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Is There a Chronotope of the Short Story?

Hans Färnlöf

Stockholm University

Abstract – The present article suggests a means to reconceptualize the chronotope in order to widen its application and rethink its generic relations to the individual text. Bakhtin singles out an overarching chronotope for every novelistic genre and subgenre, considered as historic essences. However, he also identifies a horizontal and a vertical dimension of the chronotope which may coexist in a narrative. By focusing on these dimensions, we may analyze individual narratives taken from different genres. In particular, the article shows how noteworthy are the affinities between the vertical dimension of the chronotope, as outlined by Bakhtin himself, and an extensive theorization of the short story beginning with the German Romantics. The methodological shift thus advocates a study of the specific genericity of an individual text rather than to the insertion of the text into a broadly categorized genre.

Keywords – Chronotope; Horizontal; Vertical; Genericity; Short story.

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Hans Färnlöf

Stockholm University

1. A Lacuna in the Theory of the Chronotope?

The title of Bakhtin's essay, "Forms of time and chronotope in the novel", indicates that the Russian theorist considered that an extended narrative format is particularly suitable for expressing complex spatio-temporal perspectives in literature. After having analysed primarily novelistic variations, he concludes in his final observations that the chronotope emerges "as a force giving body to the entire *novel*"', and is "at the heart of specific varieties of the *novel genre*" (250-1, my emphasis). Following these statements, two of the most prominent Bakhtinian scholars, Holquist and Emerson, explain that the use of the chronotope "is yet another way to define the distinctiveness of the novel" (xxiii). Not surprisingly, the notion has ever since been closely linked to this particular genre.¹ On the other hand, Bakhtin also stated that *all artistic forms* are of a chronotopic nature (243). Indeed, his general understanding of the chronotope, condensed in an enlightening formula by Bemong and Borghart, could fit into almost any literary category: "fixed poetic and narrative structures should be understood as means for storing and conveying forms of human experience and knowledge" (8).

With regard to the object of the present study, the short story, Bakhtin does not develop any specific thoughts on its chronotopic nature, but he does mention in passing the chronotope of "storytelling in traditional tales" (254). He also illustrates some of his arguments by referring to the short fictions of Boccacio and Poe (198-200). However, even though it naturally seems to lend itself to chronotopic reflexions, the short story is practically unexplored via this perspective. A major exception is the promising study by Falconer, who persuasively links epistemological aspects of the modern short story to the notion of the chronotope and briefly alludes to a "generic chronotope of short fiction" (703).² The present study might purvey literary theory with an additional element to clarify the understanding of such a chronotope. After giving a brief reminder of the general nature of the chronotope, I will highlight some chronotopic dimensions that could allow us to enter into dialogue with theories of short fiction and thus to widen the traditional scope of the chronotope.

2. The Dual Nature of the Chronotope

According to Bemong et al., the chronotope has suffered from "its frequent misuse as a means of dressing up outdated thematic research in more fashionable garments" (v). On

¹ Some central theoretical studies on the novelistic chronotope are Bemong et al. *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope*, Collington *Lectures chronotopiques*, Färnlöf "Chronotope romanesque et perception du monde", Mitterand "Chronotopies romanesques" and Keunen *Time and Imagination: Chronotopes in Western Narrative Culture*. Outside the literary domain, the chronotope has inspired scholars to explore the most divers sectors, such as tourism (Spode), organisation theory (Schultz et al.), didactics (Ritella, Rajala and Renshaw), or cultural paranoia (Beckman).

² Without entering into deeper theoretical questions, Klapuri comments a choice of Chekhov's stories with inspiration from the provincial chronotope, showing that a novelistic chronotope can be employed to better understand short fiction (Klapuri).

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account of its partly deceptive etymology (i. e. *time-place*), it is often believed to design simply the referential context, the setting of the literary work or the importance of a place for the plot. These studies normally mention the chronotope in their introduction and conclusion, but make little use of Bakhtin's thoughts in their analyses. However, the chronotope does not point to a specific setting or a configuration of a motif as such: it reflects a worldview which is *conceptualized through* time and space intertwined. Therefore, the chronotope is partly of an *ideological* nature. In Bakhtin's words, it "determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature" (84-5). The chronotope raises multiple questions about our vision of the world, of society, History, actual life, work, popular culture, etc. Firmly attaching the evolution of ideas to the materialist base of the society (i. e. historical, social, and economic factors), Bakhtin stresses that the chronotope indicates "a literary work's artistic unity in relationship to an actual reality" (243), a fact illustrated by his constant contextualization of the literary text.³

The literary discourse then expresses and shapes this worldview according to its inherent laws: "Out of the actual chronotopes of our world (which serve as the source of representation) emerge the reflected and created chronotopes of the world represented in the work (in the text)" (253). The chronotopes become "organizing centres for the fundamental narrative events", making them "the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (250). This programmatic force points to the *narrative* nature of the chronotope. It is important to recognise that this nature is not narratological in a structuralist sense. The famous motifs analysed by Bakhtin, such as the road, the castle, the threshold or the drawing-room, do not exist in a formal vacuum; nor should they be seen as abstract, absolute entities with an unchangeable signification but rather as historically defined by the different contexts that constitute their conceptual framework.⁴

The distinguished Bakhtin scholar Holquist perfectly sums up the dual ideological and narrative nature of the chronotope: "The specific forms into which a culture's ideas about time-space materialize Bakhtin calls chronotopes" ("Bakhtin and Rabelais" 8).⁵ It seems crucial to acknowledge this dual nature in order to respect Bakhtin's view of literature as an interpretable object made up by a language that is necessarily sprung from a sociohistorical context and thus impossible to reduce to pure formal play. It correlates with his view of literature as an *architectonic* form, a form that we cannot approach in a purely materialistic way but that we must conceive as a semiotic form that is intrinsically related to a complex context of human action, experience and reflection.⁶ Literature, just as language, must be understood as a sociohistorically grounded form of *parole* (in Saussure's terms) through which semiotic systems meet reality.

3. The Dimensional Genericity of the Chronotope

In Bakhtin's view, the dual ideological and narrative nature of the chronotope boils down to a *generic* framework. Going through different subgenres of the novel, he uses the chronotope as

³ In a footnote, Bakhtin comments on Kant, insisting on the concretisation of the chronotope in the immediate reality (85). For Kant, space and time are necessary categories for understanding and structuring the world as such, not means for forming or expressing a certain conception of society, History or life (and certainly not for structuring a narrative text).

⁴ As Lanser and Rimmon-Kenan point out in "The Postclassical Chronotope: A Narratological Inquiry", all formalist features are subject to change through diachrony. This leads us to a narratology in which identifiable, objective features are primarily understood in relation to their use in a particular context. For a broad overview of this perspective, see Hühn et al. *Handbook of Diachronic Narratology*.

⁵ For an excellent review of the chronotope and its implications, see Bemong and Borghart "Bakhtin's theory of the literary chronotope: reflections, applications, perspectives".

⁶ As Holquist explains, "for Bakhtin, aesthetics is a form of embodying lived experience" ("Introduction: the architectonics of answerability", xl).

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a synthetic notion that is able to embrace the essential properties of each of them. The narrative use of motifs coloured by historicity and of ideas about existence seen through the fundamental parameter of time interconnected with space, is subsumed to the generic essence of the text. Consequently, Bakhtin speaks in general terms about the chronotope of the realist novel, of the *Bildungsroman*, of the adventure novel, etc. In particular, he displays in his first chapters three antique genres which together form a solid base for novelistic variations to come all up to the 18th century: the adventure novel of ordeals, the adventure novel of ordinary life, and the biography.⁷ The first genre remains essentially the same; the second evolves into the *Bildungsroman* and the realist novel; the third turns into legends and modern autobiography.

Even though Bakhtin remains within the novelistic sphere, it is possible to excerpt certain dimensions of these novelistic subgenres—while still following Bakhtin’s analysis—in order to develop a widened generic approach that embraces the short story. Such an operation presents two main demands. Firstly, we must renounce Bakhtin’s preference of the novel as the ultimate form of portraying human life. We should not take the world constructed in a certain type of novel (as often is the case in studies of short fiction) as a normative starting point and then evaluate other, lesser novelistic genres against its background. Such a methodology would only lead us to the oft repeated idea that the short story is a simplified and less complex form than the novel. Secondly, we must liberate the chronotopic dimensions identified as prominent by Bakhtin from the specific subgenre to which he attached them in order to apply them on other genres as well.

More precisely, it is the short chapter on “The Chivalric Romance” that provides us a key to explore further (151–8). Here Bakhtin opposes the *vertical* and the *horizontal dimensions*.⁸ The *vertical* rendering of the world is closely attached to the life of a famous person and its evaluation with respect to absolute (i. e. to timeless and spaceless) values, such as human exemplarity, virtue, honesty and so on. It seems to reach its highpoint in medieval legends, and is still present in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, where it collides with the *horizontal* world. This latter dimension, although already manifest in the adventure novel of ordinary life from Antiquity, according to Bakhtin, becomes especially strong from the Renaissance onwards. The conception of life, society, and individuals primarily concerns and applies to the specific (and extended) time-space which is depicted in the narrative. There is no ultimate meaning or regulation beyond what is human and societal. Earthly life matters for its own sake and develops by its own standards, whether it takes place in the public or in the private sphere. The *horizontal plot* is metonymic in relation to the represented reality instead of presenting a sequence of actions that functions as the metaphor of a higher principle placed outside this reality, as is the case with the *vertical plot*.

According to Bakhtin, we see a clash of these dimensions in the *Divine Comedy*: “Each image is full of horizontal potential, and therefore strains with the whole of its being toward participation in historical events—toward participation in a temporal-historical chronotope. But the artist’s powerful will condemns it to an eternal and immobile place on the extratemporal vertical axis” (157). In other words, horizontal life as a whole corresponds to a specific value that permits Dante to place it in a static place within an atemporal time according to a transcendent verticality. Here, the concrete, worldly space and time is subordinated to—and viewed through the lenses of—a superior value system that provides meaning, interpretation and regulation to the actual world: the superior dimension of existence completely overrules mimetic spatio-

⁷ As Bakhtin only deals with the novel, he considers these genres as novels, or as some kind of proto-novels. The common feature of all genres analysed, however, is their long narrative format.

⁸ In a similar way, Zoran identifies *synchronic* (static *vs* motion) and *diachronic* (directions and axis) relations of the chronotope (“Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative”). Ladin analyses the *centripetal* (stabilizing, collective) and *centrifugal* (fragmental, idiosyncratic) forces of the chronotope (“It was not Death: The Poetic Career of the Chronotope”).

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temporality by postulating the existence of a Last Day and Eternal life: “The vertical... compresses within itself the horizontal, which powerfully thrusts itself forward. There is a contradiction, an antagonism between the form-generating principle of the whole and the historical and temporal form of its separate parts. The form of the whole wins out” (158).

4. The Chronotope and the Short Story

We are now ready to operate a methodological shift: instead of attaching the vertical dimension to certain novelistic subgenres and the horizontal dimension to other novelistic subgenres, we may extract these dimensions and apply them more generally to literary works of any kind. This study focuses on the short story. The German Romantics, who were among the first to exert deeper reflection on the questions of short fiction, already associated the short story with a detachment from the real world. Whereas the novel gives a general view of the manners of the society from which it springs, the short story does not belong to History, according to Schlegel’s analysis in “On the Poetical works of Giovanni Boccaccio”. Short fiction is interesting in and for itself, without being directly linked to a specific epoch or to the progress of humanity. This idea of the short story referring to something more or less detached from an overarching reality, is also concentrated in the classic formula by Goethe, who considered that the short story presented an event unheard of, according to his conversations with Eckermann on *Weltliteratur*. This is evident in any short story that explores another mode of reality, like the fantastic genre, but it is also visible in its interest for the marginal, the extraordinary, the sketching of an alternative world. Both Schlegel and Goethe thus identify patterns of short fiction that are clearly non horizontal. The story is too individual, too specific, too closed in itself to be integrated in a worldview in which life is seen against the background of—and in dynamic dialogue with—a reality set in specific referential space during an extended historical time. Another German Romantic, Ludwig Tieck, formulated in his essay “Wendepunkttheorie” a notion that brings us even closer to the vertical dimension: the turning-point of the short story. This notion designates the crucial moment in an epiphanic structure where a single event creates a profound revelation for the character. Another world, another way of apprehending life suddenly reveals itself. In Bakhtinian terms, this revelation is of such a magnitude that the *horizontal dimension* (life lived until the revelation) is replaced by a *vertical dimension* (life seen anew, in an overarching perspective which permits to grasp the entire existence of a character, or the entire existence as such, in a single picture), much like what happens in the *Divine Comedy*, where each life gets its final verdict when evaluated from the viewpoint of a higher dimension.⁹

It is essential to note that this revelation, even if it has a transcendental effect, does not have to lay bare a higher, metaphysical dimension of our existence. The story may concern such a revelation, but it could just as well present a character who has lived in a form of misconception, illusion, dream, hope, lie and so on, and then suddenly sees life “as it is”. In other words, the character may understand or come to terms with what really matters in life, without formulating a worldview which supposes the existence of higher powers. The realistic world can draw the character from his illusionary image of the world and reinstate him in the real world, just as well as the character in the fantastic genre can be drawn out from the normal world to encounter other dimensions of existence. In both cases, the short story challenges or even replaces the *apparent horizontal dimension* by an *essential vertical dimension*. The common feature is the tendency in short fiction to grasp existence as a whole, that is not the fruit of a long evolution through which the character primarily interacts with everyday sociohistorical

⁹ This resembles the idea of *spatial form* as identified by Frank as a prominent feature of modern literature, i. e. the idea of grasping the totality of the narrative not primarily by its linear evolution, but by integrating its different parts in order to grasp the entire meaning of the work (“Spatial Form in Modern Literature”).

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factors: the profound reality reveals itself by the direct effects of a major event. This is exactly what Charles E. May, the arguably finest modern theorist of the short story, refers to when he claims that although a short story is most often clearly situated in a mimetic world, it conveys a message that transcends its specific spatiotemporal conditions (“Metaphoric Motivation in Short Fiction”). For May, this is even the compositional challenge facing the short story writer: will he be able to conciliate sacred and realistic patterns?

May also sketches the understanding of different narrative forms in terms of experience: “When we discuss the differences between long fiction and short fiction, we must discuss basic differences in the ontology and epistemology of the two forms. The short story is short precisely because of the kind of experience or reality embodied in it” (“The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction” 132). May does not refer to Bakhtin, but the experiences that he describes seem to duplicate the horizontal and the vertical dimensions. In longer forms, “one’s character or identity is a result of interaction with his environment through duration” (134), according to May, whereas in short fiction, the narrative unfolds an *existential truth* (rather than a contextual one) that we can associate with the sacred and the mythical.¹⁰

It should now be clear that the first kind of experience corresponds to the horizontal dimension in Bakhtin’s essay, whereas the second kind of experience is clearly vertical. The short story is a *final* production, in that sense that it establishes a world to which the character has to adapt or succumb: the narrative converges to a sole effect that covers his entire existence as such, which imposes itself on the character. Similar approaches to the short story can be found in many studies. The Russian formalists identified the crisis as a distinctive feature of the short story, as in Shklovsky (*Theory of prose*). More recently, Goyet emphasizes the paroxysm of the short story (*La nouvelle 1870-1925*); for Evrard, the short format suggests the infinity of the world because it is not able to resituate the complexity of the society (*La nouvelle*); Oswald defines the short story as a quest for the definition of the subject and his identity within a story that tends towards epiphany, an act that is accomplished through an integration of the subject with the world rather than with the society (*La nouvelle*); Lohafer sketches different types of revelations according to the evolution of the short story, from its early stages to its contemporary versions (“A Cognitive Approach to Storyness”).

As the structure of the story converges towards a single moment where there is question of sudden transformation, its characters normally do not develop over time. With less agency, they seem to be more like objects submit to external forces than subjects within their own, life-changing story. The diminished freedom of the character in the short story is yet another point that shows a certain affinity with the vertical dimension and opposes itself to the characters in horizontal narratives. In shorter fiction, characters either tend to be either too marginal to fit into the horizontal worldview or closer to types (or even stereotypes), without profound or complex personalities, making them less lifelike. In the progressive and open novel, characters develop in and with the sociohistorical conditions and has the ability to impose their views and experiences on a future that is not static or preestablished. This latter viewpoint is central to Bakhtin’s analysis of the novel, which has a very strong horizontal dimension, especially in certain subgenres as the *Bildungsroman* or the realist novel.

5. Towards a Dimensional View of the Text

¹⁰ Referring to May, Falconer discusses the specific rendering of time in the modernist short story compared to that of the realist novel and the postmodernist short story in a way which is perfectly coherent with the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of the chronotope (“Bakhtin’s chronotope and the contemporary short story”).

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The notion of the chronotope constitutes a powerful tool to analyse literary forms and their relations to reality through various epochs, pointing to *what literature, within its own aesthetic framework, makes of a society- and timebound conception of reality*. According to Bakhtin, the chronotope operates on an *ideological* level by crystallizing a worldview, on the *narrative* level as the organisational principle for the narrative, and on the *generic* level to circumscribe the individual text. The methodological shift outlined in the present study concerns only Bakhtin's generic hierarchisation. For Bakhtin, the novel occupies the normative centre according to the idea that the conception of reality transposed to artistic form is especially valid in longer, narrative forms and therefore the chronotope applies particularly well to representations of a specific society, considered in and for itself, and seen through the experiences lived during an extended lap of historical time. However, his own ideas permit us to extend the study of the chronotope to other literary genres.

The major breach out from the novelistic reduction of the chronotope might be found in the exploration of the *vertical* and the *horizontal* dimensions. The affinities between Bakhtin's remarks on the vertical worldview and the theorisation of short fiction, from the German romanticists to recent short story scholars as Charles E. May, are noteworthy. However, as the horizontal and the vertical dimensions can coexist, we should not conclude nor that there is neither that there should be *a chronotope of the short story*. Rather I would like to suggest that the vertical dimension is likely to be decisive in many short narratives (whereas the horizontality should be prominent in novelistic subgenres as the *Bildungsroman* and the *realist novel*).

The shift to a dimensional methodology thus facilitates a transition of the notion of the chronotope from being viewed as a novel marker to a theoretical concept that investigates any literary text. In addition, the dimensional approach opens toward a study of the genericity of the individual text, rather than to its categorization into a broadly sketched genre. This reconceptualization of the chronotope may be an important contribution to the theorization of literary genre as well as to the study of individual texts, as the chronotope is fundamental for any comprehension of narrative time and space, regardless of the specific forms or dimensions it displays.

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