

Christiane Maria Binder

Bakhtin Revisited:

Constructions of Identity Through Time and Place
in English and New English/Postcolonial Literature

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For my family and friends and all those who make time and place
inspiring experiences in our daily encounters.

Thus the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, emerges as a center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel. All the novel's abstract elements – philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect – gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work. Such is the representational significance of the chronotope.

(M. Bakhtin)

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1. Introduction

Mikhail Bakhtin was interested in time and space as the most essential coordinates in life and literature. His definition of the artistic chronotope reads:

We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. [...] What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature [...]. In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. [...] This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (Bakhtin 2011: 84)¹

In other words, a chronotope denotes the interaction of time and space in the representation of human/characters’ experiences (cf. also *ibid.*: 120 and below).

To put it more simply: in life, people come together in certain locations and at certain times; events happen and particular experiences are made. A special atmosphere emanates and a particular meaning is temporarily assigned to the place. Place is eventually turned into space. Shortly afterwards everything can be very different in the same place. A different atmosphere may result from the interaction of people, time and place.

Don’t we all know this from university life? Just look at teaching. A lecture hall can easily become a site of horror, a place filled with monotony, dullness and inertia. The course instructor’s best intentions, methods and strategies seem to crumble to pieces. The session collapses – almost like a soufflé that refuses to rise to its proper stature. But with the next group of students in the same room only two hours later and perhaps even on the same topic and with the same texts, the room seems wonderfully transformed. It becomes a site of unprecedented inspiration, is vibrating with creative energy, brimming over with productivity. The interaction of time, place and people make all of a difference.²

In literature, this chronotopicity is constructed. Just take Nikolay Gogol’s wonderful short story “Nevsky Prospekt.” It features detailed, very vivid and inspired psychosocial descriptions of the most famous boulevard in Russia at different hours of the day with changing passers-by on foot or in carriages. From dawn to dusk they frequent the place for different reasons, depending on the time and the occasion – for work/business or leisure. We see citizens – men and women – of diverse social backgrounds, professionals, workers, strollers, people of dubious morality. These heterogeneous sets

1 M.M. Bakhtin (2011 [1981]), *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays* by M.M. Bakhtin, ed. by Michael Holquist. Transl. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press.

2 These observations were also used in my opening speech for the photo exhibition “Four-scapes & Chronotopes” at the University Library of Technische Universität Dortmund on 8 October 2018.

of people are presented in a subtly differentiated way: in terms of age, gender, profession, social status, physiognomy, clothing, and lifestyle – all markers of identity. Through their outward appearance, behaviour, activities, conversations, attitudes, beliefs and ideas they endow the place with a special atmosphere, produce the most varied connotations. What is actually only an avenue, though certainly a magnificent one, is, as it were, magically transformed into something much larger, more important and impressive. The location is almost a character in its own right in the narrative, a living organism that changes its guise at hourly intervals. Time and place entwine so inevitably that they impact the protagonists forcefully, forging human fates.³

My fascination with chronotopicity dates from the late 1990s. What intrigued me was its interlink with identity construction in literature. Subsequently I studied the ways protagonists' identities are narratively constructed through temporal and spatial relationships in types of texts as varied as fiction, essay, travelogue, autobiography, and fantasy.⁴

All this impacted my academic teaching at university, affected the design of several courses at the advanced level of British Literary Studies: "Virginia Woolf: the Writer, the Critic, the Woman, the Feminist," "Postcolonial Literatures of Africa (with special emphasis on childhood)," "Western Myths of Russia From 'Giant' to 'Néant': Intercultural Encounters in Fiction, Travelogue and Essayism," "Time and Space Experiences: Chronotopes in English and New English/Postcolonial Literature," "From Innocence to Experience: (Re-)Constructions of Childhood in Victorian Women's Autobiography," "Childhood and Food in the Edwardian Period" and "Childhood, Food and Fantasy: The Baggins and the Took Side of Life."

Eventually Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas expressly provided the theoretical framework for a revised version of the seminar "Time and Space Experiences: Chronotopes in English and New English/Postcolonial Literature" in the winter semester of 2018/19. The experience brought about the insight that in the texts selected for the course (from English, Canadian and South African literature), chronotopes function in that they address issues of urban space and city life, of identity construction, gender, communication and interculturality.

These teaching experiences, developing from research, were very enjoyable and rewarding. In turn, they re-impacted my studies. Research and teaching closely interlinked in this way. This is how they should ideally function anyway at university, in tertiary education.

A further stage in my awareness of artistic chronotopicity was reached only recently – when I was putting the finishing touches to my latest monograph *Childhood, Food and Fantasy: The Baggins and the Took Side of Life* (2018). On 26 February

3 Cf. also C.M. Binder (2017b), "'Cosas de Russia': Joseph Conrad's Confessions about Russia and Russians (Part Two)", *Praktiki i interpretacii: zhurnal filologicheskikh, obrazovatel'nykh i kul'turnykh issledovaniy* 2.3, 19.

4 Cf. the list of my publications in the bibliography. They will be referred to more specifically later on.