

**BAKHTIN'S THEORY OF THE  
LITERARY CHRONOTOPE:  
REFLECTIONS, APPLICATIONS, PERSPECTIVES**

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Nele Bemong, Pieter Borghart, Michel De Dobbeleer,  
Kristoffel Demoen, Koen De Temmerman & Bart Keunen (eds.)



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J. Story-Scientia nv Wetenschappelijke Boekhandel  
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B-9000 Gent  
T. 09 255 57 57      F. 09 233 14 09  
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*Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*

Proceedings of the workshop entitled "Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives" (27-28 June 2008) supported by the Royal Flemish Academy for Sciences and the Arts.



Gent, Academia Press, 2010, v + 213 pp.

ISBN 978 90 382 1563 1  
D/2010/4804/84  
U 1414

Layout: proxess.be

Cover: Steebz/KHUAN

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# Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives

Nele Bemong & Pieter Borghart

Since western scholars became acquainted with his writings in the 1970s and 1980s, the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin has been an indispensable figure in literary theory and a number of related disciplines in the humanities. It was, however, not for a further decade or so that his concept of the literary chronotope, one of the key notions for understanding Bakhtinian thought on narrative form and evolution, began to receive systematic scholarly attention. Since the conceptual innovation that Bakhtin introduced with this idiosyncratic view of temporal and spatial relationships in narrative could almost be regarded as a new paradigm, albeit a minor one, the explanatory potential of which has by no means been exhausted yet, this attention was certainly appropriate. Initially designed as an analytical instrument for establishing generic divisions in the history of the western novel, chronotopic analysis has recently been proposed as a conceptual tool for enriching such diverse fields as narratology (Scholz 2003: 160-5), reception theory (Collington 2006: 91-8), cognitive approaches to literature (Keunen 2000a) and even gender studies (Pearce 1994: 173-95).<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this introductory article, firstly, is to recapitulate the basic principles of Bakhtin's initial theory as formulated in "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics" (henceforth FTC) and "The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historic Typology of the Novel)" (henceforth BSHR). Subsequently, we present some relevant elaborations of Bakhtin's initial concept and a number of applications of chronotopic analysis, closing our *state of the art* by outlining two perspectives for further investigation. Some of the issues which we touch upon receive more detailed treatment in other contributions to this volume. Others may offer perspectives for future Bakhtin scholarship.

## Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope

But wherein exactly lies the conceptual advance offered by the concept of literary chronotopes? Unlike sheer formalist or structuralist approaches to narrative time and space, according to Bakhtin these two categories constitute a fundamental unity, as in the human perception of everyday reality. This "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships" denoted by the term "chronotope" (FTC: 84) is tantamount to the world construction that is at the base of every narrative text, compris-

ing a coherent combination of spatial and temporal indicators. The famous passage in *FTC* in which Bakhtin comes closest to formulating some sort of a definition reads as follows:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. The intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (*ibid.*)<sup>2</sup>

In sum, Bakhtin's basic assumption is the idea that narrative texts are not only composed of a sequence of diegetic events and speech acts, but also – and perhaps even primarily – of the construction of a particular fictional world or chronotope.

As Bakhtin himself points out, the epistemological origins for such a conception of narrative time and space can be traced back to both the philosophy of Emmanuel Kant and Albert Einstein's relativity theory.<sup>3</sup> From Kant Bakhtin borrowed the idea that time and space are in essence categories through which human beings perceive and structure the surrounding world, and hence "indispensable forms of cognition" (Morson and Emerson 1990: 367). As these categories in Bakhtin's view do not constitute "transcendental" abstractions but "forms of the most immediate reality" (*FTC*: 85), earlier commentaries often identified the philosophical component of his theory with a *Neo-Kantian view*. Bernhard Scholz, however, has convincingly argued that Kant and Bakhtin did not differ in their conceptions of time and space, but rather with regard to their focus of interest. Whereas Kant undertook a scientifically based attempt to gain *insight into the universal system* of human perception through time and space, Bakhtin was looking for *historical evidence* of such perceptual activity as manifested in literary texts:

Natural science, if I may extend the Kantian image, is the act of designing and coercing nature; literature, as a corpus of texts, presents versions of nature designed and coerced in conformity to certain principles. Literature, as a historical phenomenon, is – like older stages of science – the repository of sedimented designs, of answers given to coercing questions of reason. (Scholz 2003: 155)<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary developments in mathematics and physics, meanwhile, provided Bakhtin with the strong belief that the nature of spatio-temporal configurations in narrative worlds, although not fully identical with Einsteinian time-space (time as the fourth dimension of space), does share a common ground with the principles of relativity theory. Firstly, as has already been noted, both in physical and fictional worlds there can be observed an intrinsic connectedness of time and space, because in both realms chronology cannot be separated from events and vice versa: "[a]n event", writes Michael Holquist, "is always a dialogic unit in so far as it is a co-

relation: something happens only when something else with which it can be compared reveals a change in time and space [...]” (2002: 116). A second similarity can be found in the proposition that there exists a variety of senses of time and space. In mathematics, for instance, the alleged *universal* system of Euclidian geometry all of a sudden lost its monopoly when Lobachevsky developed his multi-dimensional geometry: “[f]or Bakhtin, what is true for geometries of space is also true of chronotopes” (Morson and Emerson 1990: 368). As Morson and Emerson have observed, it follows, then, that “[d]ifferent aspects or orders of the universe cannot be supposed to operate with the same chronotope” (ibid.). A representative example from the exact sciences can be found in the divergent rhythms according to which biological organisms and heavenly bodies evolve, and from the realm of literary history the chronotopes by which different aspects of human experience, such as the eternal alternation of the seasons (cyclicality) as opposed to the description of truly historical events (historicity), take narrative shape. In sum, “[...] the relation of ‘chronotope’ to Einsteinian ‘time-space’ is something weaker than identity, but stronger than mere metaphor or analogy” (ibid.: 367).<sup>5</sup>

## Reflections

Our earlier use of the phrase “the famous passage [...] in which Bakhtin comes closest to formulating some sort of a definition [...]” hints at one of the most fundamental criticisms with regard to the chronotope essays: a *definitive* definition of the concept is never offered. Instead, Bakhtin starts off with the formulation of some initial remarks, and proceeds to alternate between concrete examples and further generalizations, as a result of which the concept seems to acquire ever new related meanings (see Morson and Emerson 1990: 366-7). Consequently, while most items in the glossary to *The Dialogic Imagination* (the collection of four essays by Bakhtin that includes FTC) contain a reference to pages in the essays where “useful illustrations or discussions of the [particular] concept occur” (Bakhtin 1990b: 423), no such page reference is given for the chronotope concept. Ladin formulates the problem as follows: “[Bakhtin] never provides a systematic definition [...], nor does he present a clearly articulated protocol for identifying and analyzing chronotopes and the relations between them” (1999: 213). Scholz rightly remarks that “[the] meanings only gradually unfold as the argument progresses and the examples accumulate. Bakhtin’s terms, in other words, are frequently encountered ‘in use’, without explicit statement of the rules governing such use” (2003: 146). It is therefore not surprising that Bakhtin scholars such as Stuart Allan, Tara Collington and Eduard Vlasov all give different answers to the question of how many chronotopes are discussed in FTC.<sup>6</sup>

This lack of analytical precision in Bakhtin’s essays has led to a proliferation of heterogeneous chronotopic approaches to literature and, more generally, culture. This proliferation is already present in FTC itself. In the “Concluding Remarks”, which Bakhtin added in 1973 as a tenth chapter, he situates “the significance of all these

chronotopes” on at least four different levels: (1) they have narrative, plot-generating significance; (2) they have representational significance; (3) they “provide the basis for distinguishing generic types”<sup>7</sup>; and (4) they have semantic significance (FTC: 250-1). In these “Concluding Remarks”, the still relatively stable typology of the essay itself explodes into a veritable kaleidoscope where even the internal form of a word is held to be chronotopic (see Ladin 1999: 213). As a consequence, Bakhtin’s *modus operandi* has led scholars to use a plethora of different terms to designate as chronotopes literary phenomena on different levels of abstraction: they speak of “minor” and “major” chronotopes, “chronotopic motifs” and “chronotopes of whole genres” (Morson and Emerson 1990: 374), “motivic” and “generic” chronotopes (Keunen 2000a), “basic” and “adjacent” chronotopes (Vlasov 1995: 44-5), “micro-”, “incidental”, “local” and “major” chronotopes (Ladin 1999), and so on. When we consider these different critical applications more closely, it seems to be possible to distinguish five significant levels of abstraction.

(1) On the first level, we situate what Ladin has called “micro-chronotopes” (1999: 215). Language, Ladin argues, is “charged with chronotopic energy”, and the vitality of language “grows, in part, out of the tension between the ‘centrifugal’ chronotopic implications of individual words and phrases, and the ‘centripetal’ forces [such as syntax] that subordinate these centrifugal energies to coherent overarching meanings” (ibid.: 216). Micro-chronotopes are generated out of units of language smaller than the sentence through the harnessing of these energies in literary texts. They and their role in lyric poetry are further discussed in Ladin’s contribution to this volume.

(2) The so-called *minor chronotopes*, which are to be distinguished on a second level, refer to what Ladin calls “local” chronotopes (1999: 216). Bakhtin himself notes in the “Concluding Remarks” to FTC:

We have been speaking so far only of the *major* chronotopes, those that are most fundamental and wide-ranging. But each such chronotope can include within it an unlimited number of *minor* chronotopes; in fact [...] any motif may have a specific chronotope of its own. Within the limits of a single work and within the total literary output of a single author we may notice a number of different chronotopes and complex interactions among them, specific to the given work or author; it is common moreover for one of these chronotopes to envelope or dominate the others (such, primarily, are those we have analyzed in this essay) [...]. (FTC: 252; emphasis added)

In FTC Bakhtin on occasion uses the terms *chronotope* and *motif* as synonyms, for example when he uses the phrase “chronotope of meeting” interchangeably with “motif of meeting” (FTC: 97). For this reason, Morson and Emerson have labeled these minor chronotopes “chronotopic motifs”, while other scholars prefer the term “motivic chronotopes”. Other motivic chronotopes that Bakhtin mentions, apart from the meeting, are the chronotope of the road, the castle, the salon, the provincial town, the threshold and the public square. These “building blocks” of narrative texts



are defined by Keunen as “four-dimensional mental image[s], combining the three spatial dimensions with the time structure of temporal action” (2001: 421). Morson and Emerson characterize them as “congealed event[s]”, “condensed reminder[s] of the kind of time and space that typically functions there” (1990: 374).<sup>8</sup>

(3) The interaction between the concrete chronotopic units of a narrative eventually leaves the reader with an overarching impression, which we call *major* or *dominant chronotopes*. This central, “transsubjective” chronotope (Ladin 1999: 215) thus serves as a unifying ground for the competing local chronotopes in one and the same narrative text. Many Bakhtin scholars do not posit an intermediary level between minor (motivic) and generic chronotopes (see below), and simply equate the level of the dominant chronotope with that of the latter. However, not every dominant chronotope will generate a particular literary genre; there are dominant chronotopes that have not – yet – become generics.

(4) Conversely, narratives that in the course of the reading process yield a similar impression with regard to their fictional world can be assumed to share a similar major chronotope; major chronotopes can thus be divided into classes of still more abstract *generic chronotopes*. These chronotopes are what Ladin refers to as “chronotopes that [...] can be abstracted from the individual works in which they appear and serve as the basis for categorization and comparison for those works” (1999: 232). On this particular level, the concept should be understood as what Bakhtin calls “a formally constitutive category of literature” (FTC: 84).

(5) Lastly, Keunen (forthcoming) has recently proposed a systematic framework that makes it possible to divide generic chronotopes into even more abstract classes. Central to his framework is the division into two different types of “plotspace-chronotopes”, which illustrate two different kinds of temporal development in the abstract totality of the fictional world. *Teleological* – or *monological* – *chronotopes* characterize traditional narratives in which the entire plot moves towards the final moment (the “Eschaton”). Here, the curve of suspense is constructed as an alternation between chronotopes of equilibrium and conflict. Conflicts in these narratives are simply external obstacles in the course of the hero’s journey to a state of equilibrium. Based on the position of the conflict within the narrative, Keunen distinguishes three subtypes: the *mission chronotope* (where the conflict is bracketed by two states of equilibrium; e.g. the adventure novel, the fairy tale, fantasy), the *regeneration chronotope* (where a series of conflicts is overcome in a final equilibrium; e.g. the picaresque novel, the gothic novel, the popular romance) and the *degradation chronotope* (where the initial equilibrium becomes lost in an unresolved conflict; e.g. the tragedies by Sophocles or Shakespeare).<sup>9</sup> In *dialogical chronotopes*, on the other hand, the narrative is not directed towards a final moment, to a “telos”, but rather consists of a network of conflicting situations and junctions that communicate with each other – hence the term “dialogical”. Here, the conflict chronotopes are predominantly psychological in nature, and what matters is not the telos that more traditional narratives are working towards, but the “Kairos”: the critical, decisive moments characteristic of modern

novels since the nineteenth century. Again, Keunen discerns three subtypes of dialogical chronotopes, to wit the *tragic chronotope* (where conflict characters dominate), the *comic chronotope* (where balanced characters dominate) and the *tragicomic chronotope* (no dominating characters).

## Applications

Even though Bakhtin significantly broadens his perspective in the “Concluding Remarks” of FTC, the concept of the chronotope was initially designed as a contribution to genre theory.<sup>10</sup> This is manifest not only in the great emphasis put throughout the essay on the major chronotopes making up the history of the western novel – such as the adventure novel of ordeal, the adventure novel of everyday life, the chivalric romance, the idyll and the like; it is also clear from the repeated explicit acknowledgement given to the concept’s generic significance: for example, “[t]he chronotopes we have discussed provide the basis for distinguishing generic types; they lie at the heart of specific varieties of the novel genre, formed and developed over the course of many centuries” (FTC: 250-1).

Bakhtin’s assessment of narrative genres, moreover, contributes to a theoretical tradition that underscores the cognitive functionality of literary genres; the belief, that is, that fixed poetic and narrative structures should be understood as means for storing and conveying forms of human experience and knowledge. As encompassing narrative structures which “[...] determine to a significant degree the image of man in literature” (FTC: 85), generic chronotopes are in recent Bakhtin scholarship equated with the *world view* of a text. In the “Glossary of Key Terms” to *The Bakhtin Reader*, for instance, it is stated that “[s]pecific chronotopes correspond to particular genres, which themselves represent particular world-views. To this extent, chronotope is a cognitive concept as much as a narrative feature of texts” (Morris 1994: 246).<sup>11</sup> Morson and Emerson, for their part, understand generic chronotopes as “an integral way of understanding experience, and a ground for visualizing and representing human life” (1990: 375).<sup>12</sup>

Critical accounts of the precise meaning of the term *world view* range from highly abstract to rather concrete. Studies exemplifying the former tend to regard the history of prose fiction either as a laboratory where humanity has carried out a series of experiments with combinations of time and space in order to adequately model exterior reality<sup>13</sup>, or as narrative evidence for the existence of allegedly universal cognitive patterns based on the alternation between regularity and contingency (Keunen 2005; forthcoming). Conversely, Borghart and De Temmerman (2010) have shown how three diachronic manifestations of the same genre – to wit the ancient, the Byzantine and the modern Greek adventure novel of ordeal – can plausibly be linked with contemporary attempts at establishing a *Hellenic* communal identity.

A third important aspect of Bakhtinian genre theory is embodied by his conception of generic evolution, in which the process of *sedimentation*<sup>14</sup> plays a role of paramount importance:

[Certain] generic forms, at first productive, were then reinforced by tradition; in their subsequent development they continued stubbornly to exist, up to and beyond the point at which they had lost any meaning that was productive in actuality or adequate to later historical situations. This explains the simultaneous existence in literature of phenomena taken from widely separate periods of time, which greatly complicates the historico-literary process. (FTC: 85)

Over the past two decades, the process whereby chronotopes in the course of history become semantically unproductive or even inadequate, and subsequently enter the domain of popular culture, has received some critical attention. The creative recycling, for instance, of important features of the so-called *adventure chronotope* in many Hollywood movies is a case in point (Morson and Emerson 1990: 371-2). More recently, the possibility of a genuine revival of past chronotopes within the realm of literature itself has also been raised.<sup>15</sup>

The relative lack of critical attention to genuine chronotopic revival is more than likely the result of Bakhtin's teleological view of the history of narrative literature. The western novel, he argues, evolved from an initial state characterized by a total absence of historical time (e.g., the Greek romance), through a number of subsequent stages which steadily displayed a fuller sense of time (e.g. time with embryonic *biographical* significance in the Roman adventure novel of everyday life and in ancient biography), to eventually arrive at the ideal of nineteenth-century realism and the conception of *real historical time* internalized by its attendant chronotope: "[s]uch are the specific [...] chronotopes that serve for the assimilation of actual (including historical) reality, that permit the essential aspects of this reality to be reflected and incorporated into the artistic space of the novel" (FTC: 251-2).<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding Bakhtin's general philosophy of human creativity and openendedness, his teleological view of literary evolution almost seems to amount to the idea of *generic exhaustiveness*. Such an account, whether or not informed by the Stalinist ideology of historical materialism (Mitterand 1990: 83), is of course untenable. Lately, a number of scholars have hypothesized that some chronotopic configuration underlies every kind of narrative, however minimal, including jokes, strip cartoons, fairy tales, animal stories, narrative poetry and the like (see below). Therefore, instead of adhering to a closed and virtually normative genre system, it would be better to assume an *open system of numerous generic chronotopes*, the precise nature and history of many of which has yet to be determined.<sup>17</sup> Admittedly, among these a number of complex world constructions – which to a certain extent coincide with the typology established by Bakhtin – appear to be so productive that they not only make up genuine types of literary narrative but also, in the final analysis, often come to enrich the domain of popular culture as well.

From a purely methodological point of view, the possibilities for determining the dominant chronotope of a given narrative text, and thus the narrative genre to which it belongs, raise interesting questions. Recent Bakhtin scholars agree that major chronotopes should be conceived of in constructivist terms as supratextual entities, as impressions, that is, left in the mind of the reader through an aggregate of textual strategies, both of a narratological and thematic nature. Suvin, for example, holds that the chronotope “[...] is constructed by the reader’s ideologically restrained imagination, it is a signified and *representamen*, to be clearly distinguished from the text surface, which is a signifier and *representans* [...]” (1989: 40; emphasis in original). In other words, narratives that in the course of the reading process yield a similar impression as for their fictional world can be assumed to share the same generic chronotope. This implies, in turn, the possibility of categorizing a narrative text (*representamen*) on the sole basis of its display of a sufficient number of textual strategies (*representans*) known to be characteristic of a particular generic chronotope. Embarking on the *cognitive turn* in contemporary narratology (Ibsch 1990), some scholars have tried to bring the determination of generic chronotopes in line with the achievements of cognitive psychology (Keunen 2000a; see below), while more traditional narratological and thematic approaches have also been proposed (Borghart 2006; Bemong 2007).

The above discussion brings us smoothly to a second discipline within literary theory in which Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope has been tentatively but fruitfully applied: *narratology*. The basis for this connection is a rarely noted but important quality inherent in any chronotope. More than a decade before Bakhtin’s theory became the object of systematic analysis, the science fiction specialist Darko Suvin (1986, 1989) amply demonstrated that the concept of chronotope could possibly be conceived of as the *differentia generica* of narrativity. He arrives at this conclusion through a detailed comparison between the biblical Parable of the Mustard Seed and the metaphor from which the gospels derived this narrative, a comparison in which both their qualities as *cognitive organons* conveying previously nonexistent meaning and their formal similarities involving a particular *possible world* are highlighted. As a consequence, Suvin goes on to argue that “[...] the main differences between a single metaphor and a fictional text would have to be correlative to the latter’s quite different articulation” (1986: 57). Throughout his argument, Suvin convincingly draws a connection between this “different articulation” and the presence of a chronotope: “The central thesis of this paper is *that the necessary, and I believe the sufficient, ‘differentia generica’ between metaphoric and narrative texts can best be grasped by formulating it in terms of Bakhtin’s chronotope*” (ibid.: 58; emphasis in original).

Suvin’s thesis constitutes an excellent opportunity to introduce Bakhtinian literary theory into the ongoing debate among narratologists about the salient features of narrativity. A recent attempt to define the *differentia generica* of narrativity can be found in *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* (1996) by the well-known narratologist Monika Fludernik. Taking into account postmodern narratives characterized by a lack of any

significant plot pattern, she rightly argues against the structuralist tradition which reduces narrativity to a mere sequence of two or more events (*sequentiality*). Instead, Fludernik proposes a minimal form of momentaneous human experience (*experientiality*) as the common denominator of the narrative genre (1996: 20-43). In his forthcoming monograph *Time and Imagination: Chronotopes in Western Narrative Culture*, however, Keunen demonstrates how myths about gods and the creation of the world, whose subject matter is rather disconnected from the contingency of human experience, give *narrative* shape to a number of timeless principles. He consequently arrives at the conclusion that such mythical *stories* display a highly specific world construction or chronotope. In this respect, Keunen's analysis seems to provide a valuable argument for adhering to Suvin's hypothesis and rejecting – or at least nuancing – Fludernik's.

Yet another attempt to attribute to the concept of chronotope the status of genuine narratological category is Scholz's proposal to revise the structuralist theory of story from a Bakhtinian point of view (2003). Taking up both Bakhtin's notion of a *historical poetics* and the concomitant view on generic chronotopes as "formally constitutive categor[ies] of literature" (FTC: 84), Scholz argues in favor of "a theory of 'story' which will be sensitive to historical change" (2003: 161). As an alternative to the allegedly universal formalist-structuralist opposition between *fabula* and *sujet* (*histoire* vs. *récit*), Scholz conceives of generic chronotopes as culturally sanctioned ordering principles capable of generating typical plot-structures. In doing so, he proposes to split the level of *story* (*fabula*, *histoire*) in two: (1) "into the concept of chronotope for referring to the generative principle of plot", and (2) "into the concept of plot-structure for referring to the chronotope-typical sequence of events ordered in accordance with that principle" (*ibid.*: 163). Unlike the quite arbitrary preference for linear chronology inherent in formalist-structuralist theories of narrative, a Bakhtinian approach to story takes into consideration the historical determination of plot-generating principles:

It thereby manages to avoid having to sever the ties which link a particular plot, a particular plot-structure or a particular literary chronotope to the life-world in the context of which it was produced. Stronger yet, Bakhtinian analysis of narrative offers a means of conceptualizing that link without having to resort [...] to postulating spurious homologies between social structures and plot-structures [...] or, worse, having to take refuge in an aesthetics of mirroring. (*ibid.*: 162)

Finally, a few words should be devoted to the usefulness of the concept of the literary chronotope within the realm of *reception theory* and *hermeneutics*. Admittedly, as Collington has rightly remarked, "[l]e rapport entre le monde du texte et le monde du lecteur [...] est la moins développée des interrelations proposées par Bakhtine, et les descriptions du rôle du lecteur dans le processus interprétatif demeurent vague" (2006: 93). To date, it is Keunen (2000a) who has undertaken the most concerted attempt to explain the mental process of reading a narrative in terms of a Bakhtinian

conceptual framework. The principles of such a cognitive approach to chronotopes can briefly be summarized as follows. In the course of their cognitive development, readers acquire a *genre memory* consisting of an aggregate of mental structures tantamount to varying generic chronotopes. During the reading process, one of these *memory schemata* will be activated, thus enabling the reader to recognize the relevant chronotope and its corresponding narrative genre (Keunen 2000a: 1-7). Within the same paradigm, Keunen makes a similar attempt to link motivic chronotopes with so-called *action schemata*, a concept that in cognitive psychology refers to mental structures regulating human behavior in stereotypical situations such as visiting a restaurant or attending a wedding party. Likewise, motivic chronotopes are assumed to activate stored knowledge, varying from factual knowledge about empirical reality to specialized literary knowledge, including intertextuality. The combination of both would result in so-called *memory organizing packets* (MOPs), which, he believes, direct the process of reading and interpretation (ibid.: 7-10).

## Perspectives

In this last section, we would like to point out some interesting perspectives for combining Bakhtin's theory of the literary chronotope with other theoretical frameworks. As Bemong argues in her contribution to this volume, Bakhtin's views on literature and on the tasks of literary scholarship show strong resemblances to functionalist-systemic views of literature and culture, especially those of *Polysystem theory*, the systems-theoretical approach for which Itamar Even-Zohar laid the basis. Strangely enough, hardly any attention seems to have been paid to this affinity, either in Bakhtin scholarship or by systems theoreticians.<sup>18</sup> This is strange because the chronotope concept holds great potential for addressing one of the fundamental problems of systems-theoretical research, to wit how systemic principles might be translated into a manageable methodological framework. The main similarities in Bakhtin's and Even-Zohar's approaches to literature are situated on four different levels (and are largely due to the fact that both scholars were inspired by the writings of Jurij Lotman and by the so-called *dynamic functionalist* insights current in the 1920s in the writings of Jurij Tynjanov, Boris Eikhenbaum and others): (1) their relational view of literature and culture; (2) the importance they ascribe to the role of lower cultural strata; (3) the key role of generic sedimentation (see above); and (4) the importance of diachronic intersystemic relationships.

The primary characteristic that the two approaches share is a relational view on culture. A functionalist-systemic approach to literature is intent on revealing the specific synchronic and diachronic dynamics of literature within its global cultural and social constellation. Bakhtin, too, advocates the necessity of such a relational approach in his 1970 text "Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff", where he explicitly draws attention to "the interconnection and interdependence of various areas of culture" – both synchronically and diachronically – and emphasizes that "the

boundaries of these areas are not absolute, that in various epochs they have been drawn in various ways” (2002b: 2). Secondly, both Polysystem theoreticians and Bakhtin reserve an important role for the lower cultural strata in preventing cultural systems from stagnating, collapsing, or disappearing altogether. The presence of strong subcultures emphasizes the need for real competition, without which any canonized semiotic activity would gradually become petrified. Thirdly, Polysystem theory shares the Bakhtinian idea of generic sedimentation discussed above. Like the latter, it regards polysystems as essentially dynamic, evolving networks where “at any given moment, more than one diachronic set is operating on the synchronic axis” (Even-Zohar 2005: 39). Lastly, the attention in Polysystem theory to diachronic intersystemic relationships is also clearly present in Bakhtin’s chronotope essays, especially in his view of the evolution of generic chronotopes. Thus, Bakhtin characterizes the “original”, “Greek” chronotope of the adventure novel of ordeal as a chronotope that is already in itself clearly related intersystemically to several other (contemporary and older) systems, both literary and non-literary. While most elements of this chronotope were “derived from various other genres”, they “assumed a new character and special functions in this completely new chronotope”. Moreover, in their new unity, they “ceased to be what they had been in other genres” (FTC: 88-9). This view shows clear affinities with Even-Zohar’s assertion that “[a]n appropriated repertoire does not necessarily maintain source culture functions” (2005: 65).

To finish our state of the art, we would like to draw attention to some remarkable but rarely noted similarities between Bakhtin’s theory of the literary chronotope and the recently developed approach known as *Possible World-semantics*. Although devised in totally different historical and geographical contexts (Stalinist Russia vs. postmodern Northern America), the theoretical models share a number of relevant epistemological and conceptual affinities. First and foremost, Bakhtin and PW-semantics are similar in their criticism of the formalist and structuralist search for literary universals and the concomitant neglect of the semantic plane inherent in these traditions. Moreover, by explicitly theorizing the relation between text and context, both paradigms, independently, react against the merely text immanent approaches of formalism and structuralism as well (see for instance Pavel 1986: 1-10). The third, and most interesting, affinity concerns their treatment of fictional worlds. It is interesting because the two theories are strikingly different in their approach to this matter. On a conceptual level both Bakhtin and his postmodern colleagues set out to study fictional worlds and their constituents as a means of arriving at a general theory of narrative meaning. PW-semantics, on the one hand, has so far been mainly concerned with epistemological questions (e.g. what is the ontological status of fictional worlds?) and has taken a *bottom-up* approach to salient features of fictional worlds (e.g. in what manner and degree are they inhabited and furnished?) (see for example Doležel 1998: 145-84). As a consequence, PW-semantics presents itself as an analytical theory useful for determining the meaning of individual narratives. Adherents of Bakhtin’s theory, on the contrary, have been devoting the lion’s share of their critical attention to elaborating a theoretical model with explanatory qualities of a synthetic

nature. In such a *top-down* approach, the main focus of interest has been the description of encompassing narrative structures as a means to map out a series of narrative genres and their respective cognitive value. However, it is our belief that the two paradigms are bound to co-operate and mutually enrich one another in the near future: whereas the principles of construction and building blocks of fictional worlds determined by PW-semantics offer tools for more detailed and nuanced description of the characteristic features of generic chronotopes, the synthetic qualities of Bakhtin's theory have the potential to enlarge the applicability of PW-semantics in the fields of genre theory and literary history.

## Endnotes

1. At the same time, it is also true that, both because of the lack of explicitness and conceptual clarity in Bakhtin's own writings and the still rather limited number of studies engaging with the literary chronotope – as opposed to those elaborating and applying well-known Bakhtinian concepts such as “dialogism”, “heteroglossia”, and “carnival” – there still exists a certain “trouble with chronotopes” (Ladin 1999: 213-5; see also Scholz 2003: 145-8). Whereas one strand of Bakhtin scholarship acknowledges the conceptual advance offered by this theory and willingly engages in further elaborating its initial outlines, others argue that the Russian scholar was not a systematic thinker at all, assuming that the novelty of Bakhtinian thought lies precisely in its contradictory nature (Wall 2002).
2. In his recent study on Bakhtin and genre, Renfrew underscores the aspect of embodiment and corporeality in Bakhtin's definition of the chronotope. FTC, Renfrew states, “thus emerges as an extended attempt, on the grounds of extant literary material, to classify the means of finalization of the external image of the human subject, inseparable from but irreducible to the body that occupies space and moves through time. The principle of such classification will be the capability of the temporal and spatial values of any given fictional environment to facilitate the ‘possession’ of the eventness of being, to permit the representation of a living image, as opposed to one that might variously be described as ‘abstract’, ‘fixed’, or ‘monological’” (2006: 119).
3. FTC: 84-5. The following discussion is based on Holquist (2002: 115-6), Mitterand (1990: 181-9), Morson and Emerson (1990: 366-9), Neff (2003), Scholz (2003: 149-56) and Collington (2006: 25-37). For a recent discussion of the influence of Einstein's theories on Bakhtinian thought in general, see Stone (2008).
4. Other recent research links Bakhtin's ideas on the temporal-spatial nexus with the notions of the neo-Kantian German philosopher Ernst Cassirer, who, in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, distinguished between artistic, mythological and scientific strategies of knowledge (see Brandist 1997 and 2002; Poole 1998; Tihanov 2000a). In FTC (251), Bakhtin admitted to have been influenced by Cassirer's insights on the chronotopical nature of language (see the first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*), but he was probably also inspired by the mythological treatment of time and space analyzed in the second volume of Cassirer's magnum opus.
5. Bakhtin himself legitimizes the introduction of this neologism into literary studies as follows: “The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space)” (FTC: 84). Indeed, Bakhtin's usage of the term chronotope can itself be characterized as *quasi-metaphorical* in that it makes use of an already existing metaphor (which in turn sets out



to linguistically grasp the abstract mathematical formula  $E=MC^2$ ) (Collington 2006: 25-31) as a cognitive organon for better understanding data from a qualitatively different field: for the transition from *physical* to *narrative* time-space is obviously accompanied by the necessity to take into account other determining factors such as plot and characters as well.

6. Allan distinguishes “more than a dozen distinct [sic] types of chronotope” (2003: 128), Collington (2006) discerns seven chronotopes in the essay itself and three more in the “Concluding Remarks”, and Vlasov confidently states that in FTC “Bakhtin introduces his catalogued system [sic] of various chronotopes in the history of the novel. According to him there are eight basic chronotopes in the novel” (1995: 42).
7. Interesting in this respect is Tihanov’s interpretation of FTC as an indirect involvement of Bakhtin with Lukács’ discussion of the genre of the novel in *The Historical Novel* (Tihanov 2000b: 59-61).
8. A good example of a hermeneutic analysis of motivic chronotopes can be found in Deltcheva and Vlasov (1997). A creative use of the motivic chronotope in the context of landscape architecture is offered by Potteiger and Purinton (1998).
9. Departing from the notion “emplotment”, which ever since Hayden White’s influential *Meta-history* (1973) has been considered to be characteristic of historiography in general, De Dobbeleer has recently shown how Keunens classification of teleological chronotopes can be helpful in determining the particular “ideologized world view” underlying premodern historiographical (and epic) texts. Thus, by comparing the plot structure of three different “testimonies” of the fall of Constantinople (1453), he observes that different ideological “visions” (e.g. winners vs. losers) yield different “plotspace-chronotopes” (and their respective types of hero) for representing the *same* historical event (2008a). On another occasion, De Dobbeleer analyzes the narrative structure of the mission chronotope in an epic and historiographical account of the capture of Kazan (1552) in terms of the respective expansionist ideologies they were meant to perform (2008b).
10. Renfrew (2006: 118-30) provides a highly interesting discussion of the complex relation and continuity between Medvedev’s work on genre and Bakhtin’s theory of genre in the chronotope essays FTC and BSHR.
11. Other Bakhtin scholars who define the chronotope in this way are: Roderick Beaton, whose characterization of the chronotope as “the distinctive configuration of time and space that defines ‘reality’ within the world of a text, *as conceptualized within that world itself*” (2000: 181; emphasis in original) is very illuminating in this respect; Tzvetan Todorov, who characterizes it as “la représentation du monde” (1981: 140); and Bart Keunen, who uses the Dutch equivalent for world view (“wereldbeeld”) in the titles of two of his book publications (2000b, 2005).
12. According to Tihanov, the most substantial difference between Lukács and Bakhtin lies in the active nature Bakhtin assigns to literary genres (and thus to the chronotope). For Lukács, “literary genres are entities which reflect the world, each of them from a unique point of view, in an unmediated fashion.” For Bakhtin, on the other hand, “[g]enres no longer *reflect* the world, rather, they *represent* and model it” (Tihanov 2000b: 59; emphasis in original).
13. See e.g. Clark and Holquist (1984: 278), Morson and Emerson (1990: 366), Danow (1991: 46-7), Holquist (2002: 116) and Scholz (2003: 152-6). In the short theoretical section at the outset of FTC, Bakhtin gives a slight hint of such a conception of the cognitive value of narrative genres: “[i]solated aspects of time and space, however – those available in a given historical stage of human development – have been assimilated and corresponding generic techniques have been devised for reflecting and artistically processing such appropriated aspects of reality” (FTC: 84).

14. See also Tihanov (2000b: 160).
15. This possibility was left open by Bakhtin only in passing: “[s]emantic phenomena can exist in concealed form, *potentially*, and be revealed only in semantic cultural contexts of subsequent epochs that are favorable for such disclosure” (Bakhtin 2002b: 5; emphasis in original). See Borghart and De Temmerman’s analysis of the reappearance of the ancient Greek adventure novel in Byzantine and modern times (2010).
16. See also FTC (84, 85) and BSHR (19, 21, 43). For a more detailed discussion of Bakhtin’s teleological conception of literary history, see Mitterand (1990: 183-5), Morson and Emerson (1990: 372, 384, 388, 392), Morson (1991: 1082) and Collington (2006: 39-40).
17. Ladin is less optimistic, concluding that every attempt at establishing a typology of chronotopes – at whatever level of abstraction – will turn out to be vain, for such a reductionist approach, it is argued, necessarily excludes a whole spectrum of possibilities and variations: “To ‘flesh out’ the chronotope [...] we must abandon Bakhtin’s tempting vision of a complete taxonomy of chronotopes, a whole list of distinct space-times with specific generic, historical and ontological implications” (1990: 230).
18. The only instance we have found is Caryl Emerson’s suggestion that “students of intergeneric shift could learn from recent developments in translation theory” (1986: 11), which is followed by a reference to an essay by Even-Zohar on translation theories.

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