, haunts us and this would be the realm of emptiness. But there is a question of place because space is not yet filled, not saturated. In truth, it is always possible, often urgent, to displace oneself, with

⁶ For instance, there is no mention of Ricoeur as a thinker on space in canonical texts such as *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (Hubbard & Kitchin, 2011). However, the 2021 issue of the distinguished journal *Études Ricoeuriennes/Ricoeur Studies*—12(2)—is entirely dedicated to exploring “Ricoeur and the Problem of Space” (for a list of works that explore Ricoeur as a thinker on space, see Vendra & Furia, 2021, in the same issue).

the risk of becoming that passerby, that wanderer, that flâneur, that vagabond, stray dog that our fragmented contemporary culture both sets in motion and paralyses (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 149).

The placements and displacements of the body cannot be spoken of, thought, or experienced without some reference to “points, lines, surfaces, volumes, distances” inscribed on a geometrical space detached from it. Unlike the lived space of the lived body—the absolute here and “the landmark for any there”—three-dimensional geometrical space has no “privileged” places or “ethical overtones”; rather, it is measurable according to Cartesian coordinates, and each point in it can be “deduced from other points” (Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 149-153; see Ricoeur, 2016, p. 32). At the boundaries of lived space and geometrical space lies inhabited space or “site.” This “third space” or “mixed space” results from the superimposition of places on geometric space solely through an “act of construction” or architecture. Therefore, constructed space consists of “a system of sites for the major interactions of life”—be it “fixed space or space for dwelling” or “space to be traversed”—that are also “geometrical, measurable, and calculable” (Ricoeur, 2004, pp. 149-150; see Ricoeur, 2016, pp. 31-33).⁷

Ricoeur analyses architecture as a parallel to narrativity—thereby also investigating the entanglements of spatiality and temporality—by way of trying “to transpose to the architectural plane the categories linked to threefold mimesis”: prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 527, n. 2). Rather than reproducing reality, Ricoeurian mimesis functions “in a dialectical manner, as being first imitation, next reconstruction, and, finally, the transformative capacity of experience” (Ricoeur, 1998, p. 83). The act of inhabiting is the “prefiguration of space” or the presupposition of the architectural act, “inasmuch as the need for shelter and circulation lays out the interior space of a dwelling and the given intervals to traverse” (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 527, n. 2; see Ricoeur, 2016, p. 33). The act of construction is the process of “configuration of space,” and it works simultaneously with the act of inhabiting, shaping one another at the same time:

⁷ A similarity, up to a point, can be observed between Ricoeur’s notions of places, geometrical space, and sites, and Foucault’s notions of spaces of localisation, extension, and emplacement, respectively.

The functions of inhabiting are continually ‘invented,’ in both senses of the word (to discover and to create), at the same time that the processes of construction are inscribed in the design of the architectural space. We might say that the act of inhabiting, and the building resulting from the construction, shape one another at the same time (Ricoeur, 2016, p. 36).

In the act of construction, inhabiting is redesigned so that “the last word is given to a thoughtful inhabiting.” The builder configures space according to three “rules of rationality”: (1) emplotment—the “spatial synthesis of the heterogeneous” or “the intention of internal coherence” between parts of a building; (2) intelligibility—the intention to clarify and make comprehensible the inextricable through inscription in the “enduringness of materials”; and (3) intertextuality—the intention to contextualise or confront the new building next to, against, and after the “network of already-there buildings” and ways of inhabiting (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 150; 2016, pp. 36-39). Due to the ideological presuppositions of the builder, the architectural project is inclined to disregard or outweigh the inhabitants’ needs and expectations stemming from the act of inhabiting, and “is too often the representation of the ‘competent authorities’ regarding the inhabiting needs of [...] [the] masses” (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 150; 2016, pp. 33-39). Even so, the building does not complete its journey in its configuration by the builder—it gives itself not only to be seen but also to be read (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 151):

[...] it will not suffice for an architectural project to be well thought-out, or even for it to be held to be rational for it to be understood and accepted. All planners ought to learn that an abyss can separate the rules of the rationality of a project [...] from the rules of acceptability to a public (Ricoeur, 2016, p. 39).

The inhabitants of the built space read and reread it from the point of view of their way of inhabiting, approaching it with their needs, expectations, resistance, and challenges, which, when confronted by the space’s propositions of meanings, elicit responses ranging “from passive reception, subdued, indifferent reception, to hostile and angry reception” (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 527, n. 2; see Ricoeur, 2016, p. 39). In the inhabitants’ inhabiting as a response or even an answer to building, the

architectural project undergoes a “refiguration of space.” Receptive and active inhabiting implies plural, polemical, and intertextual readings of space—“careful rereading of the urban environment, a continuous relearning of the juxtaposition of styles, and thus also of life stories of which the monuments and all the buildings carry the trace” (Ricoeur, 2016, p. 39).

7. Conclusion: self-understanding by way of interpretation of space

In Ricoeurian hermeneutics of space, it is in the mimetic phase of refiguration that the interpretation of space opens possibilities for the understanding of the self for inhabitants through the transformative capacity of experience (Umbelino, 2015, pp. 205-206; Ricoeur, 2016, p. 39). Ricoeur considers the model of reading excellent for reevaluating the act of inhabiting. In the act of reading a space, the space reveals and transforms the inhabitant while undergoing a transformation of its own, as a text does:

The text unfolds its capacity to illuminate or clarify the life of the reader; it has both the power of discovering, of revealing the hidden, the unsaid of a life shielded from Socratic scrutiny, and that of transforming the banal interpretation that the reader makes according to the bent of day-to-day life. To reveal [...], but also to transform, that is what carries the text outside itself (Ricoeur, 2016, p. 39).

The dialectic of revealing and transforming is such that the interpretation of space could culminate in the self-interpretation of the inhabitant. Then, the inhabitant “understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 120), constituting the self as meaning is constituted. An interplay of revealing and transforming is also consequential in Foucault’s analyses of the subject: revealing the genealogy of the formation of the subject and the possibilities for practices of self-transformation are crucial to the Foucauldian project of the hermeneutics of the subject (Foucault, 1986, p. 64; Koopman, 2013, p. 526).

Thus, as an object in which meaning is exteriorised, built space mediates self-understanding. Even so, as Taylor (2015) notes, Ricoeur

asserts that we are not the masters of meaning's exteriorisation in objects, since the exteriorisation "may be a result of an unconscious or subconscious intention, [...] may differ from the inspiring intention, and [...] may develop autonomy" (Taylor, 2015, pp. xii-xiii)—as in the case of a building's interpretation by its inhabitants. There is, therefore, a need to emphasise the positive "creativity of the externalisation" (Taylor, 2015, pp. xii-xiii). Simultaneously, there is a need to engage with tradition to incorporate the critique of ideology, or a hermeneutics of suspicion, within the hermeneutics of space, since built space, like other external products of life, can fall under the sway of false consciousness, games of power, or ideological presuppositions (Foucault, 2000, p. 363; Davidson, 2016, p. 160).

In conclusion, this paper has shown that the "spatiality of the self" offers yet another point of intersection to further imaginary conversations and philosophical dialogues between Foucault and Ricoeur in the context of their shared concern for the self. Despite their shared concerns and similarity of themes, Foucault and Ricoeur followed distinct paths in their search for self-understanding, differing in their methodologies, and use of concepts, and ideas on thinking about those concepts (Goetz, 2004). Then, reading the two thinkers in one frame requires the reader to hold space for their works in a manner similar to Gillian Rose's paradoxical spaces—"complex and contradictory spatialities" that speak of "power, resistance, and the acknowledgement of difference" (Rose, 1993, p. 141).

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