

# The Space of Time: Chronotopes and Crisis

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*This article examines the importance of temporality to any “spatial turn,” especially regarding the coordinates of social and cultural crisis, here gathered under the rubric of “the space of time.” Although chronotopes are not usually associated with crisis at this scale, they nevertheless address specific levels of impasse in time/space relations. In literary critique, this means not only interrogating the internal effects of spatiality in narrative, for instance, but also considering the extent to which these effects may themselves be overdetermined by deeper social and spatial prerogatives. This not only helps situate the chronotope as a concept in its time but also dialectically explains its prescience for our time.*

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The idea one should elaborate dialectics through spatial logic would seem superfluous because dialectics, in both its idealist and materialist declensions, has cleaved strongly to space in its formulations and procedures. The work of Henri Lefebvre and more recently David Harvey is crucial in this regard (see Lefebvre and Harvey, *Spaces* respectively), although the temporal coordinates of their critique has often been interpreted through a kind of spatial hyperbole in which all that is space actually does the work of time to the detriment of the dialectics at issue. But to invoke dialectics in the same breath as chronotope would seem even more questionable because chronotope, at least in its Bakhtinian interpretation, appears to exclude the systematicity of dialectics in advance. One could spend quite some time tarrying with the negative of these counter-intuitions (I am thinking here of the work of Galin Tihanov on Bakhtin and Lukács: see Tihanov), so let me just assert the idea is not to proceed as if they do not harry my theoretical framework but that the tension they provide is agonistic and creative, both marking constitutive limitations in the approach and suggesting the places where such confines may be breached. Specifically, I want to explore a kind of chronotopic critique beside itself, beside, that is, the basic literary articulation Bakhtin gives it *sui generis*. Why?

When Bakhtin opined that chronotopes constitute the places where the knots of narrative were tied and untied he clearly provided a conceptual lever regarding the organization of time and space in literary form. His discussion of Greek romance, for instance, particularly in the analysis of adventure time, offers a deep understanding of how the chronotope causes narrative to appear (and disappear). It is important to stress that his concept does not codify time but, in the spirit of Einstein and Ukhtomsky from whom he draws, presses the function of its relativity and its multiple modalities. There is a certain dialectical tension written into Bakhtin's elaboration, part of which derives from its relationship to modernist spatiality, a narratological intervention itself posed on a critique of normative notions of time, the time of realism, for instance. In event, it may be Bakhtin's theorization, while a robust response to spatial formalism, is more symptomatic than a solution, a way to understand the critical genuflections of the early twentieth century that yet provides lessons for the twenty-first. From this perspective, one is immediately struck by the idiosyncrasies of Bakhtin's take on temporality. Adventure time itself, for instance, is conspicuously atemporal, a kind of narratological void that takes up time without marking it, a nothing immanent to the being of the text it pervades. Events in this space do not advance the plot or change its denouement but underline that narrative is also formed by time's suspension, by its subordination to the space of play. In an often quoted flourish Bakhtin argues this space of time is open-ended: "These hours and days leave no trace, and therefore one may have as many of them as one likes." (Bakhtin, "Forms" 94) Adventure time is outside what Bakhtin calls "real duration" and ultimately pivots on the vagaries of chance.

What if the concept just described is also a veritable allegory about the flexible fate of time itself in spatial critique? That is to say, just as Bakhtin's understanding of chronotope must be radically particularized, chronotopized if you will, so any broad conceptual reevaluation like "the spatial turn" in cultural analysis must "turn" on the temporal coordinates that inform it, even if they might constitute its impasse. Is this a turning away, a turning towards, or a turning in place, and how might time adjudicate the difference? In the Greek romance, the very narratological ability to suspend time is the impress of its chronotope, the way space is made to appear and chance to happen. On the one hand, Bakhtin elaborates this formal component as Greek "tragedy-lite," which is to say romance can keep fate at bay by not according time its due; on the other hand, the passionate effulgence of the role of chance necessarily speaks to a contextual space/time in which no chances can be taken and time is not suspended but is strenuously segmented and surveyed (and is certainly in dialogue

with the temporal logic of Stalinism). To put it simply, whenever ratios of time and space are at stake, so too is the *ratio* in which such perceptions are formed. Closer to the present, for instance, one could make the argument postmodernity's chronotope is replete with adventure time where time as such only exists as its epiphenomenon, as a more intense velocity; a mode of storytelling where plots dissipate and narrative congeals in topography or as an architectonics of architecture, or simply as things. Radicals who might want to take time or seize the moment find temporality banalized by presentism and instantaneity and any utopian aims labeled as suspiciously teleological. Postmodernism's pounding of modernism itself seems strangely asynchronous or anachronistic, taking on a horse already so thoroughly flogged that pastiche is not shaped but is largely inevitable. Yet postmodernism's temporal suspension is radical in its own way because it implies a questioning of time's coordinates, of its *ratio* now, and quickly dispenses with any concept of time that closes off possibility in its present, eternal or otherwise. It is not for nothing one of the most acute critics of the postmodern is a dialectician, Fredric Jameson, not because postmodernity is anti-dialectical but because for dialectics it speaks to a profound crisis in time, an "antinomy of postmodernity" as Jameson puts it, that symptomatically vaunts space where crisis also has a crucially temporal effulgence (see Jameson, *Postmodernism*). Postmodernity is itself an epiphenomenon, of globalization, although to be fair it is by no means a faithful cultural logic of its economic base. At this level it does not just act out the baleful disjunction of globalization with planetarity (the space between the absolute exploitation of global commodification and the ability of the Earth to sustain it) but often ardently questions such spatial adventure, as if, at any moment, chance might so interrupt its narrative as to render it moot. But again, this is an allegory of agon, not its truth.

The reason to take Bakhtinian chronotope seriously is not because it surreptitiously sneaks time back into spatial analysis but because it motivates space *with* time in literary critique, opening out its ratio to *ratio*, and in doing so tells a literary history, or what Bakhtin calls novelization, the process by which one genre gorges on the anachronism of others (the epic, the lyric, the romance). But what I mean by the space of time also takes the chronotope in another key. First, the concept of the space of time adjudicates literary time/space in its time/space, in the coordinates of a particular literary example. Second, however, it attempts to measure the very logic of that appreciation, the critical act, from the time/space of its articulation (or as Jameson reminds us, dialectics is itself subject to dialectics: see Jameson, *Valences*). But such laudable reflexivity is neither learned nor automatic nor is it necessarily significant as a dialectics

*in situ*. Instead, the space of time is about the extent to which literary chronotopes are caught within, produce and are produced by, specific crises of time and space which may have more than the literary in mind in their fullest extent. Just as philosophy must quickly ask, “Are these operations of mind?”, so social and political science must immediately question whether literary chronotopes are of any consequence in the scheme of things. There is crisis and, we are told, there is crisis (of course, the politics between the two is deeply contestable). After all, what might be a crisis in Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a key focus of Bakhtin’s critique (see Bakhtin, *Rabelais*), is surely not of the same scale as that of class and state in their tempero-spatial relations. But such a problem is about how to scale crisis, not about the value of reading crisis in its literary formations. This is where Bakhtin’s ruminations are more philological than sociological, where he steps back from “the forms of time and of chronotope” in which his own words are precipitate. The space of time is where literary chronotopes are not only descriptive but critical of crisis, about what they purport to explain, reframe, or presage. Indeed, one could conjecture the space of time is not simply *a posteriori* but in its imaginary schema can be *a priori* (the crisis it measures might also compose a crisis to come).

Bakhtin describes chronotope as a metaphor but not quite, and this is often the sense when a concept is asked to do more work than an individual example can bear. The “almost metaphor” is “not quite” the real but does not leave the literary outside such a relation, or indeed the Einsteinian relativity from which it derives. Such conceptual ambivalence is deliberately elusive (“a Gordian knot of ambiguities” as Michael Holquist [19] puts it) yet because of this asks useful questions about the logic of the principle. Think of Raymond Williams’ use of the “structure of feeling” which appears to combine a sensitivity to institution with something more amorphous and imaginary (see Williams). What might seem like a Spinozist affective embrace is tempered by a critical awareness that “feeling” does not occur alone or under conditions of its own choosing. A structure of feeling is an abstraction on the real in which the real itself is active (this element of structure is often elided in its contemporary deployment). Or ponder Walter Benjamin’s circumspect and contradictory concept of the dialectical image, whose intimations of collective dream and dialectics at a standstill Adorno pointedly noted as patently undialectical. In the *Passagen-Werk* Benjamin tirelessly assembles cultural fragments to elucidate the overall premise that as history (time) decays it forms images, not stories, cities not events (see Benjamin). Yet part of the point in Benjamin’s assemblage is that any propositional faith in the concept of dialectical image must begin by acknowledging that both the logic of dialectics *and* image are at stake in

its combination. Theories of space abound in literary critique, oscillating between those that examine its figural role in textuality (one thinks of the work of Gaston Bachelard and those influenced by him: see Bachelard) and analysis that uses space for the taxonomic mapping of the literary as a whole (say, Pascale Casanova on world literature as a world system: see Casanova) or as a template for a major genre like the novel (Franco Moretti's projects come to mind: see Moretti). Ultimately, the question is not whether an individual example of spatial theorization is appropriate but what it might tell us of the conditions of its possibility, whether it extends the doxa that congeals in the concept or seeks, consciously or otherwise, to break from its prescriptions. The ambivalence in a concept is symptomatic of a crisis that both produces it and to which it responds. But if this happens more or less all of the time then it would reduce dialectics, for example, to an unproblematic reflection of the way things are. How does a theory of crisis disturb this pedestrian role or is it an emphasis on space itself that is the key in bringing a form of crisis to light?

Rather than see crisis as everywhere, the perennial peripeteia of Fallen Man, chronotope seems to specify it or concretize it for literary critique. Social crisis, rather than more narrowly psychological crisis, is clearly illuminated by literary expression but it may not know it *as* crisis. Woolf's comment that "on or around December 1910 human character changed" is not only her observation on the role of modernism within modernity but simultaneously if largely unconsciously refracts the deep structure of social antinomies of Western Europe at that time. Of course, that the comment is made in 1924 offers the considerable benefit of hindsight, not just within the history of modernism (that two years earlier had witnessed both *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*) but within the turmoil of the interim, including the "character changing" events of the First World War and the October 1917 Revolution. The space of time says that all crisis is, whatever else it is, a question for how space and time are conceptualized, articulated, or narrated, but it is also a distillation of such processes which literature dares to imagine as the expressive content of socialization as such. Thus, a chronotope is not a playful comment on the formal features of the literary but a distillation of what Bakhtin called "the living, figurative word." If the dialectical suasion of space and time in the literary is unabashedly vexed, however, social crisis appears more clearly linked to ruptures in political economy. To state the obvious, this means chronotope can never be assumed to take a direct route between narrative logic and, in a random example, the debt decisions of the European Central Bank (!). Nevertheless, the space of time offers incredulity about the super separation of such realms and argues for a knowledge where even our arcane

belief in the imagination is a verdict, or answerability, about the logics of worlds we frame, inhabit, repress or resist. True, because time and space here are abstractions on the real, with complex sinews of the subjective and objective, crisis (economic, social, political, environmental, etc.) will always demand a more immediate rationalization with literary expression seeming to follow, if at all, according to the needs of its own time/space. The point is not to conflate these scales of apprehension but to provide an emphasis for their dialogue, if not dialogic.

While a methodology is implied in such musings, let me here provide a brief example to press the case rather than the proof. The operative logic is that the spatial turn in literary studies is deeply significant but might be differently arrayed from the perspective of chronotope, particularly one honed to crisis figured through the space of time. I have already mentioned the extraordinary intervention that postmodernism represents. However much some materialist critique has poured scorn on its “illusions,” idealism, and contradictory origins, over the last forty years postmodernism has exerted an immense influence on cultural discourses in several important manifestations. Every state, especially those emerging from the thrall of European or American hegemony, seems to have a version of postmodernism. It is a cultural symbolic as currency: it says “we can play too.” More significantly than this, it has changed the way we think about the social ontology of space. David Harvey, someone who has learned and leaned from Lefebvre’s coruscating critique, is one of several critics to explicitly link postmodern cultural logic to globalization and neoliberal rationalism, despite its otherwise radical skepticism about what the modern has bequeathed (see Harvey, *Condition*). What Harvey resists in very un-Lefebvorean fashion, however, is the conceptual fate of time and space within this fearful conjunction. Time, for instance, in the “spatial turn” of globalization, is not banished so much as absolutized so that it does not measure change but is reduced to confirming its ominipresence. When change is everywhere and always already, it is substantially empty and paradoxically inconsequential. As Jameson puts it, storefronts change (or iPhones, etc.) but these only confirm standardization and universal commodification so the movement of time comes to mean stasis, variations on a theme of capitalist development, sometimes cast as the end of history. Symptomatically, all that is left of time is its spatial signature, its spectral absence/presence in the everyday, like a wall of clocks behind a hotel check-in counter or even at a supermarket (my local store has such an array—what is the meaning of time for my food purchases when I am told it is 4am in Tokyo?). But even then, we would not only have to measure the uneven development of modernization when time is suspended (with

the appearance of Tesco in Lagos, or Carrefour in Beijing, to continue the supermarket analogy) but that the literary too has disjunct coordinates in its spatialization. David Damrosch's understanding of world literature, for example, is compendious and judicious, and one cannot fault the sheer intellectual energy that he brings to the project (see Damrosch). It has to be noted, however, that the circulation of literature in translation beyond its point of origin is a register of commodified worldliness, as taste driven as specialty coffee. I have argued elsewhere that the uncomfortable response of world literature theorists such as Damrosch, Moretti, and Casanova to the question of postcoloniality suggests a further decolonization of the Center (the North, etc.) may be in order if it is not already in process. This is one place where the chronotope of the space of time might intercede around problems of methodology and disciplinary crisis (Spivak's work on comparative literature in *Death of a Discipline* could be usefully reaccentuated in this way: see Spivak).

Just as postcolonialism gives the lie to certain new formations of world literature, so the spatial turn can be credibly delinked from all that is postmodern in neoliberalism. That is to say, the cultural logic undergoes its own tempero-spatial transmutation within the geopolitics of the late Eighties and early Nineties. For some, this moment represents a bookend in the imbrication of the literary and socio-political between two veritable imperial deaths, one marked by the rather short twentieth century of the Soviet Union (and those elaborated by Arrighi in *The Long Twentieth Century* by contrast: see Arrighi). A chronotopic critique of forms of time between 1989 and 1992 is becoming more possible now as post-Soviet and post-socialist states live simultaneously the death of another empire, the United States, the pastiche of an alternative, the European Union, and the rise of the mother of all compressed modernizations, China. But surely, the parameters of such crisis lie far beyond our professional interest in the time/space of the literary?

Yes, and no. To the extent that even an interpretive and descriptive category like novelization can array a genealogy of authors (in Bakhtin's case, Rabelais, Goethe, and Dostoevsky) without reference to the contextual determinants of time and space that differentiate them, any more ambitious chronotope that sees the literary as also creatively enmeshed in thinking time/space as a materialization of crisis is bound to seem more crudely materialist to aestheticians or roundly idealist to those for whom cognitive mapping is insistently class consciousness. Yet one can easily affirm the relative autonomy of the literary while appreciating the materialism of Bakhtin's approach (think of the space of the body in his reading of Rabelais). Importantly, Bakhtin sees chronotopes within chronotopes,

chronotopes that are sub categories, similar to his discussion of the novel as a secondary speech genre and this reminds us that such critique has a macro- and micro-narratological resonance. The localization and locality of “minor” chronotopes must be respected. Just as “major” chronotopes are not always generative of genre, so the principle of chronotope *per se* is not all inclusive. It may speak to worlds but is not necessarily world historical. The space of time is not a superimposition on these articulations but draws attention to the otherwise abstruse conditions of time/space concepts in which the literary finds both the present and the possibilities of its past in crisis. Thus, if time for postmodernism was so superfluous then the space of nation after the collapse of empires is in relatively deep trouble. Sovereignty had been secured by fiat but suddenly, by chance as Bakhtin puts it, time is now punctual and debt schedules can no longer be deferred by borrowing against the future. Such is the *Verfallen* of the modern state. While I am not as sanguine as Badiou for whom the “development” alongside the Arab Spring and OWS represents the rebirth of history (see Badiou), it is redolent in more than reflections on its extant content, and for that reason all I am accentuating is that the literary also imagines crisis figuratively, symptomatically, and sometimes actually. The space of time opens out Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s *Wizard of the Crow*, for instance, in a parody of the postcolonial state, just as much as it cleaves to the postmodern peregrinations and time knots of Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* or *Falling Man* where the essential “Americanness” of space seems to dissolve in random memory. If it girds the history house in Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small Things*, a chronotope of love and death, it also punctuates the time/space of Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* where the idea “the sea is history” is writ large. And for those writers invested in duration, like Nurrudin Farah, the collapse of time in the failed state is an indictment and not simply an accidental comment on the present. But these are lists and each example would require much more space than available here.

The space of time is one way the “spatial turn” can turn back on time. It does not solve a crisis but says that our literary endeavors are at least a part of it and sometimes, like Bakhtin’s chronotope essay in the heat of Stalinism, decisively so. In this way chronotope may be instructive in more than its primary constitutive function for the literary in terms of narrative, plot and genre. The open-endedness of the concept is a function of a time when definitiveness could have definite and dire consequences. While some critics marvel at Bakhtin’s deftness in avoiding all manner of binaries and teleological dead ends (while preserving some others), such dialogism recognizes a specific authoritarianism in history while resisting the prospect of being its victim. We are only just beginning to understand



the time/space of the spatial turn in literary critique. Chronotope itself was born of a specific crisis in modernity and it is not insignificant that spatial theory might flourish when such a historical possibility has been foreclosed. On the one hand, new forms of problematizing space disturb normative temporality, where time that has not only thickened, become flesh, in Bakhtin's parlance, but has ossified and burdened the imagination and the social. On the other hand, to make the spatial a primary scene of literary exegesis can easily become a supplementary indulgence in itself and fail to register, for instance, how such an emphasis might serve or extend dominant neoliberal nostrums in which the world is flat (see Friedman) and history has ended in a triumph of capitalist democracy (see Fukuyama). The advantage of the chronotope as an open form in conceptualization is that time is not just the object of critique but also its medium. This does not mean the present spatial turn (a present of some duration) elides critical temporality. Far from it. It does mean, however, that its logic of space must be specified in more than spatial terms. By invoking dialectics one also raises a necessary pause (but not the only kind) about both the ideologies of time and space and the modes of its methodological substance. Again, as I have suggested above, this would make for sharp distinctions between, say, postcolonial and postmodern chronotopic conditions of possibility. It does not produce dialectics as the final horizon of possibility of space and time in a variety of constellations, but draws critical attention to the movement in their relations. From this perspective, one is obliged to consider both the time/space relations in a concept, and the time/space conundrum from which it speaks. The space of time marks this dilemma and, although the spatial turn is not simply the name for the crisis it discerns, we might usefully question that connection as it shapes the content of the concept, its cognitive components, and, of course, its politics.

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## Prostor časa: kronotopi in kriza

Ključne besede: literarna veda / naratologija / prostor in čas / kronotop / prostorski obrat

Članek obravnava pomen temporalnosti za sleherni »prostorski obrat« – zlasti z ozirom na koordinate družbene in kulturne krize –, ki jo tu zajemamo s kategorijo »prostora časa«. Kronotopov običajno ne povezujemo s krizo na tej ravni, a so vendarle relevantni za specifične ravni zastoja v prostorsko-časovnih odnosih. Literarno vedo to zavezuje ne le na primer k raziskovanju notranjih učinkov spacialnosti v pripovedi, ampak tudi k zastavitvi vprašanja, do katere mere same te učinke naddoločajo globlji družbeni in spacialni procesi. To nam lahko pomaga pri umeščanju koncepta kronotopa v njegov čas, hkrati pa dialektično razloži njegovo pomisljivost v našem času.

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