

SPATIAL NARRATIVITY AND POSTMODERN SPACE

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My paper is concerned with the relation between narrative and space, as reflected in the forms and themes of the contemporary novel, here instantiated by Salman Rushdie's *The Ground beneath Her Feet*. My short survey starts from the assumption that speaking about the spatiality of the novel can prove a difficult task, and one that goes against a whole tradition inaugurated by Lessing and most famously illustrated by Paul Ricoeur's analysis of the temporality of narratives. However, since critical opinions often concur that we live in a space-dominated age, although I will of course not go as far as denying the essentially temporal nature of the novel, I will attempt to foreground some of the spatial aspects informing contemporary writing; my engagement with a century-old tradition here might serve as a basis for an attempt, however sketchy, to formulate a poetics of the spatiality of the novel.

The obvious remark concerns the relatively little interest in such a poetics, in sharp contrast with the 20th century philosophical interest in space (see, in this respect, the works of Deleuze, Lefebvre, Harvey, Jameson, de Certeau, Foucault): while there is no end to particular interpretations of space as represented in particular literary works, there are few attempts to construct a spatial poetics of the novel.

In its most generalised form, the discussion may be dated back to ancient Greek and classical debates on the pictorial nature of poetry. However, for modern times, the ultimate reference – and often object of dispute – is, of course, Lessing's famous distinction between spatial and temporal arts in *Laokoon*, an eighteenth century attempt to formulate the universal laws of aesthetic perception. The classicist foundation of Lessing's arguments, going back to Aristotelian notion of the mimetic, is best visible in the assumption that artistic form must be based on a correspondence with the essential qualities of the work's medium; thus, since a sculpture or a painting presents itself as a collection of objects juxtaposed in space and apprehended simultaneously, the plastic arts pertain to spatial form. Literature, on the contrary, depends on the succession of sounds and words in time, and is therefore a temporal art.

Mikhail Bakhtin's well-known concept of the chronotope, which needs little introduction, both resembles and distances itself from Lessing's arguments for generic

separation. While Lessing's theory drew on Kantian and Newtonian views on subjective and respectively "objective" space and time, Bakhtin plainly bases his on relativistic ideas of the four-dimensional continuum, yet again attempting to bridge the gap between literature and other forms of knowledge, as well as leaving the door open for other cultural fields to be discussed in the same manner. Bakhtin suggests that the interrelations of time and space – the simplest way to define the concept of the chronotope – represent inherent properties of narratives, their organising, signifying centres, the ground for the representation of events in narratives and the condition of their possibility.

The concept of the chronotope, is not, however, the only twentieth-century attempt to discuss the relation between space and the novel from a formal perspective. Unlike Bakhtin, other critics have focussed more specifically on questions of form. Joseph Frank's seminal essay on "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" is a case in point. Frank famously argues that modernist fiction, despite its avowed adherence to the poetics of the *durée*, creates "spatial form" by its reliance on the poetic repetition of motifs, images, myths or even words. This is seen as a means to evade the nightmare of history into the timeless world of art. As far as structuralist attempts to study novelistic space are concerned, an important and rather paradoxical qualification becomes necessary: space, it would seem, is allotted less importance for the poetics of the novel than time; an important part in all this was played by the anti-mimetic programme of structuralism in particular and 20th century criticism in general. A notable exception is constituted by Joseph's Kestner's rather little known *The Spatiality of the Novel*, itself very much indebted to Frank's analysis, but discernibly founded on Lessing's time-honoured distinctions.

Cultural and historicist approaches favour a political and social interpretation of texts, but at their best focus on a poetics of defamiliarisation that emphasises the role of spatial representations in the forming of modern consciousness. As will become clear from the extract from W.J.T. Mitchell's considerations, the starting point may well be negative: space is styled as the "other" of literature, the mirror presented by alterity at the heart of the very negation of identity. Affirming the spatiality of fiction via negation – placing the void at the centre of the text – comes from the direction of philosophers such as Derrida and the connection he posits between the space of the written text and death in *Of Grammatology*.

The second section of my paper attempts to identify some of the spatial features of contemporary British fiction, using the theoretical framework I have briefly delineated, as well as one of the most complex works of recent years, Rushdie's *The Ground beneath Her Feet*. Published in 2000, the novel takes Rushdie's engagement with popular culture to a new level. Disguised as a rock and roll epic, it tackles complex concerns as the advent of the iconic (in more than one sense of the word) within the contemporary, the role of the media, and the inevitable contact between the East and the West. The novel re-enacts the strategic amalgam of myth and history that has come to be recognised as one of the trademarks of its author.

Discussing this text in terms of space entails numerous aspects. Even from the beginning, by dint of the overt engagement with mythical *topoi*, the narration draws attention to the dialectic between location and displacement that will threaten to destabilise the whole novel, both internally and stylistically. With its reference to Aztec human sacrifice rituals and to the figure of Quetzalcoatl, the nightmare suits the mythical imaginary of the place where it occurs (Mexico), but localisation seems to be paradoxically confined to the level of language and immediately counteracted with references to more "universal" signifiers, such as the phrase "men resembling the actor Christopher Plummer", or the quote from J. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Ring*. On the other hand, the narration brings hybridisation and indeterminacy at the very heart of the text through the image of the mestizo male found in bed with Vina.

The Ground beneath Her Feet is a "space" novel because both formally and thematically it seems to overtly rely more on spatial, rather than temporal, tropes. Its shifting the focus from the Eastern to the Western world of the Americas, turns it into a novel of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, the story of the relocation of story telling. In Rushdie's text, the act of narration is relocated (perpetually displaced and emplaced) not only in geographical terms, but within the creative rift opened up by the clash between the contemporary culture of the image and the multiple narrative traditions that the text appropriates. It is this tension between the linguistic and the visual that lends the novel much of its spatiality: the duplicate images in the novel act as reminders of language's own death and as projectors of utopian desire (Rai's photographs of catastrophic events, Vina's re-created double etc). In this respect, Mitchell's description of space as the text's "other" fits Rushdie's staging of the struggle of representation).

My contention is that the novel functions according to a spatial logic of reflexivity – that is, following and extending the definition of reflexive modernity provided by Anthony Giddens, the space of the novel is reflexive for several reasons.

Firstly, it re-enacts on different levels the dialectic of the global and the local, of the abstract (image or double) and the embodied (the self bordered by skin). It might be worth remembering, for example, Sir Darius's positing of a "fourth" anthropological function (apart from Dumézil's tripartite division of Indo-European society into priests, farmers and warriors: the outsider, the unsettled and unsettling element whose Deleuzian, nomadic position precludes "territorialisation"). Secondly, the controlling trope of the novel is doubling: the doubling of individuals, the doubling of worlds and spaces, the doubling of narratives and of mediums (such as language and photography).

Moreover, the seismic trope carries further the disintegration of the body and of the subject from early novels such as *Midnight's Children*, projecting it against a cataclysmic background meant this time to represent not so much the nightmare of history, but rather the engulfing pressures of globalisation with its ambiguous interplay of dislocation and relocation. Fourthly, space in *The Ground beneath Her Feet* is phenomenologically constructed at the interface between body and world, none of which are revealed to be stable, pre-given entities, but constantly interacting fluid participants. However, the novel ends paradoxically with the very integrity of the body being supplanted by the emergence of the double – Vina's look-alike seems to be more than a mere simulacrum, a soulless image brought back from the inferno of the "hyperreal" by an Orpheus who, in a reversal of the mythical pattern, has failed to look back properly and is now content with the empty sign. On the contrary, Ormus does look back – and he does it continually, since, despite of the lyrics he has himself written, he is aware that the outside lies most homely at the very heart of the inside.