

Amor Towles's *A Gentleman in Moscow*: The Hotel as Spatial Structure of Power Dynamics

Eleftheria Karagianni, Anestis Karastergiou
University of Crete, Greece

The hotel space has been employed in many literary works as a point of reference to highlight, through intersecting life paths and ephemeral encounters, social practices, morals attitudes, and trends, mainly related to the modern subject. The objective of this paper is to explore a distinct perspective of the hotel as a space which shapes and is simultaneously shaped by power structures. Our research will focus on the hotel's dual function, as a luxury destination and at the same time as a shadowy and camouflaged punitive environment reflecting broader mechanisms of state surveillance in Amor Towles's novel A Gentleman in Moscow, revolving around the famous, luxurious and historic Metropol Hotel in Moscow. We will examine the way in which Count Rostov, the novel's main character, experiences his lifelong house arrest in the Metropol's plural and contrasted spaces, along with the tactics of control exercised over him. Drawing from Foucault and Agamben theories, we consider the Metropol Hotel as a heterotopic and biopolitical space where an individual is politically punished, socially excluded, and subjected to life exposure that turns them into a homo sacer bearing a bare life.

Keywords

Amor Towles; hotel; Metropol Moscow; heterotopia; biopolitics; homo sacer; state power

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20th century, hotel space has been a source of inspiration for many writers, and at the same time the setting for a large number of great literary books categorised as “hotel literature”. The fictional representation of hotels during the first two decades of the 1900s is mostly

related to modernism, cosmopolitanism, urban context, (see Simmel; Matthias; Despotopoulou et al), and social interaction (Tallack; Pready). Siegfried Kracauer in his well-known essay “The Hotel Lobby”, describes the hotel, and specifically the reception area, as an impersonal place of purposeless and trivial encounters, where fluid identities “Lacking any and all relation [...] drip down into the vacuum” (174). The imaginary hotel spaces have been to a large extent used to portray social stratification, practices and status, mainly that of an idle and condescending *bourgeoisie* as in the case of Arnold Bennett’s *The Grand Babylon Hotel* and Henry Green’s *Party Going*. In parallel, hotel premises have been employed to showcase a transformative experience that may be either individual, as, for example, in Anton Chekhov’s “The Lady with the Dog”, Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, E.M. Forster’s *A Room with a View*, or collective. The latter is amply depicted in the form of social but also political transition in Joseph Roth’s *Hotel Savoy*, Vicki Baum’s *Grand Hotel*, Stratis Tsirkas’s *Drifting Cities: The Club*, and Pierre Assouline’s *Hotel Lutetia*.

This paper seeks to cover a neglected area in the field of hotel literature: the use of the hotel as an alternative space of house arrest, vividly depicted in Amor Towles’s novel *A Gentleman in Moscow*. The setting in Towles’s book, as in Eugen Ruge’s *Metropol* published three years later in 2019, is Moscow’s renowned and luxurious Metropol Hotel, which, for many years after the Russian Revolution in 1917, served as a detention site for proven or suspected state opponents who were gradually marginalised both politically and socially. The reason for which Towles’s *A Gentleman in Moscow* was chosen over Ruge’s *Metropol* is that our research focuses on the unusual and uncommon condition of a long-life incarceration in the form of *involuntary*, *perpetual* and *uninterrupted* hotel sojourn, due to political reasons. Amor Towles’s novel delves into the fictional biography of Rostov, a disgraced Count sentenced to perpetual confinement in the Metropol Hotel, in the aftermath of the Bolshevik victory. Count Rostov, who resided during the Romanov era in a lavish suite of the Metropol Hotel as a distinguished and privileged scion of a noble wealthy family, is officially declared an enemy of the newly-established order. The only reason he is exempt from the death penalty is the possible attribution of an anonymous pre-revolutionary poem to him. The novel constitutes not only a personal log of house arrest, and a prisoner’s record that spans many decades, but also an account of Russia’s historical events.

Departing from Henri Lefebvre’s concept of space being a social product serving “as a tool of thought and action”, but also as “a means of control,

hence of domination, of power" (26), and going one step further, we consider the Metropol Hotel as a *heterotopia* (Foucault xix-xx). This term designates a space within another one, a mirroring counter-space of a parallel reality, where those who do not fit the dominant system are confined. It will also be argued that the biopolitics applied to the Metropol, force Towles's central figure, Count Rostov, to conduct a *bare life* (Agamben 7), a mere biological living, turning him into a *homo sacer* (71), a vulnerable subject on which an invisible but omnipresent sovereign exercises a perpetual and total domination over life and death. In the following sections we will further develop our arguments in order to prove our initial claims.

The Metropol Hotel as *heterotopia*

The novel begins with Rostov's mock trial, which sentences him to a *totally* (in both the literal and political sense of the word) framed life: "Thus, it is the opinion of this committee that you should be returned to that hotel of which you are so fond. But make no mistake: should you ever set foot outside of the Metropol again, you will be shot. Next matter" (Towles 5-6). With this, it becomes clear that Count Rostov will no longer return to the hotel as a resident, but as a lifelong prisoner. And while the hotel space remains the same, its function and use change. It becomes a *heterotopia*. *Heterotopia* is a term coined by Foucault in 1967 to describe the paradox of the simultaneous co-existence of parallel or embodied spaces. Heterotopias actually constitute counter-sites of ordinary sites, whose functions may be contested or inverted (Foucault 24). Foucault's approach is based on five principles, which we believe are fully applicable to the Metropol Hotel and justify our consideration of it as heterotopia.

According to the first principle, heterotopias are "a constant of every human group" being shaped each time by the specific society in which they arise (Foucault 24). Heterotopias thus for Foucault are primarily culturally produced. He also argues that in modern societies "heterotopias of deviation" have mostly prevailed, for example, psychiatric clinics and prisons, which have traditionally housed "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm [...]" (Foucault 27). Respectively, the Metropol is first of all a cultural production reflecting the prevailing mores, norms and trends. It should be also taken into account that hotels *a priori* may be multinational, but are by no means multicultural, meaning that, despite their international

orientation, they are carriers of the cultural features of the country in which they operate. The Metropol over the decades, was (trans)formed not only in accordance with social and cultural (r)evolution, but also in accordance with the Soviet State's division of citizens into the devoted, and deviants. For the Bolsheviks, Count Rostov, a relic of the old regime, is a deviant and therefore expelled from the new Soviet society through lifelong confinement in the Metropol Hotel. To consider the first principle of heterotopia, one has to compare the circumstances of the heterotopian attributes of the Metropol to other equivalent cases that can be found in global history and, thus, make a generalisation to consider the constant nature of heterotopias in the history of civilisation. It is argued here that the many examples one can find of buildings that have been repurposed around the world point to the fact that heterotopias are a constant of every culture, socially and politically (re)produced, despite the differences regarding their particulars. The Liberty Hotel of Boston, Massachusetts, or the Hotel Pikermi in Greece can provide us with such examples. The former is ironically known as "Liberty Hotel", as it once housed the imposing Charles Street Jail, a stark reminder of 19th-century incarceration, constructed in 1851. The jail confined inmates such as Malcolm X and the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti. Similarly, the Pikermi Hotel in Greece was used by the Junta as a short-term detention centre for important Greek communist leaders and dissident bourgeois political figures. There are many more such instances all around the world.

The second principle involves the dynamic nature of heterotopia. As history unfolds, a heterotopia that existed in the past and continues to exist in the present, may operate in a different way (Foucault 25) over the years. This principle of heterotopia that is related to the dynamic historical transformation of the place is applied to the Metropol, considering the hotel's long, rich social and political history. From its opening in 1905, until the October Revolution in 1917, the hotel served as a luxurious, avant-garde venue for the wealthy elite. After the Russian Revolution, it was renamed the "Second House of Soviets", as both Towles (on his official website) and Philps (xxxii) note, and used by high-ranking state officials. Lenin and Stalin hosted important guests and interlocutors there, turning it into a space for behind-the-scenes politics and a place for high-level decision-making. From 1930 onward, although it reopened in its former capacity as a luxury hotel hosting foreigners as well, it nonetheless remained for a long time under close and secret surveillance. The heterotopic identity of the Metropol Hotel has always been in line with the country's historic events.

The third Foucauldian principle of heterotopia highlights its ability to juxtapose “in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 25). The simultaneous co-existence of contrasting spaces in a single place in the Metropol, is incontestably applied. The hotel’s diverse purposes and controlled environments draw an odd fictional, and, at the same time, very real, architecture which embodies both libertarian cosmopolitanism and state surveillance. On the one hand there are the sumptuous and lavish areas, suites, bars and restaurants that guests can visit willingly at any time and stay in as long as they wish. On the other hand, there are the miserable, shabby, tiny rooms of the upper floors in which inmates are forced to spend the rest of their lives. In this case of the unfortunate “coincidence of opposites”, we are dealing with a discredited microcosm existing within, and in parallel to another privileged one. The hotel’s classificatory spatial planning and everything it encompasses, walls, furniture, decoration, become tangible and intangible extensions of political regulation and governmentality:

Leaving Pasha and Petya behind, the captain led the Count and his escort to a utility stair hidden behind an inconspicuous door in the core of the hotel. The ill-lit ascent turned a sharp corner every five steps in the manner of a belfry. Up they wound three flights to where a door opened on a narrow corridor servicing a bathroom and six bedrooms reminiscent of monastic cells. This attic was originally built to house the butlers and ladies’ maids of the Metropol’s guests; but when the practice of traveling with servants fell out of fashion, the unused rooms had been claimed by the caprices of casual urgency – thenceforth warehousing scraps of lumber, broken furniture, and other assorted debris. Earlier that day, the room closest to the stairwell had been cleared of all but a cast-iron bed, a three-legged bureau, and a decade of dust. In the corner near the door was a small closet, rather like a telephone box, that had been dropped in the room as an afterthought. Reflecting the pitch of the roof, the ceiling sloped at a gradual incline as it moved away from the door, such that at the room’s outer wall the only place where the Count could stand to his full height was where a dormer accommodated a window the size of a chessboard. (Towles 10–11)

Heterotopias are not only related to space, but also to time, and more specifically to fragmented temporalities, forming what Foucault calls *heterochronies* (26). Through this fourth principle, Foucault argues that heterochronies are

related to slices in time (26), which implies a complete break with traditional measurement. To illustrate his approach, Foucault cites the example of the cemetery, where the loss of life is intertwined with the eternity of memory. Confinement can also be seen as a symbolic death of a detainee's past life and individuality, a death that brings with it faded and distant memories. The heterochronies in Towles's novel are represented in various ways: a) through Rostov's flashbacks and nostalgic reminiscences for his pre-prison life, b) through the endless accumulation and flatness of time that confinement entails, c) through the replacement of a traditional calendar with the use of historical and affective milestones, d) and finally through the subjective perception and even "inventive" calculation of time. The following excerpt is indicative of how detainees determine and regulate in their own unique way time allocation and milestones:

Even men in the most trying of circumstances – like those lost at sea or confined to prison – will find the means to carefully account the passing of a year. Despite the fact that all the splendid modulations of the seasons and those colorful festivities that recur in the course of normal life have been replaced by a tyranny of indistinguishable days, the men in such situations will carve their 365 notches into a piece of wood or scratch them into the walls of their cell. (Towles 109)

Whichever wine was within, it was decidedly not identical to its neighbors. On the contrary, the contents of the bottle in his hand was the product of a history as unique and complex as that of a nation, or a man [...] Yes, a bottle of wine was the ultimate distillation of time and place; [...] (Towles 143–144)

On his personal website, Towles attributes an "accordion structure" to his novel's timeline, starting the story with a "granular description" of the Count's early days of confinement and then proceeding with "leaps across times". This is achieved through the detailed illustrations of a subjective experience of time and the measuring of its passage by defining specific turning points such as "career, parenthood, and political landscape".

The fifth and final principle points out that heterotopias presuppose a system of "closing and opening", meaning a system that renders them isolable and at the same time penetrable (Foucault 26). Accessible and at the same time forever out of reach (Foucault 26). This heterotopian function implies exclusion strategies. In order to enter or to exit, as in the case of the Metropol,

someone needs a special symbolic “licence”, such as proofs of identity, or payment for passing visitors, or the state’s verdict for its own “special guests”. A metaphor of this heterotopian aspect of access and prohibition, openness and closure is the revolving doors of the entrance of the Metropol that count Rostov characteristically calls the “revolving doors of life” (Towles 322).

Biopolitics, and the making of bare life and homo sacer at the Metropol Hotel

In the Metropol’s *heterotopia*, Count Rostov conducts a controlled and monitored life constantly exposed and watched from every angle. Space as a means of imposing authoritarian control, and Rostov’s perception of the Metropol’s luxurious public spaces as a hidden centre of power dynamics where people are manipulated and treated like puppets attached and pulled by strings, is vividly described in the following excerpt:

But at this particular moment, what the architect was working on was a detailed drawing of a crowded restaurant that looked very much like the Piazza. Only, under the floor of this restaurant was an elaborate mechanics of axles, cogs, and gears; and jutting from an outside wall was a giant crank, at the turn of which, each of the restaurant’s chairs would pirouette like a ballerina on a music box, then spin around the space until they came to a stop at an entirely different table. And towering over this tableau, peering down through the glass ceiling, was a gentleman of sixty with his hand on the crank, preparing to set the diners in motion. (Towles 337)

The construction of Rostov’s identity as an inmate is carried out through a paradox. On the one hand, through spatial and social isolation, and on the other hand, through forced, long-term, and strictly limited engagement with the hotel guests. His punishment consists of moral and symbolic tarnishing, public downgrade and humiliation though personal deprivation and public exposure: “[...] house arrest is a definitive infringement upon one’s liberty, presumably it is also intended to be something of a humiliation” (Towles 109). The appropriation of Rostov’s own living space and personal belongings also entails the diminishing of his own existence. His moving to a tiny, poorly maintained room with little, and worn-out, furniture on the hotel’s top floors, previously intended for auxiliary staff, demonstrates not only architectural

relegation to a lower social status on the fringe of society, but also that of a “vertical hierarchy” (Marinou 69) that we can also see in other novels set in hotels, for example, in *Hotel Savoy*, *Lutetia*, and *The Club*. By being replaced, Count Rostov becomes *displaced* and dislocated from the new society as he now constitutes its property and its possession:

As the two guards looked on smugly from the hall, the good captain explained that he had summoned the bellhops to help the Count move what few belongings his new quarters would accommodate.

‘And the rest?’

‘Becomes the property of the People.’ (Towles 11)

The public display of Count Rostov’s deprivation of *habitat*, meaning his intimate space and private life, automatically turns him into the property of the state and, by extension, into the property of the people, which also explains his “use” as a waiter in the hotel restaurant. Rostov’s vulnerability is also expressed through an unstoppable public exhibition of his loss of *habitus* (Bourdieu 171), that is the deprivation of his right to engage himself in his aristocratic social and cultural practices, such as hunting, and refined wine and food tasting, the adoption of a specific dress code and posture according to the occasion, the enjoyment of sophisticated discussions about art and poetry, the selection of highbrow books and other reading. The denial of one’s *habitat* and *habitus*, and the subsequent loss of one’s social identity, perceived as the process of making sense of oneself through social interaction (Jenkins 17), serve not only as a reminder of the harsh consequences for dissidents, but also as a validation of the triumph of the new order over the old regime. The hotel space in Towles’s novel is depicted as an “invisible camp”, a place that shapes a new understanding of repression through openness and exposure of transparent lives. Deprivation of the right to secrecy, despite being considered as an insult to human dignity, is frequently employed to exert control over detainees’ lives. For Simmel (2009), social bonds and human relations are constructed not only by reciprocal knowledge, the things we know for each other, but also by “mutual concealment”, that is the things we ignore (314). Simmel stresses that violation of social distance by others is an offence to one’s honour (317) and a lack of discretion that transcends “the sphere of the contents of life not to be shared” (318).

The appropriation of one’s existence, the complete regulation of every stage and aspect of one’s life, imposed by a sovereign governmental rationality

(Foucault 22) points to the concept of *biopolitics* – “the attempt [...] to rationalize the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birthrate, life expectancy, race...” (Foucault 317). Biopolitics thus is understood as the management of human physical life by mechanisms of power. Rostov’s political punishment through total control restricts not only his personal choices, but also biological aspects of life.

In addition to files on various guests who had stayed in the hotel over the years, in alphabetical arrangement were files on members of the staff [...] They were a careful accounting of human flaws, noting specific instances of tardiness, impertinence, disaffection, drunkenness, sloth, desire. (Towles 435)

As detainees’ sexual relations are monitored and tracked, Rostov maintains a secret love life. Even his right to reproduce is negotiable and subject to approval. In Towles’s novel the state overseers prove quite “magnanimous” in turning a blind eye to the paternal relationship that develops initially between a little girl, Nina (whom the communist party soon recruits), and later her daughter, Sofia, whom she abandons when the party sends her into exile.

The Count was also right to worry that Sofia’s residency would be noted. For not only was her presence remarked, within a fortnight of her arrival a letter was sent to an administrative office within the Kremlin stating that a Former Person living under house arrest on the top floor of the Metropol Hotel was caring for a five-year-old child of unknown parentage. (Towles 271)

After Sofia’s serious and dangerous injury, Rostov takes her to a hospital defying the consequences of his act. The seriousness of the matter is not recognised as a mitigating factor justifying the violation of the sentence for the first time in twenty years of imprisonment, and Rostov is hastily and secretly transported back to the Metropol in order to avoid execution. Not only are personal relations and access to medical care tracked, monitored, and even prohibited but also food and drink intake are. Expensive, old, rare wines, Rostov’s greatest delight, abundantly available at the Metropol during the Romanov dynasty, are no longer allowed to be consumed, and are placed in storage. The order to remove the distinctive labels from the wine bottles

referring to the harvest year, is a metaphorical and symbolic erasure of the past, and a method of biopolitics implemented through the imposition of dietary rules, and of what is or is not allowed to be consumed.

Within the walls of the Metropol, power dynamics impose, as already mentioned, constant exhibition and transparency, creating for Rostov an ambiguous situation: he is exposed to the public gaze, while remaining at the same time excluded from any privilege and social interaction beyond his obligation to serve customers as a head waiter. Thus, the Metropol Hotel functions as a non-typical space of incarceration where correctional and punitive practices are not determined by law, but by political will. This unusual condition puts Rostov simultaneously within and outside social rules, within and outside state law. In other words, he remains in what Agamben calls a perpetual *state of exception* (*State of Exception* 29). According to Agamben, a state of exception appears in the form of a legal vacuum caused by indefinite suppression of established rules for reasons of *force majeure*. In Towles's novel, Rostov's state of exception stems from the prevalence of a peculiar punishment that is lengthy within, but also outside, formal and prescribed procedures. Confinement in a luxury hotel is not an ordinary situation, and it does not constitute an official criminal law penalty.

Since Rostov remains "frozen" somewhere between the valid and the suspended rule, the written and unwritten law, the formal and the informal punishment, he is transformed into a *homo sacer* (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 82). Agamben, who borrows the term from Roman criminal law, attributes the quality of *homo sacer* to a person who despite the fact that they have been accused by the people of committing a crime, their sacredness stems from the paradox of "the unpunishability of his killing and the ban on his sacrifice" (74), "a life that cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed" (82). That means that on the one hand, the convicted, in our case Rostov, is forbidden to be sacrificed (he remains unpunishable, and that is what makes him sacred), while on the other, if someone kills him, he will not be convicted of murder (and he will then remain unpunished) (71). This is the one whose "holiness", not in a religious but in a symbolic sense, is based on a double exception, both from divine and human law, while being at the same time subjected to, and abandoned by a sovereign power (82-83). A *homo sacer's* life is "[...] the originary political formulation of the imposition of the sovereign bond" (85), and that sovereign bond is validated by what Agamben calls a "*bare life*", meaning an "inclusive exclusion" (7), the game of being inside – outside, that

results from a sovereign decision. A bare life is heavily “politicized through the fact of its exclusion” and because it is “a life exposed to sovereign power and the threat of death” (Whyte 109).

Conclusion

The scope, both of our study and Towles's novel, could be summarised in the following sentence: “I suppose a room is the summation of all that has happened inside it” (331). Space is not just a geometric and architectural representation. It is culturally and historically determined over time, and it produces meaning by always conversing with society and political agents. The hotel space, when controlled by the state apparatus, brings together all the characteristics of *heterotopia* encapsulating diverse sub-spaces with contrasting functions, and spatial spiral boundaries. Towles's novel highlights what we could call “the paradox of the Metropol”, meaning its dual operation as a place of punishment and imposed long-term confinement, and as a place of entertainment, constant movement, and transience. The hotel's openness and closure, display, and concealment, shape a rigid isolation within civility and sociability, a hybrid prison, unlocked and yet sealed where detainees experience a constant *state of exception*, inside and outside legal and social norms, controlled and monitored by an invisible but omnipresent power. The oscillation of the power pendulum between the law and its abrogation, the public exposure of the confined subject and his potential unpunished murder, transforms it into an Agambenian *homo sacer*. As hotel space enables submission and punitive practices, through a shifting, evolving and intervening surveillance, *biopolitics* can be largely applied, allowing the state to regulate the inmates' physical lives and to control all kinds of activities and interactions tightly. Amor Towles's *A Gentleman in Moscow* offers a nuanced understanding of incarceration, sovereign power, and the experience of house arrest by portraying the hotel's spatial configuration as a mechanism of control and surveillance. Building on this, we believe that our contribution may open a new field of inquiry within hotel literature – one that explores the paradoxical nature of multiple, parallel, or embedded hotel spaces through the lens of biopolitics, exclusion, and sovereign regulation. Works such as Daphne du Maurier's *Jamaica Inn* and Wilkie Collins's *The Haunted Hotel* may be revisited through this perspective, as both depict inn or hotel spaces as sites of

psychic enclosure, mind entrapment, coercive authority, and spatial ambiguity, resonating with the dynamics of sovereign control and spatial incarceration explored in Towles's novel.

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ELEFThERIA KARAGIANNI (she/her) has conducted post-doctoral research in the Department of Sociology, University of Crete. She was also a visiting scholar at the Catholic University of Leuven (KU Leuven), Belgium, in 2022 and 2023. She completed her Ph.D. in Political Science at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece in December 2018. She has studied French Literature (a B.A., Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and an M.A., Université Stendhal III de Grenoble), Sociology (a B.A., University of Crete), and Political Science (an M.A., and a Ph.D., National and Kapodistrian University of Athens). Her academic interests revolve around social, political, cultural, and visual studies, while her current academic research and publications focus on autobiographical, social, and political theories and representations in European and American literature, cinema, theatre, art, and graphic narratives.

eleftheria.karagianni@uoc.gr

ANESTIS KARASTERGIOU (he/his) is an academic researcher who is currently teaching Philosophy of Technology in the Department of Philosophy, University of Crete,. He has co-authored a bibliographical guide on gender, titled “An introduction to queer: A guide for persons who are interested in legal sciences”, which is available from Kallipos academic publishing. Apart from that bibliographical guide, written in Greek, he has worked on translations (reports, shadow reports) for Intersex Greece in the language pair EL<->EN. Moreover, he has co-published a paper on gender issues in machine translation. He completed his Ph.D. in late 2020 at Panteion University of Athens with a dissertation on Canguilhem’s epistemology and the relationship between man and machine. His basic research interests include philosophy of science and technology, moral philosophy, gender studies, business and technoscientific ethics, and translation studies. He holds three bachelor’s degrees, one in Greek Philology, one in the History and Philosophy of Science, both from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA), and one in Marketing and Communication from Athens University of Economics and Business. He also holds three master’s degrees, one in philosophy (Ethics), one in Science, Technology, and Society, both from NKUA, and a master’s degree in translation from Ionian University. Finally, he has worked in quality assurance in higher education, first for two years at the Hellenic Authority for Higher Education and now at the Quality Assurance Unit of NKUA.
akarastergiou@uoc.gr