

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

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



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

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Preface

It seems appropriate to begin this volume with a quotation from Mikhail Bakhtin himself, taken from his brilliant essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel. Notes toward a Historical Poetics” – an essay that serves as a frame of reference throughout this collection of papers: “We do not pretend to completeness or precision in our theoretical formulation and definitions. Here and abroad, serious work on the study of space and time in art and literature has only just begun” (1990d: 85). Only a historian of the discipline or a speaker at a Bakhtin conference would dare to repeat that second sentence, which is by now terribly outdated. That this is the case is understandable. As is well known, the essay was originally written in the 1930s but published only in 1975, the year of Bakhtin’s death, and was not translated into English until 1981. Given this lapse of time, it is rather surprising that an essay which explicitly admits to its lack of precision in theoretical formulation and definitions continues, some 70 years later, to arouse interest and to inspire scholars in several disciplines.

Bakhtin’s avowal was no false modesty. The vagueness and openness that characterizes his theoretical and philosophical work, especially on the concept of the literary chronotope, has provoked – and continues to provoke – both enthusiastic imitation and skeptical criticism. But even those who belong to the “chronotoposkeptical” camp will (have) recognize(d) the magisterial insights and intuitions expressed in Bakhtin’s work, as well as the undeniable value of recent studies inspired by the time-space concept, both within and beyond the field of Bakhtin studies.

For two reasons, research into the chronotope concept has been, and still is, a welcome addition to Bakhtin scholarship. Firstly, the field of problems relating to chronotopes transcends scholarly approaches in cultural studies of the 1980s and 1990s. Academic discussion of the concept of the “carnival” as the subversive undercurrent in modernity “discovered” by Bakhtin in literature from Rabelais to Dostoevsky, has neglected the particularities of literary imagination as well as the finer epistemological function of literary works. Bakhtin has shown how literature can help us to appreciate the fact that, in the course of cultural history, transformations of time concepts and spatial representations reflect radical changes in cultural attitudes and lived experience. The second reason is that the concept of the chronotope has helped us to understand more profoundly and more completely the concepts of “dialogism” and “heteroglossia” by connecting literary communication with concrete imaginative units and generic patterns. Literature, then, is not merely an ideational phenomenon, but has to be considered as a unique epistemological instrument that concerns intellectual, imaginative and emotional attitudes.

In addition, the value of the concept of the chronotope is also relevant outside Bakhtin criticism, because it can easily be linked with issues that play an innovative

role in literary criticism. Firstly, it can be adopted within the frame of postclassical narratology (as recently expressed, for instance, in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, 2007). Even if the concept itself has a bad reputation – and, given its frequent misuse as a means of dressing up outdated thematological research in more fashionable garments, with good reason – the basic intuitions of Bakhtin fit into the reflections on fictional world constructions which are central to recent narratological research. Secondly, Bakhtin’s concept anticipates the ethical turn in literary studies. By pointing at the imaginative quality of literary representations, the study of chronotopes helps us to understand that literary mimesis is grounded in a valued and emotionally experienced fictional world. Although Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope is often misunderstood as a pseudo-formalist tool, it does not refer only to the referential aspect of literature. It addresses not only the perception of the fictional world but also points at the spatial and temporal embedding of human action in order to offer a better understanding of how humans act in their biotopes and semiospheres. Although Bakhtin’s theory is on this point rather underdeveloped and even premature, there are sufficient impulses in his writings to allow us to say that it serves as an analytical tool aimed at understanding how literature meditates on human action in a profoundly ethical fashion. Indeed, enquiry into the connections between chronotopes and action is probably one of the most promising lines of future research. In combination with the work of Thomas Pavel (e.g. *La pensée du roman*, 2003) and the later work of Michael Holquist and Gary Saul Morson, the idea of the chronotope has the potential to become a pivotal concept within this ethical turn in literary studies.

In the best chronotopical tradition, the first origins of this book can be traced back to a particular moment at a specific place. In September 2007, on a sunny Friday morning in a local park in Clermont-Ferrand, France, four Belgian participants at an international conference on comparative literature, who coincidentally were all presenting papers that in one way or another related to Bakhtin, decided to organize a round table on the concept of the literary chronotope. Back in Belgium, two more colleagues were taken on board as part of the organizing committee. Invitations were sent out to the world’s leading Bakhtin scholars, and much to our pleasure and gratitude, many of them accepted. The resulting two-day conference was held in Brussels in June 2008, and turned out to be an agreeable and stimulating meeting, with many critical, constructive and fruitful discussions. The first drafts of most contributions to this volume were presented at that occasion. (In addition, a few scholars who had been unable to travel to Brussels, but had nevertheless expressed an interest in participating in the project, wrote contributions that were added later.) The words “first draft” deserve special emphasis. Before the conference, draft versions of all papers had been circulated to all participants. As a result, the sessions, conceived as they were to offer platforms for thorough and ample discussion among academic peers, functioned as collective editorial boards for the volume to come.

The collaborative intellectual efforts of those two days in Brussels have resulted in this scholarly tome. It exhibits a variety of theoretical approaches and concrete tex-

tual analyses, all centering upon the concept of the chronotope as initially developed by Bakhtin. After an extensive introduction that serves as a “state of the art”, the volume is divided into four main parts: *Philosophical Reflections*, *Relevance of the Chronotope for Literary History*, *Chronotopical Readings* and *Some Perspectives for Literary Theory*. These thematic categories contain contributions from, among others, such well-established Bakhtin specialists as Gary Saul Morson, Michael Holquist, Tara Collington, Joy Ladin, Bart Keunen, Roderick Beaton and Rachel Falconer. Taken together, the papers explore the implications of Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope for a variety of theoretical topics such as literary imagination, polysystem theory and literary adaptation; for modern views on literary history ranging from the hellenistic romance to nineteenth-century realism; and for analyses of well-known novelists and poets as diverse as Milton, Fielding, Dickinson, Dostoevsky, Papadiamantis and DeLillo.

Both the conference and this volume were made possible with the financial and logistical support of several institutions: the Research Foundation – Flanders, the Faculties of Arts of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and Ghent University, and the Royal Flemish Academy for Sciences and the Arts, the last of which also let us use their magnificent building as the conference venue. Last but not least, we would like to thank our publisher Academia Press for their faith in the lasting value of rigorously assessed publications.

Ghent and Leuven, April 2010